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British rider Cavendish to retire at end of season



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GOLF

Koepka takes PGA for fifth major title in landmark LIV victory

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AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023

China's Jankovic happy with available talent

AFC
Hong Kong

China head coach **Aleksandar Jankovic** will be in no hurry to rejuvenate his squad in the build-up to the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 finals next January as he looks to lead the country back to the upper reaches of the Asian game.

The Chinese have been drawn to face hosts Qatar as well as Tajikistan and Lebanon in Group A at the finals with several players who represented the country at the last AFC Asian Cup in the United Arab Emirates in 2019 still integral to the national team squad.

But while key players such as goalkeeper Yan Junling, defender Zhang Limpeng, captain Wu Xi and striker Wu Lei are now reaching the veteran stage of their careers, Jankovic is convinced his squad retains the ability to compete with the continent's best.

"When we talk about the team, this has nothing to do with age," he says. "The players are motivated, they're hard work-

ing and they're really honoured to represent China at the AFC Asian Cup. It is a big honour.

"On the other hand, we have a new wave of players. We have the under-23 team that I have been coaching for four-and-a-half years. I know them very well, we have been building up a team that will attack the Asian Games in Hangzhou in China in September with the highest targets and requirements."

"We are all behind these teams, we support them and, once this competition is finished in October, if these young players perform well that could be a ticket to the national team for them also. All the tickets for the national team are on the pitch, they just have to collect them.

"When we talk about a highly competitive team playing a high intensity football to match up with the other Asian teams, I don't think about the age. I think about the capacity and the profile of the players and their mentality."

The 51-year-old Serb was appointed head coach on a full-time basis in February and brings a wealth of experience and knowledge about Chinese football

into the role. Jankovic started working at age group level in the country in 2018 and has served as the under 23 team coach since 2021 having previously worked with many of those players at under 19 and under 20 level. He took on the senior role in an interim capacity last year when he led a youthful selection to the Finals of the EAFF E-1 Championship in Japan, where his side finished third behind Japan and Korea Republic, before taking on the role on a full-time basis.

In March he led the team into a pair of friendly matches against New Zealand, drawing 0-0 in the first game in Auckland before losing 2-1 three days later in Wellington, and he believes the Chinese can build on what he saw as encouraging performances.

"We are trying to build the team to match up to the intensity of other Asian teams, that's why we wanted to play strong, high intensity games away against New Zealand," he said.

"For me it was very important, there was a lot of useful feedback in these two games. Firstly we played high intensity games against a physically strong team,

secondly we played away and thirdly we played two high intensity games in three days and that was a big challenge for us. I got a lot of useful information."

The games against New Zealand marked the re-emergence of China from a difficult period caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, but Jankovic is confident the sport in the country is on the path to recovery ahead of further friendly matches against Myanmar and Palestine in June.

"Of course we've had a lot of problems and difficulties during the last three years but the two games we played against New Zealand showed a lot of good things for me and of course some things that have to be corrected," he said. "That's our target and our job and that's why we're trying to play another two games in June, to make the step forward from the previous experiences in New Zealand.

"If you ask me to talk about the previous period of three years, I'll say we just have to adapt, to find a solution because talking about a problem without focusing on the solution is just crying and you never solve one problem with crying. We are focused on the future."



FOOTBALL

Newcastle back in Champions League after 20 years

The Magpies seal top-four finish after Leicester stalemate

AFP
Newcastle

Newcastle qualified for the Champions League for the first time in 20 years after a 0-0 draw against relegation-haunted Leicester yesterday.

Fifth placed Liverpool's draw with Aston Villa on Saturday meant Newcastle needed just one point from their last two games to be assured of a Champions League place.

Eddie Howe's third placed side achieved their target at the first attempt at a jubilant St James' Park.

Howe and his players embarked on a lengthy lap of honour after the final whistle as they soaked up the acclaim from the Toon Army.

Newcastle's remarkable rise from relegation candidates to a top four finish in the Premier League in just 18 months is a tribute to Howe's management and financial might of the club's Saudi-backed ownership group.

The Magpies also reached the first domestic final since 1999 this season, losing to Manchester United in the League Cup.

After two decades in Premier League purgatory since Bobby Robson last led Newcastle into the Champions League, the Magpies will believe they can maintain their transformation into trophy contenders now they are back among Europe's heavyweights.

Just seven years after their fairytale Premier League title triumph, Leicester are on the verge of being relegated from the top-flight for the 12th time in



Newcastle United's defender Dan Burn (left) fights for the ball with Leicester City's goalkeeper Daniel Iversen during the English Premier League match at St James' Park in Newcastle yesterday. (AFP)

their history. That would equal the English record held by Birmingham, sending them back to the Championship for the first time since 2014.

Dean Smith's third from bottom team have won just one of their last 15 league games.

They sit two points behind fourth bottom Everton and will go down if the Toffees win their last game against Bournemouth, regardless of Leicester's result in their final match against West Ham.

Leicester's decline has been precipitous since winning the FA Cup for the first time in 2021, a campaign in which they finished fifth in the Premier League for a

second successive season.

Smith sprang a major surprise as he left James Maddison and Harvey Barnes on the bench in a bid to be "harder to beat", while Newcastle lost Joelinton to an injury suffered in the pre-match warm-up.

They nearly had to do without Joelinton's fellow Brazilian Bruno Guimaraes as well as the midfielder escaped with an early yellow card after a studs-up challenge that smashed into Boubakary Soumare's thigh.

Newcastle held 80 percent of the possession throughout the game, but Leicester sat deep to frustrate them.

Leicester keeper Daniel Iversen almost gifted Newcastle the opening goal, spilling a catch under pressure from Dan Burn.

