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Swiatek, Ruud advance as Sinner exits French Open

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SPOTLIGHT

# Al-Buenain elected as Qatar Football Association president

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani named honorary president of the QFA at the General Assembly

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The General Assembly of the Qatar Football Association (QFA) convened to elect Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain as the president for the 2023-2027 term. The newly-formed executive committee for the upcoming term includes Hani Talib Ballan (Qatar Sports Club), Mohamed Khalifa al-Suwaidi (Al Rayyan Club), Hassan Juma al-Muhannadi (Al Khor Club) and Khalid Abdullah al-Sulaiti (Al Arabi Club).

The Ordinary General Assembly meeting was attended by the president and members of the Executive Committee, as well as the General Assembly members from the 18 clubs, the Qatar Stars League Management, and representatives from Lusail, Al Bidda and Al Waab clubs. Abdullah Hamed al-Mulla, the Chairman of the Election Committee, and the committee members were also present.

Distinguished guests, including representatives from FIFA – Hany Abu Reda and Essam al-Sahebani – and the Asian Football Confederation – Karim Haidar al-Zain – were invited to oversee the electoral process of the QFA.

Following the first-ever electronic voting process in the elections, the votes were counted. Al-Buenain received 16 votes to secure the presidency. As for the members, al-Suwaidi received 18 votes, Ballan 17, al-Muhannadi 16 and al-Sulaiti 15.

The composition of the new Executive Committee aligns with the amended articles of the QFA regulations, approved by the members in the previous General Assembly meeting. The Executive Committee, serving as the executive body of the Qatar Football Association, consists of a president and four members, with one member appointed as the vice-president, in accordance with the statutory provisions.

Al-Buenain expressed his gratitude to the outgoing president Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani for his immense contributions to the QFA and Qatari football during his successive presidential terms. These terms witnessed numerous achieve-



Newly-elected Qatar Football Association president Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain (centre) poses with executive committee members Hani Talib Ballan, Mohamed Khalifa al-Suwaidi, Hassan Juma al-Muhannadi and Khalid Abdullah al-Sulaiti.

ments, championship victories, and the successful hosting of international tournaments. He affirmed that Sheikh Hamad will continue to support and endorse the Qatar Football Association through his membership in the FIFA Council, leveraging his extensive expertise to benefit the QFA at regional and international levels.

Al-Buenain also extended his gratitude and appreciation to the former members of the Executive Committee for their significant contributions and unlimited support to Qatari football during their tenure. He acknowledged the dedicated work of the late Saoud bin Abdulaziz al-Muhannadi across all levels in the past period.

Al-Buenain addressed the members of the General Assembly, including

clubs and the Qatar Stars League, extending his sincere greetings and appreciation for their tremendous support to the Executive Committee. He expressed his wish for the new Committee to succeed, emphasising club supports indispensability. He highlighted the unity of purpose among all stakeholders, aiming for the benefit of Qatari football and its continuous growth to the highest levels.

The meeting took place during the Ordinary General Assembly of QFA yesterday at the Al Majlis hall in the Sheraton Doha Hotel. It was attended by General Assembly members, Association directors and heads of departments. At the beginning of the meeting, outgoing working president Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani

welcomed the attendees and paid tribute to the late Saoud al-Muhannadi – and one of the most important figures in Qatari football.

Sheikh Hamad said: “After Jassim al-Buenain learned about my non-candidacy in the elections, he expressed his desire to run, and he was appointed as the Vice-President of the Qatar Football Association on February 22, 2023. He was also entrusted by the QFA to manage the Qatar Stars League on February 27, 2023. Since then, I have decided that my brother al-Buenain should take on a greater leadership role within the association. Therefore, he has prepared well in the past period, and I have been by his side in the past, and I will continue to be so in the future.”

Mansour Mohamed al-Ansari, the



Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain with outgoing chief Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, who was named as honorary president of the QFA.



Secretary-General, then took over to present the assembly's agenda. The meeting began with a quick presentation showcasing the major milestones from 2018 to 2022 through a short film. Al Rayyan, Al Arabi, and Al Shahania clubs were appointed to review the meeting minutes, while Al Gharafa, Al Khor, and Muaither were assigned as vote auditors.

