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Djokovic and Alcaraz in same half at French Open



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Rayyan, Arabi set up title clash at Amir Cup handball tournament



Al Rayyan will meet Al Arabi in the final of Amir Cup handball tournament after winning their respective semi-finals at Duhail Handball Sports Hall yesterday. Arabi edged past Al Ahli 34-33 in a nail-biting contest, while Rayyan beat Qatar Cup champions Al Wakrah 28-25 to book their spot in the title clash, which will be played tomorrow.



ATHLETICS

Samba qualifies for World Championships with victory in Savona

Another Qatari hurdler Bassemi Hemeida finished third after his season’s best of 49.98 secs

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar’s 400m hurdler Abderrahman Samba qualified for this year’s World Athletics Championships in Budapest after achieving the qualifying mark en route to his win at the Memorial Ottolia in Savona, Italy on Wednesday.

Samba – a world bronze medallist in 2019 – set a meet record of 48.56 secs to win the event in Italy, which is a World Athletics Continental Tour Challenger meeting. The qualification mark for the World Championship is 48.70 secs. Home favourite and Olympic finalist Alessandro Sibillo, who was competing after two years, gave Samba a good fight but had to settle for second place in 48.72 secs. Another Qatari hurdler Bassemi Hemeida finished third after his season’s best of 49.98 secs.

The victory in Italy is a significant moment for Samba, who has been struggling with injury post the Tokyo Olympics. The 28-year-old was supposed to begin the season at the Diamond League opener in Doha last month, but was conspicuous by his absence. In the 400m hurdles, an event that is increasingly making headlines thanks to Norway’s world record holder Karsten Warholm, Samba is the Qatari national record holder with a best of 46.98, the fifth-fastest time ever.

Samba, who finished fifth at the To-



Qatar’s Abderrahman Samba (left) in action en route to winning 400m hurdles at the Memorial Ottolia in Savona, Italy.

kyo Games, was unable to compete in 2022 after injuring his hamstring during warm-up for the Doha event in May. Following surgery and a lengthy period of rehabilitation, he has trained well

over the winter under the guidance of his new coach, Massimo Matrone.

“I was in good shape this time last year and I was disappointed to miss the World Championships, but I’ve had a consist-

ent block of training and I’m healthy and ready to race. The 400m hurdles is one of the most exciting events on the programme right now and I want to be back in the mix,” Samba had said recently.

Meanwhile, Reyner Mena, Darryl Neita, Zane Weir and Reetta Hurske also set meeting records at the 12th edition of the Memorial Ottolia in Savona, but the biggest highlight was Mattia Furlani’s wind-assisted mark of 8.44m in the men’s long jump.

European under 18 high jump and long jump champion Furlani produced the big jump in the second round to take the win. Rushval Samaai from South Africa placed second with 7.96m.

Dina Asher Smith won for the second time in her career in Savona in the women’s 200 metres in a wind-assisted 22.61 (+2.3 m/s). The former 200 metres world champion set the meeting record of 22.56 in 2021. European under 23 Dalia Kaddari from Italy finished second in 22.95. Last year’s European and Commonwealth bronze medallist Darryl Neita from Great Britain improved the meeting record in the women’s 100 metres twice clocking 11.06 in the heat and 10.97 in the final.

Reyner Mena from Cuba ran the first sub-20 seconds time in the history of the Savona meeting in the men’s 200 metres clocking 19.95 (+1.6 m/s). Mena set the second fastest time in his career after his PB of 19.63 in La Chaux de Fonds last year. Yancarlos Martinez finished second in 20.44. Reece Prescod from Great Britain won the 100 metres in a wind-assisted 9.94 (+2-7 m/s) beating Sri Lanka’s Yupun Abeykoon (10.01), Ivory Coast’s Arthur Cisse (10.03), Lorenzo Patta (10.08).

Groups finalised for AFC U-23 Qatar 2024 qualifiers

Kuala Lumpur: The draw for the AFC Under-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 Qualifiers was finalised at the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia yesterday. The hopefuls were divided into 11 groups – 10 groups of four teams each, with the last group containing three. Qatar, meanwhile, will play in the qualifiers for exposure with their matches classified as friendlies.

To be played from September 4 to 12 this year, Group A of the qualifiers will have hosts Jordan, Syria, Oman and Brunei Darussalam vying for the sole automatic ticket to the Finals. Group B will see 2020 champions South Korea (H), Myanmar, Kyrgyz Republic and Qatar contesting with Vietnam (H), Singapore, Yemen and Guam the Group C cast.

Japan, the 2016 champions, are the top seeds in Group D with Bahrain (H), Palestine and Pakistan their challengers while 2018 champions Uzbekistan (H), Iran, Hong Kong and Afghanistan were drawn in Group E. Group F will see 2013 winners Iraq, Kuwait (H), Timor-Leste and Macau doing battle with United Arab Emirates, India, Maldives and hosts China the Group G teams.