Callum Wilson seized on the loose ball and shot against the post before his header from the rebound was cleared off the line by Wilfred Ndidi.

Newcastle hit the woodwork again moments later through Miguel Almiron's half-volley from Fabian Schar's knock down.

Iversen misjudged another cross just before half-time, leaving Wilson with a chance that the striker headed over from close-range.

Smith sent on Maddison at the interval and Iversen partially redeemed himself with a superb save to tip over Alexander Isak's powerful drive from the edge of the area.

Barnes was next to come on for Leicester, with the anonymous Jamie Vardy wearing a furious expression as he trudged off.

Guimaraes missed a sitter when he headed against the post from virtually on the goal-line after Leicester's Wout Faes accidentally flicked a corner in his direction.

Leicester nearly won it with their first shot of proceedings when Nick Pope denied Timothy Castagne in stoppage-time, but Newcastle held on to clinch their return to Europe's top table.

SPOTLIGHT

Hopefuls set for AFC U23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 qualifiers draw

AFC
Kuala Lumpur

The qualifying journey for the AFC U23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 will be revealed on Thursday, May 25, 2023 when the official draw ceremony takes place at 3pm local time at the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

A total of 43 teams have submitted their interest to compete in the qualifiers for the sixth edition of the tournament, which will be held from September 4-12 this year.

The teams will be divided into 11 groups - 10 groups will comprise four teams each, with the last group to contain three. Each group will be played at a centralised venue in a single round-robin format, with the 11 group winners and four best second-placed teams among all groups qualifying for the AFC U23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024.

They will join Qatar, who have received automatic qualification as Host, to form the final cast of 16 at the tournament, to be played between April 15 to May 3, 2024.

The seeding for the draw will be based on the AFC U23 Asian Cup Uzbekistan 2022 rankings. Teams that did not participate have been added as the lowest-ranked teams; all matches involving Qatar will be considered as friendly matches and not taken into account when calculating the final group rankings.

As such, Qatar will be considered as an unranked team for seeding purposes.

The 11 teams that will serve as Hosts - Bahrain, China PR, Indonesia, Jordan, Korea Republic, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Vietnam - will be placed into the same Pot and drawn into separate groups at the beginning of the Draw.



menistan, Vietnam, Korea Republic, Thailand, Jordan, United Arab Emirates

12-22: Islamic Republic of Iran, Kuwait, Malaysia, Tajikistan, Bahrain, Myanmar, Cambodia, Syria, India, Singapore, Indonesia

23-33: Kyrgyz Republic, Palestine, Yemen, Timor-Leste, Chinese Taipei, Lebanon, Laos, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, China, Maldives, Oman

34-35 + unranked: Mongolia, Philippines, Afghanistan, Brunei Darussalam, China PR, DPR Korea, Guam, Macau, Pakistan + Qatar

POTS

Pot 1: Japan, Australia, Iraq, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates

Pot 2: Islamic Republic of Iran, Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Syria, India, Singapore

Pot 3: Kyrgyz Republic, Palestine, Yemen, Timor-Leste, Chinese Taipei, Lebanon, Laos, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, China, Maldives, Oman

Pot 4: Mongolia, Philippines, Afghanistan, Brunei Darussalam, DPR Korea, Guam, Macau, Pakistan, Qatar

Hosts Pot: Bahrain, China PR, Indonesia, Jordan, Korea Republic, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Vietnam.

Saudi Arabia won their maiden U23 title in June last year after defeating hosts Uzbekistan in the final of an engrossing tournament that set new records in digital engagement.

RANKINGS

1-11: Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Japan, Australia, Iraq, Turk-

CRICKET

Dhoni mania as IPL heads into tense final week

AFP
New Delhi

Chennai Super Kings host Gujarat Titans today in front of a home crowd desperate to see **M S Dhoni** win another Indian Premier League in what could be his farewell week to cricket.

A packed house is expected at Chennai's M A Chidambaram Stadium and all eyes will be on the 41-year-old Dhoni.

Four-time champions Chennai host table-toppers Gujarat in the first play-off of this season's IPL, with the winner going into Sunday's final.

The loser goes into another play-off match.

Fans have turned up in large numbers at every venue to watch Dhoni, the Chennai skipper and former India captain who is expected to retire from cricket at the end of this campaign.

He retired from national duty in 2020.

Dhoni has kept fans guessing

and not explicitly said he expects to call it quits when the end of the season arrives at some point over the next week.

The wicketkeeper-batsman has reinvented himself this term as a lower-order batsman coming in at number eight.