The minutes of the previous General Assembly meeting, held on March 27th last year, were approved. Addition-

ally, there was a vote on the Executive Committee's proposal to grant the title of honorary president of the QFA to Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani.

The membership of Lusail, Al Bidaa, and Al Waab clubs was then voted upon and accepted. This was followed by the approval of the President's report, the presentation of the unified, audited, and consolidated budget, the statement of profit and loss, and the approval of financial data and the budget.

FOOTBALL

# Ronaldo says he will continue his career in Saudi

AFP  
Riyadh

Portuguese star **Cristiano Ronaldo** pledged to remain in Saudi Arabia next season yesterday despite failing to land any silverware since his lucrative move to the oil-rich kingdom.

Ronaldo's January signing for Al Nassr has been followed by speculation about how long he will stay, including reports of a swap deal with Saudi-owned Newcastle United who have now qualified for next season's Champions League.

But the 38-year-old said in an official Saudi Pro League interview: “I am happy here, I want to continue here, I will continue here. And in my opinion if they continue to do the work that they want to do here, for the next five years, I think the Saudi league can be a top five league in the world.”

Ronaldo's 14 goals in 16 league appearances were only enough for a second-place finish for the Riyadh club,



a favourite of some senior Saudi royals. In January, the former Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus marksman signed a two-and-a-half year deal said to be worth more than

400mn euros.

He admitted some Saudi conventions had taken him by surprise, including late-night training sessions during the Holy month of Ramadan.

“In Europe we train more in the morning, but here we train in the afternoon, or evening and in Ramadan we train at 10 at night,” he said.

“So this is so strange, but as I tell you these situations are part of an experience, memories. I like to live these moments because you learn with these things. I expected to win something this year, but we didn't, but next year I am really positive and confident that things will change, and we go in a better way.”

## REALITY IS NOT THE INTERNET, BENZEMA SAYS OF LUCRATIVE SAUDI MOVE

Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema insisted yesterday that “reality is not the Internet” in response to rumours of a lucrative move to Saudi Arabia. “Why am I going to talk about the future if I am in Madrid?” asked the Frenchman. “The thing that is talking is the Internet and reality is not the Internet.”

Benzema was responding to claims he might be en route to a Saudi club, although he still has a year left on his contract with the Spanish giants. Ac-

cording to Spanish press reports, Benzema could net 200mn euros (\$215mn) in a two-year deal in the Gulf kingdom.

“For now I'm here,” he said. “Tomorrow I go training, I enjoy every day and on Sunday I have a game. I'm very proud of my work and I enjoy every training session, every game and the most important thing is to enjoy. When I go to Valdebebas it's not work for me because the day it's work I won't want to do it anymore. I enjoy football like children do and in my head I'm still a child,” said Benzema, who has won 25 titles in his time at Real Madrid.

Benzema, speaking at an award ceremony, explained that his approach to the game meant he tried to be a more versatile striker. “I know how to score goals, but what I want in football because I like football is what I can do on the field: movement, assists – I try to do things that are not seen in other strikers.”

Benzema said retired Brazilian player Ronaldo was his role model, explaining that “not only was he a goal scorer, but he could shimmy, make assists”

## Qatar to host Volleyball Challenger Cup

**Doha:** The International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) has granted Qatar the rights to host the Volleyball Challenger Cup 2023, which will be held in July, for the first time in the Middle East. FIVB announced its decision after examining bids from several countries.

Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Qatar Volleyball Association (QVA) Ali Ghanem al-Kuwari said in a statement: “Qatar's tremendous credit in hosting major sports tournament has made QVA attain great importance to the development of volleyball at the international level, in light of the readiness of the international sports facilities on which the tournament will be held.”

Al-Kuwari appreciated FIVB's trust and confidence in the capabilities of QVA, expressing – at the same time, his gratitude to the Qatar Olympic Committee for its great support for the association, and for the success of hosting the tournament.



Qatar squad lands in Vienna for training camp



Qatar national team players arrive in Vienna, Austria, for their training camp ahead of their participation in the CONCACAF Gold Cup in the US from June 16 to July 16. Al Annabi will play three friendly matches – against a Croatian side made up of local players on June 8, versus Jamaica on June 15 and against New Zealand four days later in Vienna. Qatar players will leave for the US on June 20. Qatar face Haiti (June 26), Honduras (June 30) and Mexico (July 4) in their preliminary stage matches at CONCACAF Gold Cup.