Hosts Thailand lead Group H with Malaysia, Bangladesh and Philippines also aiming for a place in the finals while Group I will see Australia, Tajikistan (H), Laos and DPR Korea locking horns. Defending champions Saudi Arabia (H), Cambodia, Lebanon and Mongolia were drawn in Group J while the three-team Group K will be a tussle between Turkmenistan, Indonesia (H) and Chinese Taipei. The AFC U23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 finals are scheduled for April 15 to May 3, 2024.

MOTORSPORT

Hamilton will sign new Mercedes deal ‘in coming weeks’

‘I’ve been so excited to get in the car again and to feel these changes’

AFP
Monaco

Lewis Hamilton yesterday denied all reports that he has been approached by Ferrari and said he was set to re-sign with Mercedes “in the coming weeks”.

The seven-time world champion's current contract expires this year. He has been in discussions with Mercedes boss Toto Wolff for several months, but recently passed the task of completing what may be his final contract in Formula One to his personal management team.

“I think, naturally, when you are in contract negotiations there is always going to be speculation,” Hamilton, 38, told a news conference at the Monaco Grand Prix. “But, unless you hear it from me, that’s all it is. There is a certain individual in this room that has been written at least one of them - I don’t know, but maybe with last weekend being cancelled, they just got bored.

“But my team is working closely behind the scenes with Toto and we are almost at the point of having the contract ready. I’m having the team focused on that so I can just do my job.

“It’s a much better position than I used to be in before because I used to do the negotiations on my own and it was very stressful. I don’t have to do that anymore.”

He added, when asked, that he hoped the contract would be completed “hopefully in the coming weeks”.

Hamilton’s denial of any approach from Ferrari followed an earlier rejection of the speculation by Ferrari team chief Fred Vasseur. He said also that despite a long win drought since the 2021 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, he remained keen to stay with Mercedes.

“I think we’re still a championship-winning team,” said Hamilton.

“It’s just that we’ve had the wrong car. I was a bit gutted when the last race was cancelled because I was excited to try our



Mercedes’ British driver Lewis Hamilton walks in the pit lane ahead of the Monaco Formula One Grand Prix at the Monaco street circuit yesterday. (AFP)

new package there. This (Monaco) is not the best platform for it track-wise but hopefully we’ll see more next week.”

Meanwhile, Hamilton hopes he and team-mate George Russell will be “more in the fight for victory” this weekend where Mercedes will run a heavily-revised version of their hitherto disappointing 2023 car.

Speaking ahead of Sunday’s 80th edition of the classic race, Hamilton admitted he had been excited and filled with

anticipation and hope, citing a feeling that the team had “found the north star” again.

A wide-ranging update package has given the team a new direction in design philosophy for their car and enlivened hopes of a revival after a run of disappointments.

“I don’t think we will be fighting for a win necessarily, but hopefully we will be more in the fight. I’ve been so excited to get in the car again and to feel these

changes,” said Hamilton. “I feel that hopefully it puts us on the right path to progress forward and try and catch the guys ahead.”

He added: “I’m really encouraged when I go to the factory and see how hard everyone is working. Last year we were a little bit lost in terms of how to fix the issues we had.

“But now, I feel like the team have found the north star. They know exactly where we need to go and how to get there.”

CYCLING

Zana wins stage 18, delightful birthday for leader Thomas

Reuters
Milan

Italian Filippo Zana of Jayco-AlUla won a gruelling stage 18 of the Giro d’Italia yesterday after fending off Thibaut Pinot, while Geraint Thomas celebrated his 37th birthday in style by tightening his grip on the leader’s maglia rosa jersey.

The 18th stage was one for the climbers on a 161-kilometre ride from Oderzo to Val di Zoldo, with Zana beating Pinot (Groupama-FDJ) to the finish line for his first Giro victory.

Warren Barguil (Arkea-Samsic) crossed the line third, well behind the top two.

“I still can’t believe it. I have to thank the team because they gave me this opportunity,” Italian champion Zana said.

“In the finale I played my cards right, it was an opportunity that comes around a few times in life and I took it.

“To win with the tricolour jersey is special.”

Pinot and Zana were part of a six-man breakaway which built up a lead of four-and-a-half minutes to the peloton with 10km to go, but the duo dropped their companions on the steep Alpine slopes as they surged to the finish line.

In the overall standings, In-

eos Grenadiers rider Thomas extended his lead at the top to 29 seconds, with Primoz Roglic (Jumbo-Visma) leap-frogging Joao Almeida (UAE Team Emirates) into second.

Thomas was made to work hard, as he clung to the wheel of Roglic throughout the final stretch, while Almeida did well to remain in touch with the pair after momentarily looking like he would be left behind by his GC rivals.

“To gain time on Almeida and not get dropped by Primoz is a good day,” Welshman Thomas said.

“I felt pretty good, in control. Primoz likes to go hard, easy, hard. I gave him a few turns and wasn’t sure how he was feeling but then in the last 2km he really squeezed on again. He was really strong but I’m happy with how I was.

