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FOOTBALL

Young players determined to prove themselves, says Salman

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TENNIS / FRENCH OPEN

Alcaraz overcomes wobble to reach third round

Sabalenka advances as Blinkova beats fifth seed Garcia on 9th match point

AFP
Paris

World number one Carlos Alcaraz overcame a second set blip to defeat Japan's Taro Daniel and reach the French Open last 32 yesterday.

The Spanish star came through 6-1, 3-6, 6-1, 6-2 against his 112th-ranked opponent and will face Canada's Denis Shapovalov for a place in the fourth round.

Alcaraz, 20, is bidding to add the Roland Garros title to the US Open he won in 2022.

"I'm very happy with my level. The wind meant conditions were really difficult so I had to adjust as much as possible, I was very focused on each shot," said Alcaraz.

The victory gave Alcaraz a 22nd win from 24 on clay in 2023, a run which has yielded titles on the surface in Buenos Aires, Madrid and Barcelona.

"Taro was playing great. He is a really tough player and this year he has won matches against great players," said Alcaraz who is top seed at a Grand Slam for the first time.

Yesterday, he fired 46 winners past New York-born Daniel.

Shapovalov, the 26th seed, saw off Italy's Matteo Arnaldi in four sets to reach the third round in Paris for the first time.

Meanwhile Stefanos Tsitsipas believes he'll need to have the mental and physical strength of an elite, battle-hardened special forces commando to break through to a maiden Grand Slam title.

The Greek world number five came agonisingly close to winning the French Open in 2021 when he surrendered a two-sets lead to lose in five to Novak Djokovic.

It's a memory which still haunts him, especially after losing to the Serbian superstar again in January in the final of the Australian Open.

"There are a few guys that can play good under pressure, especially in big, tight moments, and you have to have the mental strength of a Navy SEAL to pull it through," said Tsitsipas, hailing the crack US special forces unit.

Tsitsipas made the French Open last 32 for the fourth year in succession yesterday with a 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 6-2 victory over Spain's Roberto Carballes Baena.

As well as making two Grand Slam finals, the 24-year-old has fallen at the semi-finals on



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in action against Japan's Taro Daniel during their match on day four of the French Open in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

four occasions - twice to bitter rival Daniil Medvedev (2020 and 2021 Australian Open) and to Djokovic (2020 French Open) and Rafael Nadal (2019 Australian Open).

In his quest, he has resorted to consulting Rafael's Nadal autobiography because he "kind of shows you that anyone can do it".

"You have to have the physique of a marathon runner, the lungs of a marathon runner. You have to have the power of a football player," added Tsitsipas when asked what constitutes a Grand Slam champion.

"There are so many little components that you have to link up in order to make this unbelievable player where you allow yourself to be unstoppable."

Tsitsipas racked up his 50th Grand Slam win in the first round against Jiri Vesely while yesterday's victory against Carballes Baena was his 20th at Roland Garros.

"I get excited when I see personal records being kind of set and broken," he added.

Another of Tsitsipas's ambitions is to deliver a first Davis Cup title to Greece.

However, he is his country's only player in the world's top



Aryna Sabalenka in action against Iryna Shymanovich during their French Open match in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

500 so if an unlikely triumph in the prestigious team event is ever to be secured, it would require Greece to have a reliable doubles pairing.

That's where his brother Petros, who is Greece's top-ranked

doubles player, enters the equation.

The Tsitsipas brothers were beaten in the first round in Paris on Tuesday, losing in a final set tiebreak to Marcelo Arevalo and Jean-Julien Rojer.

"Trust me, it sucks. To be losing that with your brother, it sucks more than usually," said Stefanos.

"I'm doing this for my brother. I don't think I would have done this for anyone else. One of our

own personal dreams is winning Davis Cup together. Doing that with your brother is probably the most beautiful thing you can witness on a tennis court."

In the women's section, world number two Aryna Sabalenka cruised into the third round yesterday with a straight-sets win over fellow Belarusian Iryna Shymanovich.

The Australian Open champion took some time to get the measure of her opponent, who had never won a main-draw WTA match before this tournament, before wrapping up a 7-5, 6-2 victory. Sabalenka will face either Poland's Magdalena Frech or Russian Kamilla Rakhimova in the last 32.

French hopes of a Roland Garros singles' champion were all but extinguished as Russian Anna Blinkova sent fifth seed Caroline Garcia tumbling out with a 4-6 6-3 7-5 second-round victory yesterday.

Blinkova, who had already knocked Garcia out in Paris in 2019, prevailed on her ninth match point to end a tussle that lasted nearly three hours.

The world number 56 double faulted twice on match point as nerves got to her, but she even-

tually ended it with a powerful serve to set up a meeting with Ukraine's Elina Svitolina.

With Garcia gone, the French women are without a seed in the singles' draw while none of the French men were among the top-ranked.

On a sun-kissed Court Philippe Chatrier, where most of the ticket holders had opted for lunch over tennis, Garcia broke for a 2-1 lead in a strong start to her bid to claim consecutive wins on clay for the first time this season.

She did not face a single break point in the first set and stole Blinkova's serve in the first game of the next set, only for her Russian opponent to break straight back.

Garcia conceded another break in the fourth game with a double fault and a third one in the fifth as Blinkova blitzed through the set despite facing some late resistance.