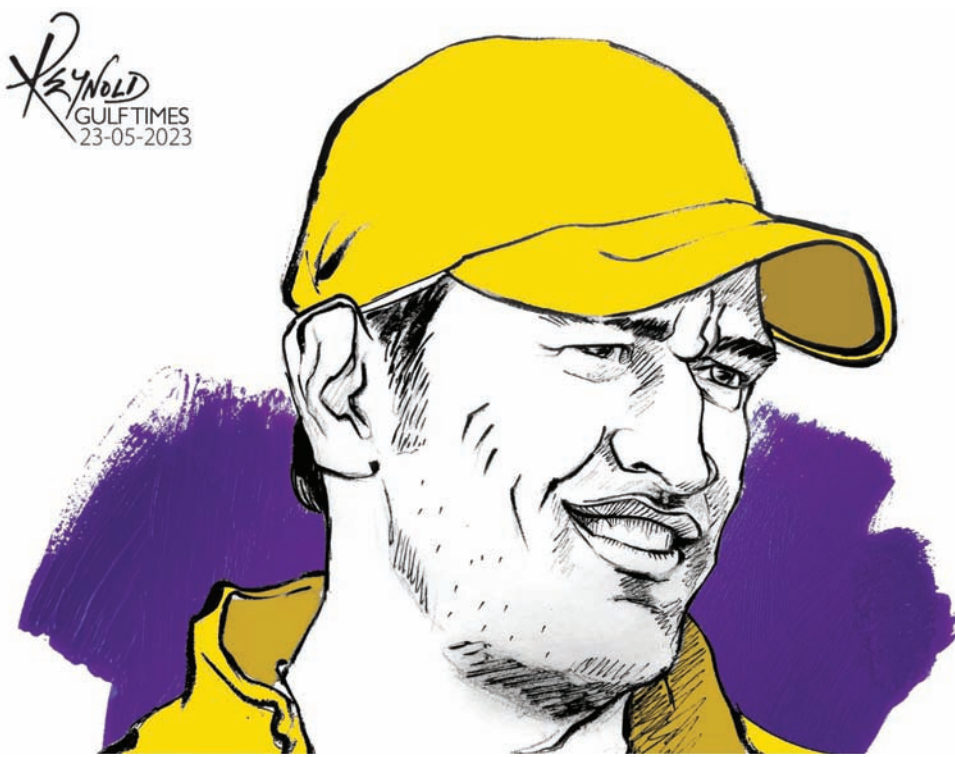
"This is what my job is," he said after hitting a nine-ball 20 in a late cameo to help Chennai defeat Delhi earlier this month.

"I have told them (his team) this is what I am supposed to do, don't make me run a lot, and it has been working."

Dhoni's likely farewell is one of a number of sub-plots heading into the final week of the Twenty20 extravaganza.

Opponents Gujarat have extended their fairytale journey from winning the crown in their debut season last year to making the play-offs once again.

"Last year we did well, everything went our way," said skipper Hardik Pandya, who then guided Gujarat to the top of the 10-team table in the regular season this year.



CYCLING

Cavendish says he will retire at end of 2023 season

"Cycling's been my life for over 25 years. I've lived an absolute dream"

AFP
Paris

Mark Cavendish said yesterday he will retire at the end of the season, bringing the curtain down on the career of one of cycling's all-time great sprinters.

The British rider, whose 34 Tour de France stage wins are joint most with Belgian legend Eddy Merckx, will have one final chance to claim the record outright in July when he takes part in the race one last time.

The 38-year-old, known as the "Manx Missile", made the announcement alongside his wife and children at a press conference in Coccaglio during yesterday's rest day at the Giro d'Italia.

"I've absolutely loved racing every kilometre of this race so far, so I feel it's the perfect time to say it's my final Giro d'Italia and 2023 will be my final season as a professional cyclist," Cavendish said yesterday.

"Cycling's been my life for over 25 years. I've lived an absolute dream.

"The bike has given me the opportunity to see the world and meet incredible people, a lot of whom I'm proud to now call friends.

"I love the sport more than you can even imagine and I can't see myself going too far from it, that's for sure."

Over a storied career Cavendish's deep racing knowledge, a fearless, aggressive approach and the ability to marshal teammates and outspeed rivals has earned him a staggering 161 wins with 53 of those coming at Grand Tours.

"This race (the Giro) has an important place in my heart as a cyclist and a person," he said. "The Giro d'Italia gave me my first Grand Tour wins in 2008. Italy was my home for many years during my career. And the people here welcomed me, as one of their own."

Traumatic experience

One of cycling's most popular riders, Cavendish also endured private trauma away from the sport.

In a horrific incident last year, he and his wife were held at knifepoint by robbers in a late-night attack.

Born in Douglas, on the Isle of Man, the former junior bank clerk joined a nas-



Deceuninck-Quick-Step rider Mark Cavendish of Britain celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win stage 10 of the Tour de France from Albertville to Valence on July 6, 2021. (Reuters)

cent British Cycling Academy in 2003.

By 2008 he won a first Tour de France stage with German team T-Mobile, racking up 30 in a period of dominance until 2016, when he was stuck down by the draining condition of Epstein-Barr virus.

Tour de France director Christian Prudhomme told AFP ahead of the 2018 Tour that Cavendish had "nothing to prove".

"Many people will mention Mario Cipollini but for me Mark Cavendish is the Tour de France's all-time great sprinter," the race director said.

Cavendish, however, had other ideas about what he had left to prove.

He went five years without a win and also ended up without a team in early 2021. On a rookie's salary, however, Cavendish was taken 'home' to Belgian outfit Deceuninck Quick-Step by maverick team boss Patrick Lefevere, a larger-than-life character Cavendish trusted and believed.

On stage 13 of the Tour de France that summer Cavendish equalled Merckx's 46-year-old record of Tour de France stage wins by taking a fourth win on that edition. Cavendish also won the rain-bow jersey at the world road race championships in Copenhagen in 2011 and the Monument one-day race Milan-San

Remo in 2009. He has ridden for T-Mobile, Team Sky, Bahrain, Quick-Step and is currently with Astana.

Cavendish, a silver medallist on the track in the omnium at the 2016 Olympics, also received an MBE for services to British cycling.

"He is the greatest sprinter of all time, really, when you see his record," said Geraint Thomas, the 2018 Tour de France champion.

"It's kind of strange to see him retire, actually, because it means I'm going to be soon as well," he added. "But he hasn't finished yet. He's still got to get that record at the Tour and win a stage here."

FOCUS

Kohli says playing his best T20 cricket but IPL title elusive

AFP
New Delhi

Virat Kohli says he's playing his best Twenty20 cricket again but at 34 the superstar batsman is running out of time to win the Indian Premier League.