“It’s nice (to gain time on Almeida) but Primoz had a bad day the other day, Almeida today. I’ve just got to keep being consistent. Just take it day by day, climb by climb.”

Yesterday’s stage served as a warm-up for today’s punishing 183-km ride from Longarone to Tre Cime Di Lavaredo, which involves a long and slow climb at the start before three challenging category one ascents, with a total altitude gain of 5,400 metres.



Team Jayco Alula’s Filippo Zana in action before crossing the line to win stage 18 at the Giro d’Italia from Oderzo to Val di Zoldo in Italy yesterday. (Reuters)

CRICKET

Anderson says he will be ready for Ashes opener

Reuters
London

England fast bowler James Anderson says he has recovered from a groin injury and will be fit for the first Ashes Test against Australia next month.

England’s leading bowler in tests with 685 wickets, Anderson suffered the injury playing for Lancashire last week.

He is unlikely to play in the one-off Test against Ireland before the Ashes after the uncapped Josh Tongue was added to the squad.

“Yes, definitely,” Anderson, 40, told *The Telegraph* newspaper yesterday when asked if he would be fit for the opener against Australia at Edgbaston on June 16.

“I have no issues running and bowling again and just keeping my fingers crossed I can carry on going as I have been and will be ready for the Ashes.

“The idea is to try and step it up here at Lancashire over the next couple of days and then meet up with England on Sunday and see where I get to. I am in the squad for the Ireland Test but we have to make a call on that nearer to the time.”

Anderson’s availability is crucial for England, who are already without injured fast bowler Jofra Archer. Going into his 10th Ashes series, Test cricket’s third most prolific wicket-taker is confident England can take the urn off Australia for the first time since 2015. Particularly if they replicate the domineering style of play that



has seen them win 10 of 12 Tests under Stokes and head coach Brendon McCullum.

“If you look at our team, if we play to the best of our ability with that mindset, I don’t think anyone can cope with us,” said Anderson. “So yes, I think we can win. “I feel like if we can keep the same mentality and the same sort of feeling in the dressing room we’ve had. It’s fairly relaxed, we’re trying to enjoy ourselves, we’re trying to entertain people, take the positive option.”

England lost 4-0 in the last Ashes series in Australia.

Jason Roy agrees termination of ECB contract to play in MLC
Batsman Jason Roy has given up his incremental contract with the England and Wales Cricket Board

(ECB) to play in the inaugural edition of the United States’ new Twenty20 tournament - Major League Cricket (MLC).

Roy, who was an integral part of the England side which won the 2019 one-day World Cup, was dropped from a full contract to an incremental one in October.

The incremental contracts are given to players who may feature for England on a less predictable basis.

“The ECB have agreed for him to play in the competition (MLC) on the proviso that he gives up the remainder of his ECB incremental contract, which both parties have agreed to,” the ECB said yesterday. “The ECB wish to clarify that this decision will not affect Jason’s selection for England teams going forward.

We have absolute confidence and faith that Jason is committed to England cricket.”

In a statement on social media, Roy said he would never “walk away from England.”

“I’ve had clear and supportive conversations with the ECB about participating in Major League Cricket. The ECB were happy with me to play in the competition as long as they didn’t have to pay me for the remainder of the contractual year,” Roy said.

“As a single format player with no central contract I wanted to take the opportunity to play this competition as there are currently no scheduling conflicts with England. It benefits me as an England player to play as much competitive cricket as possible.”

Asia Cup fate to be decided during IPL final

New Delhi: The fate of this year’s Asia Cup, which may determine Pakistan’s participation in the World Cup in India, will be decided on the sidelines of Sunday’s Indian Premier League (IPL) final in Ahmedabad, Asian Cricket Council (ACC) President Jay Shah said. Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), host of the eight-team Asia Cup in September, has offered a “hybrid” model to stage some matches at a neutral venue after India refused to tour the country. Owing to their soured political relations, bilateral cricket between India and Pakistan remains suspended and they play each other only in multi-team events. Pakistan have threatened to boycott the World Cup in India in October-November should they

be forced to stage the entire Asia Cup in another country, which could be the United Arab Emirates. Shah said cricket chiefs from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Afghanistan would attend the IPL final in Ahmedabad on Sunday, where a final decision would be taken. “We will hold discussions with them for outlining the future course of action in relation to Asia Cup 2023,” Shah, also the secretary of the powerful Indian board, said in a brief statement yesterday. He was not immediately available to elaborate when Reuters contacted him. PCB chairman Najam Sethi was likely to join the meeting virtually, a source said.

MADHWAL - TENNIS-BALL CRICKETER WHO ENTERED IPL RECORD BOOKS

Chennai, India: Akash Madhwal was working as an engineer and playing tennis-ball cricket just a few years ago - now he is in the Indian Premier League record books. The 29-year-old fast bowler returned stunning figures of 5-5 in the play-offs to lead five-time champions Mumbai Indians to victory over Lucknow Super Giants on Wednesday. Mumbai will face Gujarat Titans today for a place in Sunday’s final against Chennai Super Kings. With Jasprit Bumrah and Jofra Archer both out injured, the previously unheralded Madhwal has grabbed his chance to shine. He joined Mumbai last year as an injury replacement but remained confined to playing practice matches, before skipper Rohit Sharma introduced him to the big stage this season. “The team has given me the responsibility so I am trying to do it,” Madhwal told reporters after his man-of-the-match performance.