Al-Atya competes at Rally Italia Sardegna



Qatar’s Nasser bin Khalifa al-Atya (also inset) and Italian co-driver Bernacchini Giovanni drive their Ford Fiesta during the Special Stage 1 of the Rally Italia Sardegna yesterday. Al-Atya and Giovanni were sixth fastest in the SSI. This is the second round in Europe in the FIA Masters Cup for Al-Atya and Giovanni. They featured in the Rally of Portugal three weeks ago.

CRICKET

Pace ace Broad hits the right lengths as England dominate

The England bowler, appearing in his 162nd Test, grabs five wickets at Lord’s

Reuters  
London

England’s Stuart Broad laid down an early marker in what promises to be a seismic summer of Test cricket with five wickets against Ireland before Ben Duckett and Zak Crawley crushed the visitors’ spirit at sun-baked Lord’s yesterday.

The 36-year-old paceman was supreme, taking the 20th five-wicket haul of his career as Ireland were dismissed for 172.

England openers Duckett and Crawley then tucked into an appetising Ireland attack after tea as the hosts reached 152-1 in only 25 overs to seize control of the four-day test.

Left-hander Duckett was particularly impressive as he reached his sixth test half century from 53 balls, ending a one-sided day on 60 not out.

Crawley, yet to convince as England’s first-choice opener despite 32 previous tests, reached his 50 off only 39 balls as Ireland’s attack wilted.

Crawley fell for 56 but Ollie Pope continued the punishment with 29 from 35 balls before stumps.

The one-off Test is very much an aperitif for the Ashes starting in a fortnight and there was a buzz of anticipation around the ground as captain Ben Stokes won the toss and invited Ireland to bat on a greenish wicket under an overcast sky.

Ireland, still looking for their first win as a test-playing nation having lost the previous six, slumped to 19-3 as Broad, appearing in his 162nd Test match, wrought havoc with three wickets in an eight-ball spell.

First he trapped Peter Moor (10) lbw with a full and straight delivery and on the first ball of his next over Ireland captain Andy Balbirnie dangled his bat outside off stump and edged to Crawley who took a fine slip catch.

Two balls later Harry Tector flicked a rising Broad ball off his body straight into the hands of Matthew Potts at leg slip.

Broad’s next delivery rapped Paul Stirling’s pads and he was given out but relieved after a review.

Ireland were bowled out for 38 in their previous innings at Lord’s four years ago when they were chasing a modest target of 182 for what would have been an historic victory.

There was no repeat of that shambolic collapse as Stirling launched a spirited fightback alongside opener James McCollum. Stirling struck England’s debutant seamer Josh Tongue for successive boundaries in the 16th over and also went after spinner Jack Leach but was out for 30 off 35 balls when he gloved an attempted sweep off Leach behind to Jonny Bairstow.

Having reached 78-4 at lunch and with the sun bursting through, Ireland might have hoped to reach 200 at least.

McCollum moved to 36 after lunch before edging Broad to Joe Root at first slip and then Lorean Tucker (18) fell lbw



England’s Stuart Broad appeals for the wicket of Ireland’s Curtis Campher on the first day of the one-off Test at Lord’s Cricket Ground, London, yesterday. (Reuters)

PUNTER LANDS £50,000 WINDFALL FROM BET ON TONGUE DEBUT

London: One lucky punter who believed 14 years ago that Josh Tongue would one day play for England and placed a cheeky bet will win £50,000 (\$63,000) when the fast bowler makes his international debut against Ireland yesterday. Tim Piper had watched Tongue play when he was just an 11-year-old and placed a £100 bet at odds of 500-1 that he would play a test match for England in the future. “I’ve kept the bet slip in a cupboard all these years,” Piper told BBC Sport. “I just thought to myself, ‘it must be worth 100 pounds’. If he doesn’t make it, he’d make us proud anyway. This is just a bonus for him to get in the Test team. Tongue, the son of Piper’s club teammate Phil, was a spinner at the time and the 56-year-old had seen enough to realise he was destined for great things.