Kohli scored another century for Royal Challengers Bangalore on Sunday - his second in as many matches - and he now has seven IPL tons, more than any other player.

But his 101 not out wasn't enough. Gujarat Titans won by six wickets as they, Chennai, Mumbai and Lucknow went through to the play-offs of the world's biggest T20 tournament.

"A lot of people think that my T20 cricket is declining. I don't feel like that at all," Kohli said afterwards. "I think I am playing my best T20 cricket again."

That might be so, but for Kohli and Bangalore it was just the latest IPL failure.

The franchise has never won the title in 16 attempts - they were runners-up three times - since the tournament began in 2008.

Kohli was Bangalore skipper for nine of those seasons and at the end of the 2021 edition he decided to give up leading the team.

That was in the midst of a tough period for Kohli when the magic with the bat deserted him and he admitted to mental health struggles. In 2020 he had relinquished the Indian T20 captaincy after a disastrous World Cup and was sacked as ODI skipper. He then quit as Test captain. Kohli admitted later that he would "fake intensity" to put up a brave front and that he became "snappy" to his Bollywood actress wife Anushka Sharma.

"When I left (the) Test captaincy I got messages only from M S Dhoni and nobody else," Kohli said last September.

"A lot of people have my

Green justifies price tag
Tomorrow, five-time champions Mumbai Indians, led by India skipper Rohit Sharma, take on Lucknow Super Giants in another play-off.

The winner of that match will play the loser of Chennai-Gujarat on Friday for a spot in Sunday's final at the world's biggest cricket stadium.

Mumbai rode on Australian all-rounder Cameron Green's maiden T20 century in a crushing win over Sunrisers Hyderabad on Sunday to sneak into the playoffs.

Green's 47-ball 100 not out on Sunday and a 56 by Rohit in Mumbai's successful chase of 201 has suddenly made the IPL heavyweights, who last won the IPL in 2020, favourites in the knockout clash against Lucknow.

The 23-year-old Green - a regular with the Australia Test side - was the second-most expensive player in IPL history when Mumbai Indians bought him for \$2.11mn in this season's player auction.



number and say things on TV, but no one sent me a message."

A fresh-faced 19-year-old Kohli made his India debut the same year the IPL started and became the fastest batsman to reach 10,000 ODI runs in 2018.

As Test skipper he brought India to the top of the rankings and in 2019 led his team to a first-ever Test series triumph in Australia.

But his lean patch saw him not manage a century in any format for almost two years until he broke the drought at the Asia Cup last September with an unbeaten 122 against Afghanistan.

He followed this up in October with 82 not out in a stunning win over Pakistan at the T20 World Cup in Australia, an innings dubbed the "Miracle in Melbourne". Kohli hasn't looked back, scoring three ODI hundreds in four matches and then in March his first Test century in over three years, against Australia in Ahmedabad.

In this IPL, Kohli and Bangalore skipper Faf du Plessis were one of the most dependable opening pairs, knocking up more than 1,000 runs together. The South African top-scored in the regular season with Kohli third.

But except for Australian smasher Glenn Maxwell, the lower order failed to fire, in particular specialist finisher Dinesh Karthik. Bangalore's bowlers also failed to perform when it really counted.

Hazlewood deemed fit for WTC final, Ashes after injury scare

Melbourne: Australia paceman Josh Hazlewood is expected to be fit for the World Test Championship (WTC) final against India and the Ashes despite cutting his Indian Premier League (IPL) campaign short.

Hazlewood returned to Australia after reporting "minor side soreness" following his most recent IPL match for Royal Challengers Bangalore two weeks ago, Cricket Australia said. The governing body said Hazlewood had returned to "high intensity bowling" after a brief and precautionary rest period. He would continue to increase his bowling workloads in preparation for the WTC final and the Ashes series against England, CA said in a statement. "Hazlewood is considered fit and available for the WTC and Ashes series," Hazlewood has

battled injuries over the past 18 months and had a four-month layoff from bowling to recover from an Achilles problem sustained in the Sydney Test in January. The WTC final starts on June 7 at The Oval in London, with the Ashes kicking off at Edgbaston from June 16. England have had their own injury problems in the lead-up to the Ashes, with fast bowler Jofra Archer ruled out of the entire series and fellow quick James Anderson sidelined with a groin strain. Paceman Ollie Robinson is also under an injury cloud after suffering an ankle problem for county side Sussex over the weekend. Australia hold the Ashes after retaining the urn with a 4-0 win over England at home in 2021-22.

India board says Adidas to become new kit sponsor

Bengaluru: The Indian cricket board (BCCI) said yesterday that German sportswear giant Adidas would become the new kit sponsor of the national team.

Reports in local media earlier this year had said that a deal was close and BCCI secretary Jay Shah confirmed the move on Twitter without providing financial

details or the length of the contract. "I'm pleased to announce @BCCI's partnership with @adidas as a kit sponsor," Shah tweeted. "We are committed to growing the game of cricket and could not be more excited to partner with one of the world's leading sportswear brands. Welcome aboard, @adidas."

In 2020, the BCCI had signed a three-year deal with the Mobile Premier League's sports merchandise brand MPL Sports to replace American sportswear manufacturer Nike. Clothing brand Killer Jeans then stepped in as an interim sponsor after that deal ended prematurely and their contract will expire on May 31, reports said.

The board is still in negotiations with two companies that can take over as jersey sponsors of the Indian team to replace Biju's, whose contract expired in March. "In case we are unable to find a long-term partner, we will be making a stop-gap arrangement," a BCCI official said yesterday.