“It’s not that I can take his (Bumrah’s) place, but whatever I can do in my capacity, I am doing.” Madhwal’s route into IPL folklore - the first to take a five-wicket haul in the play-offs - came by way of an unusual path. He was working as a civil engineer when he quit a steady job and joined his state team, before the IPL came calling. “Cricket is my passion and not a burden,” he said. “So I am enjoying cricket after leaving engineering and a job to follow my passion without having much at home.” Madhwal is also a product of

tennis-ball cricket, a variant of the sport using tennis balls. It is popular among budding cricketers across India and Madhwal said it played a part in his breakout display. “I have learnt to bowl yorkers in tennis-ball cricket and I try to implement that (here) because that’s the only ball to save yourself (from getting hit for runs),” said Madhwal, who hails from the north Indian state of Uttarakhand. “My strength is my yorker and bhaiyya (“brother” Rohit) used me where my strength lies and where the team needs me.” His feat on Wednesday came on the back of 4-37 against Sunrisers Hyderabad. Standing at 1.75 metres (five feet and nine inches), Madhwal is not your usual tall and burly fast bowler, but his accuracy and grit more than makes up for the lack of size. “We knew what he had, and we needed somebody to bowl at the back end,” said Rohit. “Having seen him, I was confident he could get the job done for us.”



SPOTLIGHT

Will ‘King James’ really give up NBA throne?

AFP
Los Angeles

Aweary, honest admission that one of the greatest careers in NBA history could be over? Or a calculated move designed to spur the Los Angeles Lakers into bolstering their roster? Just days after LeBron James sent shockwaves rippling through basketball by revealing he was considering retirement, analysts are divided over whether the “King” is truly ready to give up his throne.

The 38-year-old delivered a vintage 40-point performance in a losing effort for the Los Angeles Lakers on Monday as Denver completed a 4-0 series sweep of the 17-time champions to reach the NBA Finals.

The defeat drew an unusually cryptic response from James in his postgame press conference as he reflected on a roller-coaster season that saw the Lakers emerge as title contenders despite a dismal 2-10 start.

“I don’t like to say it’s a successful year because I don’t play for anything besides winning championships at this point in my career,” said James.

“We’ll see what happens going forward. I don’t know. I’ve got a lot to think about to be honest.”

In remarks to an *ESPN* reporter after the press conference, James made it clear that retirement was under serious consideration.

Asked what he planned to “think about” in the offseason, James replied: “If I want to continue to play.”

That startling admission marked a sharp departure from James’ previous public statements about how he sees the remainder of his career playing career.

He inked a lucrative two-year contract extension with the Lakers last August that takes him through to the end of the 2024-2025 NBA season.

That would potentially provide him with the opportunity to play in the NBA with his eldest son Bronny James – something James has repeatedly said is his dream.

Monday’s dazzling game-four display came at the end of an injury-disrupted regular season in which he averaged an impressive 28.9 points per game across 55 games.

Nevertheless, James hinted that the punishing nature of the NBA season, citing the “bus rides and plane rides” might be losing



Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James shoots the ball against the Denver Nuggets during the third quarter in game four of the Western Conference Finals for the 2023 NBA play-offs at Crypto.com Arena. (USA TODAY Sports)

its appeal after two decades. “It’s challenging,” he said.

Former NBA player and *ESPN* pundit JJ Redick said the com-

ments might be designed to signal to the Lakers front office that the team needed strengthening.

“I think as an athlete there’s

always a moment when you sort of begin to question your own athletic mortality,” Redick said.

“Maybe in some ways LeBron is

at that stage. Am I buying that he’s going to retire? No, absolutely not. LeBron is one of the most calculated athletes in the history of professional sports. Everything he does is for a reason. And whether this is to put a little bit of pressure on the Lakers to improve the roster...whatever it is, there’s a reason he did this.”

ESPN reporter Brian Windhorst said James was “essentially sending a message” to the Lakers by inviting speculation about his future.

“There is something for the Lakers to consider here,” Windhorst told *ESPN*’s First Take discussion show.

“The Lakers have four or five weeks to consider the direction they are going with this team. They’ve got to make a decision about whether they want to hold this team together.”

Analyst Stephen A Smith meanwhile is convinced that James will stay in the NBA to realise his dream of playing with his son. However, Smith said James’ intended to signal his dissatisfaction with the Lakers roster.

“He put on a show and received minimal help,” Smith said of James’ game four performance. “No-one is going to convince me that that doesn’t play

a role in what he disseminated to everybody last night. Now, do I think he will retire? I don’t.”