Blinkova pounced early in the decider and served for the match at 5-4, only for Garcia to save match points to level for 5-5. She saved other match points at 6-5 after dropping her serve but Blinkova finally got a first serve in to end Garcia's campaign.

'Political statements not banned,' says ITF after Djokovic-Kosovo row

PARIS: International tennis chiefs insisted yesterday that "political statements" are not banned at Grand Slam events after Novak Djokovic controversially wrote "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia" on a camera at the French Open. Djokovic defended his message in comments to Serb media, saying that Kosovo is Serbia's "cradle, our stronghold". The International Tennis Federation (ITF), the governing body of the sport, said they had received a request from the Kosovo Tennis Federation demanding Djokovic be sanctioned over his

actions. However, they pointed out that such statements do not contravene regulations. "Rules for player conduct at a Grand Slam event are governed by the Grand Slam rulebook, administered by the relevant organiser and regulator. There is no provision in this that prohibits political statements," an ITF spokesman told AFP.

Djokovic was criticised earlier yesterday for his comments about recent clashes in Kosovo by French sports minister Amelie Oudea-Castera who said he "shouldn't get involved".

The Kosovo Olympic Committee (KOC) accused Djokovic of "stirring up" political tensions, a spokesman told AFP. Djokovic "breached the fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter regarding political neutrality and involved yet another political statement in sports", the KOC wrote in a letter sent to the IOC on Tuesday.

KOC head Ismet Krasniqi sought that the IOC initiates disciplinary proceedings against Djokovic, said the letter posted on its Facebook.

Such "behaviour cannot be tolerated

as it sets a dangerous precedent that sports can be used as a platform for political messages, agendas and propaganda", the letter quoted Krasniqi as saying. Ukrainian player Elina Svitolina said Djokovic, who returns to the court later Wednesday for his second round match, should be free to "say his opinion".

Svitolina, who has repeatedly spoken out over tennis' response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, believes players should be able to talk publicly about political issues.

"We are living in the free world, so why not say your opinion on something?," said Svitolina, who reached the third round with a 2-6, 6-3, 6-1 win over Storm Hunter yesterday.

"I feel like if you stand for something, you think that this is the way, you should say. I mean, if you are with a friend sitting, talking, you're going to say your opinion, he is going to say his opinion. So why not?"

Thirty peacekeepers from a Nato-led force in Kosovo were injured in clashes with ethnic Serb demonstrators on

Monday during protests about the installation of ethnic Albanian mayors in northern Kosovo.

Kosovo, mostly populated by Muslim ethnic Albanians, broke away from the then-Yugoslavia in the late 1990s and declared independence in 2008, in a move that has never been accepted by neighbouring Christian-majority Serbia or its ally Russia.

"For me it's just part of human life, politics, sports, you know, different things," added Svitolina.

(AFP)

CRICKET

Stokes feels fit as England begin busy Test summer

‘We know what the problem is and it’s about managing it with workload and the medical team, just to get through it’

AFP
London

England captain Ben Stokes expects to play a full part with the ball and bat as his side begin their Ashes preparations in earnest today with a four-day test against Ireland.

The state of Stokes’ knee has raised doubts about his ability to perform the all-rounder role and it flared up in the drawn test series in New Zealand in February.

Stokes managed to bowl only nine overs in the two Tests against the Kiwis but fully intends to be part of England’s attack at home to Australia.

So all eyes will be on the 31-year-old against Ireland over the next four days at Lord’s.

“My knee is in a much better place than it was in Wellington,” Stokes told reporters at his pre-match press conference yesterday.

“I have got myself into a position where I am not able to look back and regret or say I have not given myself the best opportunity to play a full role with the ball this summer.”

Stokes continued to be troubled by niggling injuries while appearing twice for Indian Premier League side Chennai Super Kings this year and managed to bowl only one over for them.

“I have got myself into a place where I feel like I am back at 2019, 2020 with my body.

“Hopefully I can turn up every day and bowl like I was able to do before this little niggle,” he said.

“We know what the problem is and it’s about managing it with workload and the medical team, just to get through it.”

With James Anderson and Ollie Robinson resting up ahead of the Ashes as they recover from niggles, England will hand a debut to Worcestershire seamer Josh Tongue.

“Having someone who is able to bowl



England's Ben Stokes during practice at Lord's Cricket Ground, London, Britain, yesterday. (AFP)

at that extra pace and can come on and change where the game is going, have that X-factor, is great to have in your side,” Stokes said.

“I am looking forward to getting him involved.”

Ireland have failed to win any of their previous six Test matches since gaining Test status in 2017, but gave England an almighty scare at Lord’s four years ago when they bowled the hosts out for 85 before lunch on the first day.

However, they were skittled for 38 in their second innings chasing 182 for a famous victory.

Ireland will be without paceman Josh Little who has been rested in preparation for the World Cup qualifier in Zimbabwe next month – a decision that has raised some eyebrows, especially after Ireland’s high performance director Richard Holdsworth described the Lord’s clash as ‘not a pinnacle event’.

Even so, Ireland will be determined to

try and add to their 50-over and T20 triumphs over England. “It’s a big week for us as a team and an organisation. You don’t get too many chances to play test matches at Lord’s,” Ireland captain Andrew Balbirnie said this week.