GOLF

Koepka completes hat-trick of PGA Championship titles

‘THIS IS PROBABLY THE SWEETEST ONE OF THEM ALL BECAUSE ALL THE HARD WORK THAT WENT INTO IT’

AFP
Rochester, United States

Brooks Koepka outduelled Viktor Hovland and Scottie Scheffler in a back-nine battle on Sunday to win the PGA Championship for his fifth major title, giving Saudi-backed LIV Golf a milestone major triumph.

The 33-year-old American captured his third PGA Championship and became the first player to win a major since joining LIV, firing a three-under par 67 to finish 72 holes at Oak Hill on nine-under 271.

“This is probably the sweetest one of them all because all the hard work that went into it,” Koepka said. “This one is definitely special.”

Norway’s 11th-ranked Hovland, chasing his first major title, and American Scheffler, last year’s Masters winner and the new world number one, shared second on 273.

“I put up a good fight. I played great today,” Scheffler said. “I gave the guys on top of the leaderboard something to think about.”

“But Brooks just played some fantastic golf this week. He played too good this weekend for me to catch up to him.”

There were a smattering of boos for Koepka as he walked onto the 18th green to make the concluding putts for the title, a sign of the bitter acrimony that has engulfed golf since the launch of the LIV circuit last year. But Koepka calmly finished off

PGA Championship past 10 winners

2023: Brooks Koepka (USA)
2022: Justin Thomas (USA)
2021: Phil Mickelson (USA)
2020: Collin Morikawa (USA)
2019: Brooks Koepka (USA)
2018: Brooks Koepka (USA)
2017: Justin Thomas (USA)
2016: Jimmy Walker (USA)
2015: Jason Day (AUS)
2014: Rory McIlroy (NIR)

an impressive romp, his first major win since 2021 right knee surgery sidelined him for most of the past two seasons.

“I hear it all,” Koepka said. “I just don’t care. That’s sports. You’ve got to be mentally tough.”

Thinking of the rehabilitation and recovery made Koepka emotional as he walked off the 18th green.

“I look back at where we were two years ago,” Koepka said. “I’m so happy right now. I’m at a loss for words. But this is the coolest thing.”

Koepka’s victory puts him among the winningest 20 men in major history.

“It’s incredible,” said Koepka. “I’m not sure I even dreamed when I was a kid I would win this many.”

Australia’s Cam Davis and American Kurt Kitayama shared fourth on 277 with another LIV player, American Bryson DeChambeau.

Four-time major winner Rory McIlroy shared seventh on 278 with Austrian Sepp Straka.

Koepka was among the stars who jumped from the PGA Tour



Brooks Koepka celebrates after winning the PGA Championship at Oak Hill Country Club. (USA TODAY Sports)

to breakaway LIV Golf, which offered record \$25mn purses for 54-hole events.

The PGA banned LIV talent

from its events, with a legal fight between them due in court next May. In the meantime, the majors have provided the only outlet

for competition between players from the rival tours.

In all, there were six major winners from LIV in the field of

156 with a combined 15 major crowns, none of them won since joining the upstart circuit, including Australian Cam Smith’s

British Open title last July. “We haven’t forgot how to play golf,” Smith said. “We’re all great golfers out there.”

Koepka led entering the final round at last month’s Masters but, in his words, “choked” away the green jacket, finishing second to Spain’s Jon Rahm but taking lessons in mental attitude.

“I definitely wouldn’t have won today if that didn’t happen,” Koepka said.

Ace for US club pro

In the closing drama, Hovland was undone by a 9-iron from a fairway bunker at 16, where he embedded his ball into the bunker wall and went on to make double bogey.

Koepka sank a birdie putt at 16 from just inside five feet to reach 10-under and lead by four.

“I thought I handled myself pretty well,” Hovland said.

“Pretty unfortunate on 16 but I don’t feel like I gave it away.

“Brooks deserved to win. He hit a lot of great putts and a lot of great shots.”

Scheffler birdied 18 and Koepka took bogey at 17 to lead by two at the 18th hole.

He dropped his approach inside 10 feet and two-putted for victory.

US club professional Michael Block aced the 151-yard par-3 15th on the fly with a 7-iron and was cheered all the way along his walk to the hole.

It was the first hole-in-one by a club pro in the PGA since 1999.

Block shot 71 to share 15th on 281, earning a spot in next year’s PGA field.

TENNIS

Medvedev says ‘unbelievable’ Rome title among his best wins

Reuters
Rome

Daniil Medvedev rose to number two in the world rankings ahead of the French Open by capturing the Rome title on Sunday and the Russian said his unexpected win on clay counts as one of his most special triumphs.

Heading into Rome, Medvedev had won 18 of his 19 titles - including the 2021 US Open - on hardcourts, with his Mallorca Open victory on grass the same year the only exception.

The 27-year-old, who previously made no secret of his dislike for clay, was a player transformed at the Italian Open and ended the tournament with a 7-5 7-5 win over rising Dane Holger Rune.

Asked where his victory ranked among his many successes, Medvedev told reporters: “In a way, number one, just because it’s the first one on clay and it’s unbelievable.”

“I’d never have thought I’d be able to make this. I have to be honest, a Grand Slam is always bigger. The US Open is always number one there.

“This one is special because I didn’t think it was going to happen. I still don’t believe - not that I won it, but I played so well this week.”

Medvedev said using new strings this year had helped his clay game as they were softer and aided his deep groundstrokes. But there were some concerns at the beginning of the year when they did not work as well on the hardcourts in Australia.

“I was 100% doubting myself,” Medvedev said.

“Should I go back to the old ones, I was playing good with it? I said ‘no, let’s try more! Now it’s unbelievable.”