“He wants to hang around long enough to be in a uniform on a basketball court with his son, that is his dream.

“But it hurts that much to put in all that work and come up short. I think we heard what we heard last night because LeBron James has serious questions as to what the Lakers can truly accomplish.

“For him it’s about championships or bust.”

The NBA’s all-time leading scorer, James passed Michael Jordan as the NBA’s leading scorer in the playoffs and has four NBA championships. He led the Lakers to the 2020 NBA title in the playoff bubble during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Prior to Monday, James had pointed to the opportunity to play on the same team with his son, Bronny, a likely member of the 2024 draft class.

James turns 39 on Dec. 30 and statistically showed no signs of slowing down.

He played 55 regular-season games due to a foot injury, averaging 28.9 points, 8.3 rebounds and 6.8 assists in the 2022-23 regular season.

TENNIS

Djokovic, Alcaraz in same half of the French Open draw

THE TWO COULD POTENTIALLY MEET IN SEMI-FINALS AT ROLAND GARROS

AFP
Paris

Novak Djokovic could face world number one Carlos Alcaraz in the semi-finals of the French Open after both players were placed in the same half of the draw yesterday.

Djokovic is chasing a record 23rd men’s Grand Slam title in the absence of the injured Rafael Nadal, who will miss the tournament at Roland Garros for the first time since his 2005 title-winning debut.

The third-seeded Djokovic, Roland Garros champion in 2016 and 2021, meets 114th-ranked Aleksandar Kovacevic of the US in the first round in Paris – the first French Open since 1998 without Nadal or the now retired Roger Federer.

The 24-year-old Kovacevic is making his Grand Slam main draw debut.

Djokovic, who turned 36 on Monday, has been bothered by a recurrence of a right elbow injury which has disrupted his clay-court season.

He failed to go beyond the last eight at any of the three events he played on clay this spring, losing his number one spot to Alcaraz.

Djokovic has also fallen behind Daniil Medvedev in the rankings after the Russian succeeded him as Italian Open champion last weekend.

US Open champion Alcaraz and Medvedev both start their Roland Garros campaigns against a qualifier or lucky loser.

Alcaraz faces a challenging path to a second Grand Slam title, with Lorenzo Musetti a possible last-16 foe before 2021 runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas potentially awaits him in the quarter-finals.

“I always want to believe in myself and I always want to win the biggest tournaments in the world,” said Medvedev.

“But at the same time, I didn’t think I could win a Masters 1000 on clay in my career because usually I hated it, I hated playing on it. I didn’t feel good on it and nothing was working.

“Before this tournament already in Madrid and Monte Carlo I wasn’t feeling too bad. I thought, ‘OK, let’s continue’. Then when I came here I felt so good in practice and I told my coach, ‘I don’t know what is happening but I am feeling amazing’.”

For Djokovic to set up a blockbuster last-four clash with Alcaraz he may need to get past Monte Carlo Masters champion Andrey Rublev in the quarters.

Casper Ruud, who was thrashed by Nadal in last year’s final, is seeded fourth and plays a qualifier in his opening match.

The in-form Holger Rune arrives in



Serbia’s Novak Djokovic (left) returns to Denmark’s Holger Rune during their quarter-finals at the Rome Open on May 17, 2023 and Spain’s Carlos Alcaraz is seen in action against Hungary’s Fabian Marozsan during their third round match of the same event on May 15, 2023. Djokovic could face world number one Alcaraz in the semi-finals of the 2023 French Open after both players were placed in the same half of the draw in Paris yesterday. Djokovic is chasing a record 23rd men’s Grand Slam title in the absence of the injured Rafael Nadal, who will miss the tournament at Roland Garros for the first time since his 2005 title-winning debut. (AFP)

Paris at a career-high six in the world and takes on Christopher Eubanks of the US in round one.

Iga Swiatek contends with Elena Rybakina threat

Two-time women’s champion Iga Swiatek begins her title defence against Spain’s Cristina Bucsa, the world number 67 who was beaten by the Pole in the third round of this year’s Australian Open.

The top-ranked Swiatek, bidding to become the first back-to-back women’s champion at the French Open in 16 years, is coming off a thigh injury which forced her to retire in Rome. She is seeded to meet 2022 runner-up Coco Gauff in the quarter-finals and could face Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina, last week’s Italian Open winner, in the last four.

Rybakina has beaten Swiatek three

times this season, knocking her out of the Australian Open Melbourne and Indian Wells before advancing when injury halted her rival in Rome.

Barbora Krejickova, the 2021 winner, could await Swiatek in the last 16. The Czech lost in the first round a year ago.

“This is my favourite tournament. I always get this extra motivation to practise harder here. I’m really excited to be here,” Swiatek said during the draw ceremony yesterday.

Aryna Sabalenka, who won her maiden Grand Slam crown in Melbourne, plays Marta Kostyuk of Ukraine in round one. Sabalenka has never got beyond the third round in Paris despite making at least the semi-finals at all of the other three majors.