“I was fortunate to be here for the last one and obviously we will take it in and soak it up, but at the same time we’re here to do a job and compete with one of the best test sides in the world. We want to focus on the job in hand.”

‘Test win over England would be new high for Irish cricket’

London: Ireland captain Andrew Balbirnie said beating England in a Test would “easily be our best achievement in cricket” as the underdogs prepare to face Ben Stokes’ men at Lord’s this week.

The Irish have made their reputation on the back of their exploits in white-ball internationals. They defeated Pakistan, England and the West Indies at the 2007, 2011 and 2015 50-over World Cups respectively and beat eventual champions England at the 2022 T20 World Cup. Ireland, however, have played just six Tests in their history and are still searching for a first win in that form of the game.

Four years ago, in their previous Test at Lord’s, they dismissed England for just 85, only to suffer a 143-run defeat after they themselves slumped to 38 all out in the fourth innings of the match.

“It didn’t play out the way we wanted to but we got a glimpse into what would happen if we were to win a Test,” said Balbirnie yesterday’s eve of the four-day Test.

“And, I think if we were to beat England, it would easily be our best achievement in cricket in the game.”

The odds, though, are stacked against Ireland, with England having won 10 of their 12 Tests since skipper Stokes and coach

Brendon McCullum joined forces last year. “We know that this England team is in a really good place leading to the Ashes,” said Balbirnie.

PACERJOSH LITTLE GETS REST

Ireland will be without Josh Little at Lord’s after the young fast bowler, who starred for the Gujarat Titans side that reached the recent Indian Premier League final, was rested for next month’s 50-over World Cup qualifying tournament in Zimbabwe.

Little also missed Tests against Bangladesh and Sri Lanka after his IPL exploits. Ireland’s high performance director, Richard Holdsworth, defended the 23-year-old’s absence on the grounds a Test at Lord’s, a major landmark for most players, was not a “pinnacle event” for his side this year. “Of course, we would have loved him here but I understand completely that he’s got to focus on resting up and getting ready for our World Cup qualifier,” said Balbirnie.

“Josh played in an IPL final in his first IPL appearance, I’m not stupid, he’s going to get picked up by other leagues and we are going to have this situation again, but he still wants to play for Ireland. I’ve spoken to him and he still loves playing for this team.”

GOLF

Rahm says it is ‘sad’ that politics blocking Garcia from playing Ryder Cup



Jon Rahm of Spain signs autographs for fans after playing a practice round prior to the Memorial Tournament presented by Workday at Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio. (AFP)

Reuters
Dublin, Ohio

Jon Rahm doesn’t care which tour players compete on when it comes to the Ryder Cup. He wants the best players from Europe and the United States going toe-to-toe in what he calls a “beautiful” event. The Europeans were routed two years ago at Whistling Straits, but Rahm teamed with Spanish countryman Sergio Garcia to earn three of their team’s nine points. That partnership won’t be rekindled in Italy this year, with Team Europe captain Luke Donald of England telling Garcia he will not be considered.

Garcia left for LIV Golf last year and recently resigned from the DP World Tour along with Englishmen Richard Bland, Ian Poulter and Lee Westwood and Sweden’s Henrik Stenson, who was removed as Europe’s Ryder Cup captain when he joined the Saudi-

backed league. “I’m going to miss him,” Rahm said of Garcia yesterday ahead of the Memorial Tournament. “We had a great partnership at Whistling Straits. ... So it’s a little sad to me that politics have gotten in the way of such a beautiful event. It’s the best Europeans against the best Americans, period. And whatever is going on, who is playing LIV and who is not playing LIV to me shouldn’t matter.”

Team USA captain Zach Johnson said last week that it would be “irresponsible” for him to talk about LIV players making his team yet as Brooks Koepka went on to win the PGA Championship – vaulting him to second in the United States’ Ryder Cup standings.

The US will attempt win on European soil for the first time since 1993, and Rahm believes Garcia, Europe’s all-time leading Ryder Cup points scorer, should be playing in Rome come September.

Fellow Spaniards Seve Ballesteros and Jose Maria Olazabal scored 12 points while being

paired together a record 15 times, and Rahm envisioned playing at least one more Ryder Cup with Garcia, who owns a record 28.5 career points for Europe.

Rahm is second in the Official World Golf Ranking. The next Spaniard is Pablo Larrazabal at No. 53, followed by Adrian Otaegui at No. 81 and Adri Arnaus at No. 92. Garcia has tumbled to No. 218 as LIV continues to wait for the outcome of its application to earn OWGR points for its events.

“A Spanish duo in the Ryder Cup I think to me is embedded into the roots of the Ryder Cup,” Rahm said. “... It’s whoever is best suited to represent the European side. And I have a hard time to believe that the best player Europe has ever had, the most successful player Europe has had on the Ryder Cup isn’t fit to be on the team.

“It’s unfortunate. I will miss him. But with that said I want to be hopeful, there’s a couple of Spanish guys playing really good right now, so hopefully they can join me on the team.”

FOCUS

Nicklaus calls McIlroy’s major drought since 2014 ‘a mystery’

Reuters
Dublin, Ohio

Rory McIlroy may be one of the game’s greatest players but the Northern Irishman has not won a major title in nearly nine years, a barren run in the elite events that has left golfing great Jack Nicklaus puzzled.