Medvedev’s title run was his fifth of a standout 2023 season, including Masters 1000 crowns in Miami and Rome.

The 20-time tour-level titlist believes his experience playing under championship-match pressure at Masters 1000 events helped him keep his cool at tough moments against Rune.

“For sure every time you play a big final, it’s an experience,” said Medvedev. “It’s an experience for the next one. For example, both Miami and here, I felt like the start was so-so, then I managed to get into the match more and more and play better and better. “When I played my first



Russia’s Daniil Medvedev acknowledges the crowd after winning the final of the Italian Open against Denmark’s Holger Rune on Sunday. Medvedev beat Rune 7-5, 7-5. (AFP)

(ATP Masters 1000 final, in Montreal in 2019), it was against Rafa [Nadal]. I got destroyed. I started bad, as I kind of started these matches, then I was only playing worse and worse. The next one I managed to win against Goffin [in Cincinnati in 2019]. It was a tight match from both of us. We knew it’s going to be first one for us.

“With experience, I managed to do better in this moment, so maybe that helped. But then in general terms, after Miami, I was feeling confident, good.”

Tennis chiefs pledge roof for rain-lashed Italian Open

The rain-soaked 2023 edition of the Italian Open might soon be a bad memory with plans announced on Sunday to build a roof over the main showcourt at the Foro Italico.

The structure would be completed by 2026, promised officials.

“The roof is coming,” said Vito Cozzoli, CEO of the Italian government agency Sport e Salute (Sport and Health).

“This will be a futuristic project that will make the Foro Italico’s centre court usable year round.”

Rain played an unwanted role in this year’s tournament. Saturday women’s fi-

nal only began at 11pm and ended just after midnight thanks only to an injury for Anhelina Kalinina which handed the title to Elena Rybakina.

That followed the delayed second men’s semi-final between Daniil Medvedev and Stefanos Tsitsipas. Sundays men’s final between champion Medvedev and Holger Rune started 90 minutes late.

Italian bureaucracy is likely to play a role in the roof project, however, with building permit approval expected to take from eight to 10 months.

There would then be another year and a half to two years to get the actual construction completed at an historical sporting park dating back nearly a century. The project would be paused during upcoming editions of the Italian Open.

Plans call for increasing the court capacity from its current 10,000-plus to 12,500 spectators.

French Open offers players tool to filter out online abuse

The French Open is offering players at this year’s tournament free access to a tool that will filter hateful messages on their social media platforms in a bid to prevent cyberbullying and harassment, organisers said yesterday.

The French Tennis Federation (FFT) said that artificial intelligence will be used to moderate comments players receive on posts in real time - with responses analysed in less than 200 milliseconds - and care will be taken about what is censored.

“As part of its strategy to take care of the players’ mental health, the FFT decided to collaborate with ‘Bodyguard’ to fight against cyberbullying,” the FFT said in a statement.

“A team of linguists creates word patterns that enable the system to be updated in real time according to what is posted on social media, in order to generate a more contextual analysis.”

The FFT added that the technology will be used to protect all official FFT and Roland Garros social media accounts as well as those of players who opt for it for the duration of the Grand Slam and at least a week after the tournament has ended.

Social media platforms that will be monitored are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok and Discord.

“We will not accept any form of violence at our tournament,” FFT director Caroline Flaissier said. “We’re very proud to be the first Grand Slam tournament to offer players a solution that efficiently protects them against cyberbullying.”

FOCUS

Berry wins NASCAR All-Star Open

Reuters
North Carolina

Josh Berry advanced to the NASCAR All-Star Race at North Wilkesboro Speedway in North Carolina by winning the circuit’s All-Star Open earlier in the evening.

With 23 laps to go, Berry took the lead from Ty Gibbs, who also advanced to the All-Star Race by finishing second.

In his No 48 Chevrolet, Berry got a boost from Michael McDowell, who ran Gibbs low off Turn 1 and eventually onto the apron through Turns 3 and 4. That contact allowed Berry to sneak past in the 78th lap and take the lead for good.

“Man, I feel so relieved,” Berry said. “These guys deserve to be in this race so bad. Thank you so much to Hendrick Motorsports for believing in me and giving me this opportunity under the circumstances. Ally, everybody

back at Hendrick Motorsports and Chevrolet. ... Man, this is really cool!”

McDowell was upset with how Gibbs raced him earlier in the event, when Gibbs caused McDowell’s No 34 Ford to collide with Justin Haley’s No 31 Chevrolet with 43 laps remaining.

“I wasn’t going to ruin anybody else’s race, and I just wasn’t going to wave them by,” said McDowell, who finished 13th. “I was going to make (Gibbs) go around on the outside, and he still wanted to try to go through the bottom, which he was setting himself up. I should’ve ran him into the barrels and called it good.”

Gibbs saw where McDowell was coming from but wasn’t going to back down with a shot at the All-Star Race on the line.

“I can understand the No 34’s frustration,” Gibbs said. “At Martinsville we were running 18th and they clobbered us and about wrecked us, so I think it’s honestly fair game.”

Paris 2024 hoping for Olympic flame on Eiffel Tower: source

Paris: Paris 2024 organisers have been planning to install the Olympic flame on the Eiffel Tower, a source with direct knowledge of the matter told Reuters yesterday. The source added that the flame would not be put at the top of the Eiffel Tower, for technical reasons, and it was not clear whether it would stay on the monument throughout the Games but the combination of two such iconic images would be a dramatic backdrop to the July 26-Aug 11 event.

“It’s been a work in progress for the last two years now,” the source said.

The flame cannot be at the top of the tower because of the antennas already installed there, they added.