Furthermore, her title win in Madrid this spring was followed by a first-up exit

at the hands of 134th-ranked Sofia Kenin in Rome.

Third seed Jessica Pegula has a tricky opening match against fellow American and 2022 Australian Open finalist Danielle Collins, while Rybakina gets a qualifier first up.

Ons Jabeur, seeded seventh, is a potential quarter-final opponent for Rybakina, who defeated the Tunisian in the 2022 Wimbledon final.

Jabeur also finished runner-up to Swiatek at the US Open.

Rybakina, a Russian-born Kazakh has yet to get past the last eight at Roland Garros.

French fifth seed Caroline Garcia meets China’s Wang Xiyu as two-time major winner Victoria Azarenka squares off with 2019 US Open champion Bianca Andreescu in the first round.

FRENCH OLYMPIC MOVEMENT MUST ‘FOCUS’ ON PARIS GAMES, WARNS IOC

Lausanne: The French Olympic movement must “focus” on the preparations for the 2024 Games in Paris, an IOC spokesperson told AFP yesterday hours after Brigitte Henriques’ surprise resignation as National Olympic Committee (CNOSF) president.

The Olympic body “calls on everybody to take responsibility so that the internal arguments that have affected the CNOSF these past few months cease”, the spokesperson said.

Henriques’ resignation will not affect the organising of the Games which is handled by the Paris Olympics organising committee, headed by France’s three-time canoeing gold medalist Tony Estanguet.

The sporting world’s quadrennial global showcase gets underway on July 26 next year and runs until August 11.

Henriques’ dramatic resignation at the committee’s general assembly comes after a year-and-a-half of internal squabbling and a very public disagreement with her predecessor Denis Masseglia.

Henriques had insisted prior to the assembly she had no intention of resigning but to the astonishment of the attendees she said she would step down on June 29.

She had taken a few weeks off at the end of 2022 to recover after her right-hand man Dider Seminiet had been cast aside in September but the atmosphere had not improved when she returned to her post.

The CNOSF general secretary Astrid Guyart will act in a caretaker role until a new president is elected “in the next three

months”, the body said in a statement.

“There have been no winners today,” French Sports Minister Amelie Oudea-Castera told AFP after Henriques’s announcement.

She added, however, there could be “a victory, that of ethics and democracy”.

Oudea-Castera added she had summoned the board of the CNOSF to meet with her next Tuesday to clear the air and plot the way forward.

Henriques’s resignation was broadly welcomed by the presidents of the French sports federations.

“It is a courageous decision which will certainly diminish the ongoing conflicts as we were spiralling out of control,” handball federation president Philippe Bana told AFP.

The resignation of Henriques – a former vice-president of the French Football Federation – is just the latest drama to affect French sports in the past year.

Several federations – football, rugby, gymnastics and tennis – have become embroiled in scandals.

There have been two high profile resignations as a result – football’s octogenarian president Noel Le Graet went in February following accusations of sexual and psychological harassment.

Former sports minister and French rugby coach Bernard Laporte also quit his role as president of the French Rugby Federation in January after being convicted of corruption – months away from France hosting the men’s Rugby World Cup.



President of the French Olympic Committee (CNOSF) Brigitte Henriques (right) holds the hand of one of her daughters in her arms during the General Assembly of the organisation in Paris yesterday. She resigned from her post, a blow in the middle of a general assembly 14 months before the Olympics 2024 in Paris, in order to end an internal crisis that has lasted for more than a year and a half. (AFP)

Lilia Vu pulls away in LPGA Match-Play opener

Las Vegas: Top-seeded Lilia Vu cruised to a 4-and-3 victory over US countrywoman Lauren Hartlage as group play began in the Bank of Hope LPGA Match-Play in Las Vegas.

Vu, who is ranked fourth in the world, was level with Hartlage through 11 holes before winning each of the next four holes at Shadow Creek Golf Course to seal the win in Group 1.

Second-seeded Brooke M. Henderson of Canada, the world’s eighth-ranked player, posted a 3-and-2 win over South Korea’s Yaeun Hong in Group 2.

The 64-player field is divided into 16 groups that are competing in round-robin play through Friday. The winner of each group will advance to single-elimination play.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar must become best in Asia to challenge on global stage: Queiroz



Reuters
Doha

Qatar head coach Carlos Queiroz said they must move on from their disappointing performance as hosts of last year's World Cup and focus on defending their Asian Cup title against "beautiful players" and "wonderful teams".

Qatar finished bottom of their group at the World Cup, losing all three games under previous coach Felix Sanchez.

The Gulf nation is due to host the Asian Cup in January and February next year, and the team will be defending champions after stunning Japan in the 2019 final.

"We are in one special moment because looking back a little bit, we've just

finished the World Cup, and it was a little below the high expectations," Queiroz, who took over in February, told *The National* newspaper on Wednesday.

"So we have now one mission, which is to get back to normality and put things in the right way and make our team, our players and our fans understand that now we go for one competition level that is our world.