The 83-year-old Nicklaus, speaking yesterday ahead of this week’s Memorial Tournament which he hosts in Dublin, Ohio, was at a loss to explain how McIlroy has not celebrated a major since winning his fourth at the 2014 PGA Championship.

“I mean, he is, as far as talent, he’s as talented a player as there is in the game of golf,” said Nicklaus.

“Why he hasn’t won in nine years? Kind of a mystery to a lot of people because he is so good.”

McIlroy missed the cut at the 2023 Masters, where he was seeking the final leg of the career Grand Slam, and then took a break to focus on his mental well-being following a taxing year in which he served as an unofficial spokesman for the PGA Tour in its battle with LIV Golf.

The 34-year-old Northern Irishman, in his second event back from the break, finished seventh at the PGA Championship and now looks to build off that this week at the Memorial ahead of his next shot at major glory in the June 15-18 US Open.

Nicklaus, who won a record 18 major championships during his storied career, said he spoke with McIlroy earlier yesterday at Muirfield Village and was unsure how to explain why the golfer is stuck at four majors.

“I don’t know really know



Rory McIlroy is seen during the Golden Bear Pro-Am at Muirfield Village Golf Club. (AFP)

back from the break, finished seventh at the PGA Championship and now looks to build off that this week at the Memorial ahead of his next shot at major glory in the June 15-18 US Open.

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“I don’t know really know

what to make of it. Because he’s very confident. He works very hard at it. He’s a good student of the game. He practices a lot,” said Nicklaus.

“I don’t know whether his is a constant lack of being able to keep that concentration for the whole thing or not, because sometimes he is the par, par, par, double, 8. He does that sometimes. And I said, ‘Why, Rory? Why does that happen?’ And ... he doesn’t know.”

Nicklaus went three years without a major between 1967 and 1970 – a drought by his lofty standards – a dry spell during which he still played well but was not logging the necessary practice hours as his family became more of a priority.

“It’s a matter of – we all go through periods. Rory may be going through a little bit of that period,” said Nicklaus, who went on to collect seven majors over the next five years, starting with the 1970 British Open.

“He’s going to wake up one morning and say ... ‘Hey, I better, you know, get on the stick here and start winning some more majors,’ because he’s certainly going to win some more. I can’t believe that he’s not.

“And sometimes we all have to focus, focus on what we have to do and so forth and to get there.”

BWF may allow Russians, Belarusians to compete as neutrals

Lausanne: The Badminton World Federation (BWF) will consider allowing Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete as neutrals in international competitions, the sport’s governing body said yesterday, a month after they had extended the ban.

The BWF first banned Russian and Belarusian athletes in March last year after Russia invaded Ukraine. Belarus is being used as a key staging ground for Russia’s war in Ukraine, which Moscow terms a “special operation”.

Last month the BWF said there was no “satisfactory justification” to lift the suspension on players and officials from the two countries when it extended the ban.

However, it has now changed its stance and

could potentially align itself with the International Olympic Committee’s recommendations to allow athletes from both countries to return to competition as neutrals.

“The guiding principle for BWF is that athletes should always be allowed to participate in sport competitions without judgement of their passport and separate of any geo-political conflict outside the control of the sports movement,” it said.

“Therefore, a regulative and operational framework to allow athletes with Russian and Belarusian passports to compete as individual neutral athletes has been commissioned to be presented to Council at its next meeting in August.”

NBA

Title-hungry Nuggets face odds-defying Heat in finals

‘UNTIL WE WIN A CHAMPIONSHIP, PEOPLE ARE GOING TO KEEP SAYING THAT ABOUT US. SO THAT’S WHAT DRIVES US’

AFP
Denver

Denver Nuggets squad looking to prove its championship quality and an upstart Miami Heat lineup that made defying the odds a trademark are on an NBA Finals collision course.

Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic of Serbia leads the Western Conference top seed Nuggets against sharpshooter Jimmy Butler and the Heat, who needed a play-in victory just to grab an eighth seed in the Eastern Conference.

The best-of-seven championship series begins today at Denver. It's the Nuggets' first trip to the NBA Finals since making their league debut in 1976.

Denver has won hard-earned respect after 46 seasons of futility, this year as a playoff top seed for the first time. "Our goal is to win a championship, so we have much more work to do," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said.

"Seems like for years now, some dusty old cowtown in the Rocky Mountains, the little respect that we get. You can sit there and complain about it or you can just embrace who we are and what we have. "Until we win a championship, people are going to keep saying that about us. So that's what drives us. Getting to the finals doesn't do it. It's winning a championship."

Jokic, a 6-foot-11 (2.11m) centre, averaged 24.5 points, 11.8 rebounds and a career-high 9.8 assists a game this season and shot a career-best 63.2% from the floor. Miami centre Bam Adebayo says the key to slowing Jokic is "making him take tough shots" but added, "The biggest thing for us is try to limit his assists. Sounds easier said than done. Biggest thing for us is watching film and figuring that out."