“The venue for the lighting of the flame on the Opening Day of the Olympic Games has not yet been decided,” a Paris 2024 spokesperson told Reuters.



They did not deny working on installing the flame at the Eiffel Tower and would not disclose when any announcement would be made. The flame will arrive in the port city of Marseille on May 8 by boat - the three masted tall ship “Belem” - after a 10-day journey across the Mediterranean from Greece.

FOOTBALL

Mbappe goals see PSG all but secure Ligue 1 title

‘My players have their hands on the trophy. Now we need to finish on a high in the next two matches and lift the trophy’

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain all but secured the Ligue 1 title on Sunday as a Kylian Mbappe brace gave them a 2-1 win away to Auxerre that left the Qatar-owned club six points clear at the top of the table with two games remaining.

PSG had hoped to officially confirm a second straight championship triumph, and a ninth in the last 11 seasons, but they needed closest rivals Lens to slip up earlier in the day.

Lens won 3-1 at Lorient, and so PSG still require one point from their final two matches to secure a French record 11th title overall.

However, a goal difference advantage of 16 over Lens means they are almost certain to win the title even if they end the season level on points with their closest rivals.

PSG, whose final two matches are away at Strasbourg and at home to Clermont, will move ahead of Saint-Etienne's previous record of 10 titles which they equalled last year.

Mbappe's goals both came in the first eight minutes in Burgundy as he moved on to 28 for the season, two ahead of Lyon's Alexandre Lacazette on top of the Ligue 1 scorers' chart.

He struck in the sixth minute, collecting a Fabian Ruiz pass and turning home defender Gauthier Hein inside out before shooting high into the net.

It was 2-0 two minutes later, as Hugo Ekitike left a Lionel Messi pass for Mbappe to rifle in a shot from the edge of the area.

Auxerre saw Rayan Raveloson hit the bar late in the first half and Lassine Sinayoko pulled one back six minutes after the break.

“My players have their hands on the trophy. Now we need to finish on a high in the next two matches and lift the trophy at



Paris Saint-Germain's forward Kylian Mbappe (left) celebrates after scoring his team's first goal with teammate Fabian Ruiz during the Ligue 1 match against AJ Auxerre in Auxerre, France. (AFP)

home on the last day.” PSG coach Christophe Galtier told broadcaster Amazon Prime.

Galtier and PSG have come in for criticism during a challenging second half of the season, in which they have lost six times in Ligue 1 and were knocked out of the Champions League by Bayern Munich in the last 16.

“When we look back and analyse the season, we had a very difficult period after the World Cup with injuries to key players,” Galtier added. “Our squad was severely weakened in big games and that led to us playing badly, but believe me, it is still a performance to win the league.”

Lens came from behind to win their game and move a step closer to securing a place in next season's Champions League group stage.

Romain Faivre put Lorient ahead inside six minutes, pouncing to score after Lens goalkeeper Brice Samba was put under pressure at a throw-in.

Yet Lens came roaring back to record a fifth straight victory, equalising when a Florian Sotoca shot deflected in on 20 minutes.

Adrien Thomasson capitalised on poor defending to put Lens in front five minutes later, with captain Seko Fofana wrapping up the points late on. Lens have

won nine of their last 10 games, the exception being a 3-1 defeat away to PSG. They have been chiefly focused on securing second place and direct qualification for next season's Champions League group stage, a level the club last appeared at two decades ago.

They are five points ahead of third-placed Marseille with two games to go. Third place enters the Champions League in the third qualifying round. “There is no such thing as ‘almost’ in the Champions League in the mind of a coach,” said prudent Lens manager Franck Haise. “You are either qualified or you're not,

and for the moment we are not.”

Rennes kept alive their hopes of qualifying for Europe as Amine Gouiri scored a hat-trick in their 5-0 win at already-relegated Ajaccio. Rennes remain sixth with two games left, and with only the top five qualifying for Europe.

However, they are just a point adrift of Lille and three behind fourth-placed Monaco, who they face next.

Folarin Balogun, who this week switched international allegiance from England to the United States, scored his 20th Ligue 1 goal this season for Reims as they drew 2-2 with Angers.

SPOTLIGHT

AGCFF GA to be held tomorrow



AGCFF president Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The ordinary general assembly of the Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF) will be held at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Doha tomorrow.

The meeting will be chaired by President of the AGCFF Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani and will be attended by AGCFF Vice-President Salem bin Saeed al-Wahaibi, and members of the

heads of the Gulf Football Associations. The general assembly will vote on the host nation for the Arab Gulf Cup and will elect president and vice-president for the next session.

During the General Assembly, the topics on the agenda will be discussed, including the approval of the minutes of the meeting of the general conference, which was held in Basra on the sidelines of the Gulf 25, in addition to discussing the administrative report and the activities that have been implemented.

Al Rayyan part ways with coach Cordova

DOHA: It is announced yesterday that **Nicolas Cordova** will not return as the Al Rayyan coach next season following the recently-concluded domestic football season. Chilean Cordova, who coached Qatar U-23 side, took over as Al Rayyan's interim coach in February 2022 before being confirmed as manager four months later.

However, Al Rayyan struggled throughout the season and finished at dismal ninth place in the QNB Stars League (QSL), which the side won on eight occasions in the past. “Thank you Nicolas Cordova,” Al Rayyan posted on its twitter account. Portugal's Leonardo Jardim is likely to replace the Chilean. According to a report Jardim has accepted a two-year contract with the Lions. The club is expected to make the announcement soon. Jardim recently led Shabab Al Ahli to Adnoc Pro League in the UAE. The 48-year-old, a former Monaco coach, also guided Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal to the Asian Champions League title in 2021.