"We cannot challenge international football if we're not the best in Asia. So this is exactly what I want: to create this concept of the players and all the team to understand that in football there is one journey. And the journey starts when you start to play against yourself. And step by step, when we start to become more solid, we can extend our ideas. That's my technical approach with them right now."

Qatar begin their Asian Cup defence against Lebanon before facing Tajikistan and China, but Queiroz knows far tougher challengers await after the group stage.

"Now the most important thing is the next step, how we're going to be prepared, how we're going to be ready to compete against beautiful players, wonderful teams, the best in Asia," added the Portuguese coach.

"Because it will be hard. It will be a tough competition, but the most important thing is in the end to play good football, have a lot of fun, and bring as much pride and honour for the country."

Asked how the mood is within the camp following the World Cup, Queiroz told *The National*: "What is this? I put a line now and there is nothing behind.

This is a new era."

Qatar kick off their title defence against Lebanon on January 12 at Al Bayt Stadium. Queiroz, who led three-time winners Iran to the quarter-finals in 2015 and then to the semi-finals four years ago, said: "The first game is important not only for us, it's for everybody in a short competition of four teams – the first game a lot of times dictates what will happen in the group. But it happens also sometimes that even the team that lose the first game became champions at the end.

"What is important is not only to know how to play, but to be ready to rebound from all and everything. Success is not a straight line in football; it is a line that will go up and down. In this kind of competition, you have to have a concrete stomach."

PREMIER LEAGUE

Guardiola praises Man City intensity after Brighton draw

'Exceptional game. Congratulations to Brighton for qualifying for Europa League'

Reuters
Brighton, England

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola praised the intensity of his Premier League champions after a 1-1 draw at Brighton and Hove Albion on Wednesday despite admitting to some wild celebrations a little over 48 hours before.

For the first time since February, City dropped league points as a stunning goal by Brighton's Paraguayan teenager Julio Enciso snapped their 12-game winning run in the league. Erling Haaland, who set up Phil Foden's opener, had a late goal disallowed, resulting in a yellow card for Guardiola who simply hates dropping points.

City have one more league game left before an FA Cup final against Manchester United and then a Champions League final against Inter Milan. Victories in both will see City match Manchester United's treble, so Guardiola's side might have been excused taking their foot off the gas having won a fifth title in six seasons at the weekend. That they did not win, however, was more to do with an excellent Brighton side who sealed a Europa League spot.

"Exceptional game. Congratulations to Brighton for their deserved qualification to the Europa League," Guardiola said.

"The game we played, 48 hours after we partying in Manchester, 48 hours later we behaved and we showed why we were the champions against that team. We showed what we have done with and without the ball. I didn't see one drop in our intensity and idea.

"They had chances, we had chances, we scored a goal, they scored a goal. Both teams want the ball, both teams want to press. The keepers are fundamental in



Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola celebrates with captain Ilkay Gundogan after the Premier League match against Brighton.

this game. The quality (Brighton) have, they are an exceptional team."

Guardiola shared some jokes during the game with Brighton boss Roberto De Zerbi and warmly congratulated the home players. But he was angry that Haaland's goal was disallowed for shirt-pulling. "Watch it. Watch it, if it's a fault, every action for Erling is a fault," he said

of his 52-goal striker.

Guardiola said his side cannot afford to lose any momentum as they seek to make history. "I didn't see it, against Chelsea I didn't see it today. During the week we have to rest, recover mentally," he said. "It's been demanding for the past six months playing Bayern Munich, Real Madrid, chasing Arsenal. The training now is just relaxed."

Brighton's point means they can make plans for the Europa League, the club's first European venture.

"What an achievement, what a club, what a group of guys. The togetherness, the culture and we are driven in by a top, top manager. Special times," keeper Jason Steele said.

FOCUS

'Didn't want to criticise Vinicius' with tweet: La Liga's chief Tebas

AFP
Madrid

La Liga chief Javier Tebas insisted yesterday he didn't mean "to criticise" Vinicius Junior following a charged exchange on Twitter after the Real Madrid forward was racially abused during a march. The incident on Sunday, when the 22-year-old Brazilian star was subjected to racist taunting as Real Madrid lost to Valencia, kicked up a storm over whether Spain is doing enough to stamp out racism in football.

Later, Vinicius hit out at La Liga on Twitter saying it "belongs to racists" prompting Tebas to respond with several tweets that appeared critical of the player. "I didn't want to criticise Vinicius," Tebas said. "My frustration was my mistake. I understand that Vinicius is frustrated because he doesn't understand about the division of powers (for dealing with racism), but I'm also frustrated because I do know about it and there were no sanctions."

Tebas said he hadn't yet spoken to Vinicius but would be willing to do so and would say: "I'm sorry if you felt offended but I wasn't trying to attack you' and I would tell him again that like him, I'm also frustrated."

In his tweet on Sunday night, Tebas wrote: "before criticising and insulting La Liga, you need to be properly informed" about the division of powers when it comes to imposing sanctions. Under Spanish law, La Liga can only identify and report cases of racism but it is not empowered to impose sanctions.