LAST 10 CHAMPIONS	
2022: Golden State Warriors	Game 2 at Denver
2021: Milwaukee Bucks	Denver Nuggets v Miami Heat (0000 GMT)
2020: Los Angeles Lakers	Wednesday June 7
2019: Toronto Raptors	Game 3 at Miami
2018: Golden State Warriors	Miami Heat v Denver Nuggets (0030 GMT)
2017: Golden State Warriors	Friday June 9
2016: Cleveland Cavaliers	Game 4 at Miami
2015: Golden State Warriors	Miami Heat v Denver Nuggets (0030 GMT)
2014: San Antonio Spurs	Monday June 12
2013: Miami Heat	Game 5 at Denver (if necessary)
	Denver Nuggets v Miami Heat (0030 GMT)
SCHEDULE (all times GMT)	Thursday June 15
Thursday June 1	Game 6 at Miami (if necessary)
Game 1 at Denver	Miami Heat v Denver Nuggets (0030 GMT)
Denver Nuggets v Miami Heat (0030 GMT)	Sunday June 18
Sunday June 4	Game 7 at Denver (if necessary)
	Denver Nuggets v Miami Heat (0000 GMT)

The Nuggets have talent and depth around Jokic, led by guard Jamal Murray, who missed the entire 2021-22 season due to a torn left knee ligament. He's averaging 27.7 points in the playoffs. "I'm so happy for Jamal. He's a special player," Jokic said. "He has been our best player since round one, really stepping up. Even if he doesn't make shots, his energy is always good. He's still fighting."

Denver forwards Michael Porter Jr, Aaron Gordon and Bruce Brown and guard Kentavious Caldwell-Pope each average 10-15 points in the playoffs in supporting roles that have made the Nuggets formidable. "When we're just playing the right way, everything opens up," Murray said. "Everybody eats when we're all playing for each other and we've been doing that for a while. We're just in a great rhythm of playing unselfish basketball."

And there's more to come. "We've got four more wins to go," Murray said. "First Nuggets team to go all the way. We just want to make the most of the opportunity."

To do that, the Nuggets must defeat a giant-killer Heat team that became only the second eighth seed to reach the NBA Finals after the 1999 New York Knicks. Miami, which lost two regular-season games against Denver, lost a play-in game to Atlanta then beat Chicago to grab the last East playoff spot.

The Heat stunned NBA winner Milwaukee, beat New York and edged Boston in seven games in the East final after letting the Celtics pull level from an 0-3 hole. "We have some incredible competitors in that locker

room. They love the challenge," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said.

"Things don't always go your way. The inevitable setbacks happen and it's how you deal with that collectively. It can sap your spirit. It can take a team down for whatever reason. With this group, it has steeled us and made us closer and made us tougher." Butler has averaged 28.5 points, 7.0 rebounds and 5.7 assists a game in the playoffs but "Jimmy Buckets" says he isn't finished. "Nobody is satisfied," he said. "We haven't done anything. We don't play just to win the Eastern Conference. We play to win the whole thing."

And being a huge underdog in the finals is just how Adebayo wants it. "When you go through what we went through this whole season, people writing us off, to be four games from a championship just speaks volume to, one, we never quit, and two, everybody rallied together," he said.



Former NBA star Alonzo Mourning presents Jimmy Butler of the Miami Heat with the Larry Bird Trophy after Butler was named the Eastern Conference Finals MVP after defeating the Boston Celtics 103-84 in game seven of the finals at TD Garden Boston on Monday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

It's exciting for me to do something new, says Carlsen on joining GCL

Agency
India/US/UK

World Rapid Chess champion **Magnus Carlsen** is looking forward to the "exciting prospect" of the upcoming Global Chess League (GCL) in the UAE. A joint venture between Tech Mahindra and world governing body FIDE, the GCL will feature Carlsen, a former five-time world chess champion, as an icon player.

With six teams, the inaugural edition of the GCL will be held from June 21 - July 2 at the Dubai Chess & Culture Club in association with the Dubai Sports Council. Carlsen said: "It is an exciting prospect for me to be a



part of. This will be something new. Something that has not been done this way in over-the-board chess. I am looking forward to exploring this format in

the future." The league will see each of the six franchises play a total of 10 matches in a double round-robin format, with the winner of each match being

decided in a best-of-six board scoring system played simultaneously. The top two teams will qualify for the final and be crowned the World Champion Franchise Team. Carlsen, who is known for his experimental views on chess, believes that team format matches are something that he really prefers.

"Personally I very much enjoy team events and the team spirit within the group. I am looking forward to meeting the other players in the team, and competing with and against the exciting young generation of Indian players. One of the really good things about this tournament is that men and women can compete against each other at the same stage."

Carlsen also rated the Indian talent that is coming through very

highly by saying, "I think India is doing a lot of right things so far, and it is a matter of time before it is clearly the leading chess nation in the world."

Hailing Tech Mahindra's involvement with the league as a welcome move, Carlsen said: "I am happy that an ambitious partner like Tech Mahindra has joined the chess ecosystem. I believe this is a positive move for chess."

Carlsen also reminisced about his best memories from his chess journey and said that he is thankful for his family's support. "My family has always been very supportive without ever pushing me, and for that, I'm very grateful. The year we travelled together when I was 13, earning my Grandmaster norms, will always be a fond memory," he said.