“There was this little kid who bowled leg-spin, googlies and top-spinners. It was like Shane Warne,” Piper added. Tongue, 25, switched to fast bowling when he moved to the Worcestershire academy and Piper said he kept an eye on the bowler who went on to pick up 162 wickets in first class cricket. Tongue had, however, contemplated retirement during a 15-month shoulder-injury layoff from 2021-2022 before two operations and botox injections fixed the issue. He finally earned his England call-up for this week’s one-off test against Ireland at Lord’s after injury concerns over fellow quicks James Anderson and Ollie Robinson. “He had all those injuries, but I never gave up on him,” Piper added. “I kept thinking, ‘maybe it can happen’. These last two weeks have been a mad turnaround.”

to Leach when he missed an attempted sweep.

Curtis Campher and Andy McBrine shared a 38-run stand before McBrine attempted to drive Potts through extra cover but nicked behind to Bairstow.

Broad completed his third ‘five-for’ at Lord’s and first at the home of cricket for 10 years by clean bowling Mark Adair (14)

before Campher (33) was bowled having a swing at Leach.

Potts finished off by having Fionn Hand caught behind.

With sumptuous batting conditions the only question then was whether England would be ahead by the close.

They just failed but should pile up the runs today.

SCOREBOARD  
Ireland 1st Innings  
J. McCollum c Root b Broad 36  
P. Moor lbw b Broad 10  
A. Balbirnie c Crawley b Broad 0  
H. Tector c Potts b Broad 0  
P. Stirling c Bairstow b Leach 30  
L. Tucker lbw b Leach 18  
C. Campher b Leach 33  
A. McBrine c Bairstow b Potts 19  
M. Adair b Broad 14  
F. Hand c Bairstow b Potts 1  
G. Hume not out 0  
Extras (b1, lb9, nb1) 11  
Total (all out, 56.2 overs, 263 mins) 172  
Fall of wickets: 1-15 (Moor), 2-19 (Balbirnie), 3-19 (Tector), 4-64 (Stirling), 5-98 (McCollum), 6-104 (Tucker), 7-142 (McBrine), 8-169 (Adair), 9-172 (Campher), 10-172 (Hand)  
Bowling: Broad 17-5-51-5 (1nb); Potts 12.2-4-36-2; Tongue 13-4-40-0; Leach 14-2-35-3

England 1st Innings  
Z. Crawley c and b Hand 56  
B. Duckett not out 60  
O. Pope not out 29  
Extras (b4, lb1, nb1, w1) 7  
Total (1 wkt, 25 overs, 113 mins) 152  
To bat: J Root, H Brook, B Stokes, J Bairstow, S Broad, M Potts, J Tongue, J Leach  
Fall of wickets: 1-109 (Crawley)  
Bowling: Adair 7-1-59-0 (1w); Hume 8-0-29-0; Hand 7-1-42-1; Campher 3-0-17-0 (1nb)  
Note: Match scheduled for maximum four days.

FOCUS

IPL chairman sees no threat from new Twenty20 leagues

Reuters  
New Delhi

The Indian Premier League’s (IPL) stature as the world’s top Twenty20 competition is secure despite the emergence of similar franchise-based tournaments around the world, its chairman Arun Singh Dhimal told Reuters.

The IPL, with an estimated brand value of \$8.4bn, continues to attract the world’s top players and coaches with the kind of money T20 competitions in Australia and England can only dream of.

The landscape is changing, however, with lucrative leagues starting up in the United Arab Emirates and South Africa this year, while Major League Cricket gets underway in the United States next month.

Even if players now have more choice where to take their talent than ever before, Dhimal was confident the IPL would retain its primacy in franchise cricket.

“We don’t see anyone else as our competition, there is none even close to IPL,” he told Reuters by telephone.

“Our best wishes to all the boards starting their own T20 leagues, but I don’t think any of them can be a threat to IPL.”

Dhimal’s conviction stems from the strong viewership numbers for this year’s IPL, which concluded on Monday, especially from the league’s digital partner.

Jio Cinema, in a statement on Wednesday, said more than 120 million unique viewers had tuned in to watch Chennai Super Kings beat Gujarat Titans in a dramatic final, with a peak concurrency of 32.1 million.

“It has been a phenomenal success, and largely because of the sheer competitiveness of this year’s tournament,” Dhimal added.