On Tuesday, it called for more sanctioning power to act against fans for violent, racist or xenophobic behaviour, saying it felt "powerless" when its incident reports failed to result in any punitive action. Tebas said only the Spanish football federation had the ability to impose sanctions and reiterated calls for La Liga to be granted sanctioning power. "We want the power to act because with that, we're sure that within months, we'll be able to resolve this problem," he said.



Tebas said that when he took over as league chief in 2013, the stadiums were filled with "racist and homophobic chanting. I remember people shouting 'Messi is retarded'" he said. "We insisted that this disappear from the stadiums and we did it," he said, adding: "We are very aware that Vinicius is being insulted because he's such a great player."

He also expressed frustration that no other body had supported La Liga when it filed legal complaints about racism in stadiums, especially when it came to the case of Vinicius. "In all our complaints, we have filed suit alone, we've never been backed by any other institution and in Vinicius' case, not even by Real Madrid," he said after the club accused La Liga and the federation of being passive.

La Liga has filed various lawsuits in relation to racist abuse suffered by Vinicius "Vinicius is different. He's not your average player. I'm convinced that he'll win the Ballon d'Or at some stage," Tebas said, adding he hoped the Brazilian would keep playing in the Spanish league because "he's a very important asset for his club and for La Liga".

He said the league had been carefully watching Vinicius' away games for any further signs of racial abuse. Tebas said he was worried that what had happened could affect the Spanish league's image, insisting that "Spain is not a racist country and Spanish football isn't racist."

Tebas said he doesn't think the scandal will affect Spain, Portugal and Morocco's joint bid for the 2030 World Cup.

Qatar finish runners-up at Arab Snooker C'ship



Qatar yesterday finished runners-up in the snooker event on third day of the Arab Billiards and Snooker Championship in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The national side comprising the trio of Ahmed Saif, Muhanna al-Obaidly and Bashar Hussein lost to Iraq 1-2 after a thrilling battle in the final. Qatar finished the group stage on top after beating two Saudi Arabia sides and Kuwait. They had defeated Jordan in the semi-finals. Meanwhile, the third day of the tournament saw the Saudi's Khaled al-Ghamdi win the gold medal in the 10-ball billiards competition for juniors. Twelve countries are participating in the championship, which will conclude on May 29.

Dybala an injury doubt for Roma's Europa League final

Rome: Forward Paulo Dybala could miss AS Roma's Europa League final against six-time champions Sevilla, manager Jose Mourinho said yesterday. The 29-year-old Argentine, who has scored 16 goals and has eight assists across all competitions this season, is yet to recover full fitness after picking up an ankle injury at the end of last month.

"I don't think he can play. Honestly, I hope he can make it for the bench. It's the last game of the season even if after that we have Spezia," Mourinho told reporters ahead of next Wednesday's final in Budapest.

"But for Paulo, it would be the last game. I'd be happy if Paulo could go on the bench and play 15 or 20 minutes. Dybala is still with the doctors."

Roma will travel to 11th-placed Fiorentina tomorrow before taking on the Spanish side in the Europa League final. The Portuguese coach said midfielder Lorenzo Pellegrini would return for the final after missing two games with an injury, but he is out for the Fiorentina clash. Mourinho



underlined the importance of enjoying the final amid reports that he could leave the Italian side, adding that he "will forever be tied to Roma," but acknowledged the feelings are not the same when it comes to his former club Tottenham Hotspur.

The former Porto, Inter Milan, Chelsea, Real Madrid and Manchester United boss, who led Roma to their first European title by winning the Conference League last season, said he feels no connection with Spurs. Mourinho was

sacked by Spurs in April 2021 after 17 months in charge and six days before the League Cup final – which they lost under interim manager Ryan Mason.

"I hope the Tottenham fans don't get me wrong but the only club in my career where I don't have still a deep feeling for is Tottenham," Mourinho said. "Probably because the stadium was empty, COVID time. Probably because Mr Levy (Spurs chairman Daniel Levy) didn't let me win a final and win a trophy. But it's the only one, so after that - Porto,

Chelsea, Inter, Real Madrid, Manchester United – all the clubs I feel a connection. Maybe people (will say) you cannot love every club – yes, I love every club!"

Mourinho's comments come after Feyenoord manager Arne Slot ended speculation over a possible move to the Premier League club, saying he was in discussions with the Dutch champions over a contract extension.

MARTINEZ DOUBLE SECURES ITALIAN CUP FOR INTER

Meanwhile, Lautaro Martinez scored twice as Champions League finalists Inter Milan came from behind to beat Fiorentina 2-1 and retain their Italian Cup title on Wednesday.

Nicolas Gonzalez gave Fiorentina an early lead at the Stadio Olimpico, but Martinez drilled Inter level and then volleyed in the winner before half-time for Simone Inzaghi's team. Inter's ninth Italian Cup triumph moved them level with Roma. Only Juventus, with 14 titles, have lifted the trophy more often.