Jacobs out of Florence 100m with lingering back issue

FLORENCE: Olympic champion Marcell Jacobs will miss tomorrow's 100m at the Diamond League meeting in Florence as he continues to recover from a back injury, the Italian athletics federation announced. "The recovery process for Jacobs, after the problem that emerged in recent days, does not appear to be fully completed yet," the federation said in a statement on Tuesday. Jacobs pulled out of last week's event in Rabat, where he had been due to race world champion Fred Kerley, because of a back nerve problem. The Italian beat Kerley to gold at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, but the pair have not faced off since. Jacobs missed much of the 2022 season and withdrew from the world championships in the US after the 100m heats. Budapest will host the 2023 world championships from August 19-27. Earlier, world 100m silver medallist Marvin Bracy-Williams says Jacobs needs to do his talking on the track after the Italian pulled out of a key matchup with an injury. Freshly arrived from Los Angeles where he ran 10.03sec at the weekend, Bracy-Williams is the star attraction at the low-key Montreuil meeting outside Paris. But he has his eyes fixed on bigger challenges later in the summer - most notably from world 100m champion and fellow American Fred Kerley and Jacobs, who has never matched the speed or form that carried the Italian to a shock Olympic title in Japan two years ago. In an interview with AFP, Bracy-Williams remarked that Jacobs backed out of a race against Kerley at the Rabat Diamond League on Sunday, saying he had a back nerve problem. "I want to beat Marcell as bad as I want to breathe," he said. "He's one of the guys I haven't beat yet and he talks a lot of shit for a person that doesn't race. "So I'm looking forward to competing against him. He's the reigning Olympic champion, everybody obviously wants to go at him. (AFP)

FOCUS

Aspire plays host to latest stage of UEFA assist programme between QFA, FIGC

As part of the ongoing UEFA Assist programme, Aspire Academy hosted two guests from the Italian football federation's (FIGC) coaching staff on May 28 and 29.

The Academy welcomed Marco Montini the fitness coach for Italy's under-19 national team and Ms Maria Luisa Cravana, performance nutritionist for Italy's under-21 side.

The UEFA assist project matches European football federations with ones from the rest of the world to help develop the sport through the exchange of knowledge and ideas.

The programme has seen the Qatar Football Association (QFA) working with the FIGC since 2019.

Thanks to the QFA and Aspire Academy's working relationship, Montini and Cravana spent time at the academy exchanging



ideas and giving talks to coaches and staff.

Montini spent time with Academy's under-15 squad as they undertook a strength and conditioning workout and presented to the QFA/Aspire Academy staff the activities planned by Italian under-19 squad towards the preparation of the

next European Championship for this category.

He was full of praise for the cooperation between the two football associations as well as Aspire Academy as hosts.

"It has been a great exchange of knowledge and I have had the opportunity to see the incredible facilities," Montini said.

"But the facilities alone are not enough, and you also have very great professionals like the conditioning coaches, physiologists, psychologists, nutritionists."

"It was a fantastic experience; I invite other people to come here to see all the things that you do here because it is impossible



to pick out one thing." As part of her visit, Cravana gave a talk on nutrition to coaches who

are at Aspire Academy undertaking the performance module of their Asian Football Confederation Coaches' Pro-Licence course.

She also said she would be returning to Italy with new ideas

to share with her colleagues. "It was also for me, a great experience and I enriched my knowledge in general, in performance, in nutrition and strategically," she explained.

"It is a wonderful facility that does important work to guarantee very high quality and high calibre football." Aspire Acad-

emy's Director of Football Performance & Science, Valter di Salvo, is proud of the academy's role in the UEFA assist project.

"It is a great honour for Aspire Academy to host a technical delegation from the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) as part of the UEFA Assist programme," he said.

"We are delighted to be able to bring together the QFA and FIGC for this two-day exchange of knowledge."

The visit is one of several exchanges that have been planned for 2023 and follows a visit from the Italian National football team's fitness coach, Claudio Donatelli in January.

While last September Umm Salal SC's head coach, Wissam Rizik, spent time at a training camp for Italy's under-21 squad. An experience that the former Qatar captain described as "very informative and valuable"

FOOTBALL

Young players are determined to prove themselves: Salman

Qatar squad leaves for Vienna today for a preparatory camp for the Gold Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Midfielder Tariq Salman is hoping Qatar will put behind their disappointing World Cup performance at the Concacaf Gold Cup, which will be held in the United States of America and Canada from June 24 to July 16.

Qatar's 26-member squad will depart to Vienna, Austria, today for the second phase of their training camp as they prepare for their second appearance as a guest side at the Gold Cup. The young team under the watchful eyes of head coach Carlos Queiroz had a three-day training camp at the Aspire Academy, which concluded on Tuesday.

The veteran Portuguese coach, who took over from Felix Sanchez after the World Cup debacle where the hosts lost all three of their group matches, has selected a fresh-look squad yesterday for the Gold Cup.

Salman, who is only one of the few surviving senior members from the World Cup squad, said the youngsters have brought a fresh energy into the squad. "We are focused on our training for the Gold Cup. All the players are looking forward to proving themselves, particularly the new players," midfielder Tariq Salman said on the sidelines of the camp.

"We reached the semi-finals when we competed in the Gold Cup for the first time. We are returning to the tournament with high ambitions. It is an important tournament as it is a first challenge for us under a new coach before the World Cup Qualifiers and the Asian Cup," he added.

Left-back Jassem Jaber said the team is settling under Queiroz, as the players learn to implement the ideas of the new coach. "We are trying to learn the coach's ideas and will give our best to implement them on the field. We know the task is difficult in the presence of strong sides but we are determined to do well at the Gold Cup," he said.