FOCUS

Messi and Argentina to play Australia in China friendly

AFP
Beijing

Lionel Messi will lead world champions Argentina in a friendly against Australia in Beijing, the country said yesterday, followed by another game in Indonesia.

The clash on June 15 at the Workers' Stadium in the Chinese capital is a rematch of Argentina and Australia's meeting in the last 16 of the Qatar World Cup. Messi scored in a 2-1 win for Argentina and they went on to win the World Cup.

“On June 15, Lionel Messi will lead the Argentinian national team in a friendly against Australia in Beijing,” the South American country's embassy in China said on the Twitter-like Weibo. Separately, the national team also announced another friendly, against Indonesia in Jakarta on June 19, as part of a summer “Asia Tour”.

Football Australia chief executive James Johnson said playing in China will further boost ties between the two countries after years of troubled relations.

“Football is truly the global game and for Australia to be invited to play this match in China, and against the world number one, we hope this will open further opportunities for our two nations to



work together both on and off the football field,” Johnson said. “It's been 15 years since our senior men's national team played in China and we are truly excited to be returning to face Argentina at the newly renovated Workers' Stadium in Beijing,” he added. International sport has only just begun to return to China after Beijing abruptly ditched strict virus curbs late last year.

BOTTOMLINE

Spain prosecutors open probe into racist abuse of Vinicius

AFP
Madrid

Spanish prosecutors opened a probe yesterday into racist chants aimed at Real Madrid's star forward Vinicius Junior during a match as the football federation president admitted the country had a “problem” with racism.

The 22-year-old Brazilian international forward was targeted by a home supporter during a 1-0 defeat at Valencia on Sunday and was later sent off. The prosecutor's office in Valencia is investigating the incident as a possible “hate crime”, a judicial source told AFP. The move comes after Real Madrid said it had filed a complaint with the office “in order for the facts to be investigated and for those responsible to be held accountable.”

The club said the chants, in its view, “constitute a hate crime”.

Separately, Spain's government sports council said it was analysing the images to “identify the perpetrators of these insults and behaviours to propose the appropriate sanctions.”

The body has in similar incidents in the past proposed a one-year stadium ban and fine of 4,000 euros (\$4,300) for those found guilty. Top figures from the world of football and beyond rallied around the player, who has frequently been singled out for racial abuse in La Liga. The head of Spain's football fed-



Real Madrid's forward Vinicius Junior pointing at the stands during the La Liga league match against Valencia CF at Mestalla Stadium in Valencia on Sunday. (AFP)

eration, Luis Rubiales, said the country had a “problem” with racism.

“As long as there is just one fan, a single undesirable, or group of undesirables who hurl insults over someone's sexual orientation, or skin colour, we have a serious problem,” he added. During the match, Vinicius stood in front of fans behind the goal and pointed to the apparent culprit and play was delayed for several minutes in the second half. Referee Ricardo de Burgos Bengoetxea spoke to stadium officials, who made an announcement calling for racist insults

to stop before play resumed 10 minutes later.

The referee wrote in his post-match report that a fan shouted “monkey, monkey” at the player.

Vinicius was sent off in added time at the end of the game for hitting Valencia player Hugo Duro during a brawl. He later issued a statement saying that La Liga “belongs to racists”.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva condemned the abuse, telling a news conference at the close of the G7 summit in Hiroshima: “He was attacked. He was called a ‘monkey’.”

He called for the Spanish

league to take “serious measures”. Spain's Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz, a deputy prime minister, also weighted in, saying “racist chants in football stadiums do not represent our country”. “We will continue to work to end racism,” she tweeted.

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said Spanish football needed to be prepared to halt matches. “The Spanish league has a problem, and Vinicius is not the problem. Vinicius is the victim,” Ancelotti said.

“What has happened today has happened before, but not like that, it's unacceptable,” he told reporters.

FIFA reiterated yesterday that stopping matches is permitted as well as players walking off the pitch in their three-step approach when racist abuse takes place. “Full solidarity to Vinicius,” FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in a statement.

Vinicius has been racially abused at several stadiums this season in Spain and an effigy of him was hung from a bridge by Atletico Madrid fans.

Writing on Instagram, Vinicius said Spain was viewed as “a country of racists” in his homeland. He said Spain was “a great country, which welcomed me and that I love, but which has accepted to expose to the world the image of a racist country. I am sorry for the Spanish people who do not agree, but today, in Brazil, Spain is known as a country of racists.”

Matic equaliser, Juve points reduction keep Roma in European hunt

ROME: Nemanja Matic's late equaliser in yesterday's 2-2 draw with Salernitana sent Roma into the European places as Juventus dropped below the capital club after their points reduction was revised. Former Serbia midfielder Matic scored seven minutes from time, at the same time as the Italian Football Federation's appeals court announced Juve's 10-point deduction.

The decision came following a revision of their initial 15-point penalty inflicted on the club over illicit transfer activity. Juve head to Empoli and can move back above Roma as well as Atalanta into fifth spot - the Europa League berth for next season. At the Stadio Olimpico, the hosts were

on the back foot early on as midfielder Antonio Candreva opened the scoring after 12 minutes. The 36-year-old fired home his effort from inside the box.

Roma were level just two minutes after the break as Stephan El Shaarawy scored his second goal in as many league appearances. With 35 minutes remaining, Boulaye Dia regained the lead for the visitors but Matic's equaliser was to come.

As Roma pressed forward with a good chance for Tammy Abraham, 34-year-old Matic claimed a point with a low effort to move his side into sixth place, the Europa Conference League qualifier spot. (AFP)