“Most of the matches went down to the wire and there were plenty of last-over thrillers. We got a phenomenal response from the fans. Our viewership grew manifold and our broadcast and digital partners both are excited. “Even the in-stadia experience of the fans has been phenomenal, and going forward it’s only going to get better.”

The IPL’s popularity has remained undimmed since its 2008 inception and the Indian cricket board’s (BCCI) policy of not allowing its own players to participate in foreign leagues has helped ensure its preeminence.

Dhimal said the IPL would remain a 10-team event but the number of matches, currently 74 per season, might go up to 94 if it gets a bigger window in the calendar prepared by the governing International Cricket Council (ICC).

While the IPL offers life-changing money for most of its participants, the global cricket-ers’ association has called for players to receive a bigger share of the league’s revenue.

Dhimal, however, said there had been no discussions about increasing the \$11.5mn salary cap for each franchise.

“We will have to consult the franchises and team owners before taking a call,” he said. “While we still have 10 months before the next IPL, a lot of discussion will have to take place before anything like that happens.”

Dhimal, who is also a senior BCCI official, also dismissed media reports that the IPL was planning to stage matches in Saudi Arabia or to help the oil-rich country set up its own T20 league.

“It’s the ICC’s job to grow the game outside the traditional pockets,” Dhimal said. “BCCI has helped nations in the past but as far as a T20 league in Saudi Arabia is considered, it’s all speculation.”

KERLEY FACES FLORENCE TEST, EVEN WITHOUT JACOBS

Florence, Italy: World 100m champion **Fred Kerley** will again miss out on a chance to test himself against absent Olympic gold medalist Marcell Jacobs, but the field for the blue riband event at the Florence

Diamond League today still oozes class. Jacobs also pulled out of last weekend’s Diamond League meet in Rabat, meaning there has not been a showdown between the pair since the Italian trumped Kerley for a shock gold at the Tokyo Olympics, pushed back a year to 2021.

“I’m not upset that he’s not competing,” Kerley said of Jacobs, who withdrew with a back injury.

“I just wish him health and that he gets back to 100 percent.” Kerley will notably line up with US teammates Marvin Bracy and Trayvon Bromell,

the duo who completed the world championship podium in Oregon last year.

Kerley, winner of the meeting in Rome last year in 9.92sec before conquering the US championships and taking the world

gold in Eugene, will also be up against Kenya’s Ferdinand Omanyala. Omanyala has the fastest time of the season, 9.84sec run in Nairobi, but was second to Kerley in Rabat.

Completing the line-up will be Jamaica’s 2011 world champion Yohan Blake,

South African Akani Simbine, Italy’s surprise European indoor champion Samuele Ceccarelli and Australian Rohan Browning.

“It will be a chance to test myself against high-level rivals, I’ll try to have something to say,” said Ceccarelli.







TENNIS

# Ruud, Swiatek advance as Sinner exits French Open

‘IN A NORMAL MATCH I WOULD HAVE WON 6-3 6-2, BUT HERE YOU HAVE THE CHANCE TO FIGHT LIKE HE DID’

Reuters  
Paris

Fourth seed Casper Ruud and holder Iga Swiatek stayed on course to reach consecutive finals at the French Open while a couple of unheralded names in the women’s draw continued to show their immense potential on a sunny day at Roland Garros.

Elena Rybakina also booked a third round spot with a 6-3 6-3 win over rising Czech teenager Linda Noskova with the fourth seed and Wimbledon champion dazzling again on Parisian clay as one of the top contenders for the Grand Slam title.

Ruud, who lost to Rafa Nadal in last year’s final, is aiming to capitalise on the 14-time champion’s absence through injury this year and looked rock solid for much of his 6-3 6-2 4-6 7-5 victory over Italian qualifier Giulio Zeppieri.

“It was a tough match,” Ruud said.

“I started well, got a break early and served well myself.

“That’s the beauty of best-of-five sets. In a normal match I would have won 6-3 6-2, but here you have the chance to fight like he did.

“He played much better in the third set and the fourth set, and it became very tough.”

Swiatek, who is looking to lift the Suzanne Lenglen Cup for the third time in four years, briefly struggled against American Claire Liu but returned to her



Poland's Iga Swiatek in action during her second round match against Claire Liu of the US at the French Open in Paris yesterday. **Right:** Norway's Casper Ruud plays a forehand return to Italy's Giulio Zeppieri in Paris yesterday. (AFP)



rampant best with another bagel in her 6-4 6-0 victory.