Meanwhile, Al Arabi goalkeeper Jassim al-Hail is excited at the prospect of making his debut for Qatar. "Every one of us is aiming to do well and contribute for the team with the best effort. We are working hard in the training camp to enter the tournament well prepared," he said.

In Vienna, Al Annabi will play three friendly matches – against a Croatian side made up of local players on June 8,



Qatar players trained for three days at the Aspire Academy.



Qatar's head coach Carlos Queiroz talks to his players at the three-day training camp.

versus Jamaica on June 15 and against New Zealand four days later. Qatar players will leave for the USA on June 20.

Queiroz's side will open their Gold Cup campaign against Haiti at the NRG Stadium in Houston on June 24. The Asian Champions then take on Honduras on June 29 in Glendale, Arizona be-

fore wrapping up their Group B matches against heavyweights Mexico on July 2 in Santa Clara, California.

The 70-year-old Queiroz has retained few players from the World Cup squad like Almoez Ali, Mohamed Muntari, Bassam al-Rawi, Assim Madebo and Tariq Salman but the Gold Cup squad mostly

consists of players who featured at the Gulf Cup in January.

After pruning the squad to 26 from 41 players after a short camp, Queiroz regularly spoke about 'talent and performance identification' but said the doors were always open for the seniors to make a comeback.

QATAR SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Jassim al-Hail (Al Arabi), Mishaal Barshim (Al Sadd), Salah Zakaria (Al Duhail), Youssef Hassan (Al Gharafa) **Defenders:** Hazem Ahmed (Al Wakrah), Ahmed Suhail, Jassem Jaber (Al Arabi), Tariq Salman, Musab Khader (Al Sadd), Bassam al-Rawi, Mohamed al-Nuaimi, Youssef Ayman (Al Duhail), Hammam al-Amin (Al Gharafa) **Midfielders:** Ahmed Fathi, Abdullah al-Maarafi (Al Arabi), Asim Madebo (Al Duhail), Ali Asad, Mohamed Waad, Mahdi Salem (Al Sadd), Mustafa Mishaal (Al Shamal) **Forwards:** Ahmed Alaa (Al Gharafa), Almoez Ali, Mohamed Muntari (Al Duhail), Tamim Mansour (Al Rayyan), Khaled Mounir, Youssef Abdelrazzaq (Al Wakrah)

Wakrah, Arabi open Amir Cup campaign with victories



Al Wakrah and Al Arabi secured victories in their Amir Cup basketball tournament Group 2 matches at Al Gharafa Sports Club yesterday. Wakrah defeated Al Rayyan 87-70 in the first match while Arabi beat Qatar SC 95-84 in the second match of the day. Al Sadd will take on Al Khor and Al Ahli meet Al Shamal tomorrow.



QFA General Assembly today to elect new president

Doha: The Qatar Football Association (QFA) will hold its General Assembly today, where the elections for the Executive Committee for the 2023-2027 term will be conducted.

In addition to members of the General Assembly from the 18 clubs, the meeting will be attended by Abdullah Hamid al-Mulla, the chairman of the electoral committee, and the members of the committee.

The Electoral Committee has approved the names of the candidates to run in the elections of the Executive Office.

The candidates are: Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain (Qatar Sports Club) for the presidency of QFA; Hani Talib Ballan (Qatar Sports Club); Mohamed Khalifa al-Suwaidi (Al-Rayyan Club); Hassan Juma al-Muhanndi (Al Khor Club) and Khalid Abdullah al-Sulaiti (Al Arabi Club)

The elections will be held by secret ballot. The candidate who receives the most votes will be elected to the presidency of QFA. The four candidates who receive the most votes will be elected to the Executive Office.

The General Assembly will discuss many topics listed on the agenda.

Discussion and approval of the budget, presentation and approval of the audited financial statements, and presentation of the report of the independent external auditor are all on the agenda today, as is the appointment of permanent auditors based on the recommendation of the executive committee (if any).

In addition to anything else brought up by QFA members or the executive office, plus the president's closing remarks.

Young footballer dies after cup brawl in Germany

Berlin: A 15-year-old footballer from Berlin died yesterday after he was seriously injured in a fight with players from a French team at an international youth tournament, police said. The teenager "died in hospital as a result of his severe brain injuries" after being hit on the head in the altercation in Frankfurt on Sunday, local police said in a statement.

A 16-year-old player from the French team was arrested following the fight and was still being held in custody, police said. The brawl occurred following the final whistle in a game between the victim's side JFC Berlin and a team from French second-division club Metz.

Investigators were still looking at the "detailed sequence of events" which led to the young player's injuries, they said. The victim was seemingly hit "on the head or neck" before he "fell to the floor and had to be resuscitated", police said in a separate statement.

The victim, already declared brain dead on Tuesday, was kept on life support so his organs could be donated, a spokeswoman for the Frankfurt prosecutor's office said. French club Metz said Tuesday it was "profoundly shocked" by the events at the tournament in Frankfurt.

Metz confirmed that a player from its "Performance Programme", a scheme which gives "young footballers... from all over the world access to a high-level training structure", was being held by German authorities. The suspected attacker "denies having deliberately caused serious bodily harm", the club said.

CITY'S GUARDIOLA NAMED LMA, PREMIER LEAGUE MANAGER OF THE YEAR
Pep Guardiola was named the League Managers Association (LMA) and Premier League Manager of the Year on Tuesday after guiding Manchester City to the Premier League title.

Guardiola led City to their fifth league crown in six seasons and the club are set to face Manchester United in the FA Cup final on Saturday and Inter Milan in the Champions League final a week later. Guardiola saw off competition from Arsenal's Mikel Arteta, Brighton & Hove Albion's Roberto De Zerbi, Newcastle United's Eddie Howe, Burnley's Vincent Kompany and Plymouth Argyle's Steven Schumacher to win the LMA award.

UNITED STRIKER MARTIAL OUT OF FA CUP FINAL THROUGH INJURY

Manchester United will miss the FA Cup final against Manchester City due to injury, the Premier League club said. The France international picked up a hamstring injury in Sunday's 2-1 win over Fulham in United's final Premier League match of the season as they wrapped up a third-placed finish with 75 points. United won the League Cup in February and will face City in the FA Cup final on Saturday.

BRENTFORD SIGN DUTCH KEEPER FLEKKEN FROM FREIBURG

Brentford signed Netherlands goalkeeper Mark Flekken in a deal worth a reported £11mn

(£13mn) yesterday. Flekken agreed a four-year contract with the Premier League club, who will complete the transfer subject to international clearance and a work permit being granted.

The 29-year-old, capped four times by the Netherlands, could replace Brentford's current first choice keeper David Raya, who has been linked with a close-season move. Flekken began his career in his native Netherlands at RKVV WZD and Roda before moving to Germany, where he has played for Alemannia Aachen, Greuther Fuerth, Duisburg and Freiburg.

He made his Netherlands debut in March 2022 and kept 13 clean-sheets in 34 Bundesliga matches, the highest tally in the division last season. Frank has said Raya could leave the club after four successful seasons. But Frank warned clubs that it will cost £40mn to sign the highly-rated 27-year-old.

MEAD LEFT OUT OF ENGLAND SQUAD FOR WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

Beth Mead has been left out of the England squad for this year's Women's World Cup, but Bethany England returns for the tournament in Australia and New Zealand. England boss Sarina Wiegman has recalled England after the striker scored 12 goals for Tottenham in the Women's Super League since joining from Chelsea in January. England was an unused squad member when Wiegman's team won the Women's European Championship last year and has not featured on the international

stage since September.

In a blow to England's hopes of a first World Cup triumph in the women's game, there is no place for Euro 2022 Golden Boot winner Mead. The Arsenal forward lost her battle to recover in time for the World Cup after sustaining an anterior cruciate ligament injury in November. Chelsea centre-back Millie Bright and Barcelona defender Lucy Bronze, also sidelined of late, do feature in a 23-player list. Leah Williamson and Fran Kirby had already been ruled out due to injury.

Jordan Nobbs is included despite sustaining an injury in Aston Villa's penultimate game of the season. Katie Zelem has been brought back after not making the last squad in April and there is no recall for Williamson's predecessor as captain Steph Houghton. Wiegman's side start their World Cup campaign against Haiti in Brisbane on July 22 and also take on Denmark and China in Group D.

LEEDS UNITED OWNER SECURES DEAL TO TAKE OVER TROUBLED SAMPDORIA

Troubled Italian club Sampdoria said its shareholders have approved a restructuring plan, a move which paves the way for a takeover by Leeds United owner Andrea Radrizzani and his partner Matteo Manfredi.

Sampdoria, which has just been relegated from Serie A for the first time in over a decade, said the deal entails a cash injection of up 40mn euros to shore up the Genoa-based club's finances. Hard-hit by the pandemic, Sampdoria have been for sale for over a year.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Maguire has decision to make about United future: Ten Hag

Reuters
Manchester

Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag said he is happy to have Harry Maguire in the squad but the centre back will have to make a decision about his future after losing his regular place in the side. The England international has fallen down the pecking order behind Lisandro Martinez, Raphael Varane and Victor Lindelof, and left back Luke Shaw has also played in central defence, leaving Maguire with eight Premier League starts this season.

Maguire became the world's most expensive defender when United signed him from Leicester City for 80mn pounds in 2019. His contract is due to end in 2025. Asked about Maguire's future, Ten Hag told the *Times* newspaper: "Let's say I'm happy he's here and when we needed him he did his job. But it's also a decision he has to make."

The Dutchman said Maguire was putting in 100% effort in training and had played an important role as club captain but acknowledged the player would not settle for a place on the bench going forward. "No one would be happy with this situation. He is not as well," he added.

Ten Hag added that goalkeeper David de Gea will remain at the club next season but said



Manchester United coach Erik ten Hag (right) with Harry Maguire.

the Spaniard, who kept the most clean sheets in the Premier League this season, would face competition for the gloves. "... I will not say he'll always be my number one because in a club like Man United there must be competition in all positions," he said.

United finished third in the league and won the League Cup in Ten Hag's first season as manager. They have the chance to add another trophy when they host champions Manchester City in the FA Cup final on

Saturday. "I've seen many FA Cup finals. The tradition... I'm really looking forward to it," Ten Hag said. "It's not about stopping Manchester City, it's about us winning the FA Cup. We want to build our own legacy and era."

United have had little to celebrate since winning their last league title in 2012-13 under Alex Ferguson, but there is a growing feeling of optimism thanks to Ten Hag's tactical acumen and man management skills.