Russian qualifier Mirra Andreeva continued to enjoy a dream Grand Slam debut as the 16-year-old stormed into the third round with a 6-1 6-2 win over Frenchwoman Diane Parry, though she admitted to having butterflies in her stomach.

“I’m happy that you don’t see that I’m nervous,” said the world number 143, who became the youngest player to reach the third round in Paris since a 15-year-old Sesil Karantancheva stormed into the last eight in 2005. “I hide it

pretty well.” American Kayla Day made no secret of her success after a stunning 6-2 4-6 6-4 win over compatriot Madison Keys, thanking her Czech roots for enhancing her tennis skills.

“My mum, she was born and raised in Prague, and I speak fluent Czech. That’s the only reason why I’m good at tennis, because I’m half Czech.”

Jannik Sinner later squandered two match points in his 6-7(0) 7-6(7) 1-6 7-6(4) 7-5 loss to German Daniel Altmaier in an epic battle lasting more than five hours. “Playing every point you

can with the best effort, that’s what keeps you in reality,” Altmaier said about his escapes on match point.

“I was just thinking that and the competition says it all. We’ve had historic matches with so many match points ... I don’t know if you can call this a ‘historical’ match, but I think it was one to remember.”

Croatian Borna Coric was made to work hard by Pedro Cachin before the 15th seed prevailed 6-3 4-6 4-6 6-3 6-4 but it was a day to forget for Australian 18th seed Alex de Minaur who fell

to a 6-3 7-6(2) 6-3 defeat by Tomas Martin Etcheverry.

**Jabeur subdues risk-taking Dodin for third round spot**

World number seven Ons Jabeur played the odds in her French Open match against daredevil Oceane Dodin yesterday to win 6-2 6-3 and march into the third round.

Jabeur has endured a stop-start season in which she had minor knee surgery before winning the title in Charleston and skipping the Madrid Open with a calf problem. While it may not have

been the preparation she would have liked for Paris, Jabeur has looked solid in her two matches so far, having reached the third round without dropping a set.

The Tunisian initially struggled to control Dodin’s powerful game as the 26-year-old French world number 122 attacked almost every ball, playing with considerable risk. While she made many difficult points, Dodin missed several easier ones, including two volleys, to send Jabeur 4-2 up.

The Tunisian’s drop shot is arguably the best in the women’s

game and the 28-year-old world number seven made full use of it on her next service game to move 5-2 ahead. Dodin’s risky play did not pay off when another audacious crosscourt forehand flew wide to hand Jabeur the first set.

The pair then traded early breaks but Dodin’s errors gradually piled up as Jabeur clinched the contest on her third match point to end the French presence in the women’s draw.

It is the third time in five years that no French player has made the third round of the women’s competition.

## DJOKOVIC SAYS ‘IT’S WHAT I STAND FOR’ IN KOSOVO ‘HEART OF SERBIA’ ROW

**Paris:** Novak Djokovic has defiantly insisted “it’s something I stand for” regarding the controversy over his explosive comments about Kosovo earlier this week at the French Open.

On Monday, the 22-time Grand Slam champion wrote “Kosovo is the heart of Serbia. Stop the violence” on a TV camera after his first match at Roland Garros.

“I would say it again, but I don’t need to because you have my quotes,” he said after making the third round on Wednesday with a straight sets win over Marton Fucsovics.

“I’m aware that a lot of people would disagree, but it is what it is. It’s something that I stand for. So that’s all.”

Djokovic had 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 state-



ments 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 for his comments about recent clashes in Kosovo by French

sports minister Amelie Oudea-Castera who said he “shouldn’t get involved”.

Oudea-Castera told broadcaster *France 2* that Djokovic’s message was “not appropriate, clearly”. “It was a message that is very activist, that is very political.”

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 should be free to “say his opinion”.

## ANDREEVA, 16, WANTS ‘25 GRAND SLAMS’ BUT WON’T BECOME TENNIS ‘DIVA’

**Paris:** Sixteen-year-old qualifier Mirra Andreeva became the youngest player since 2005 to reach the French Open third round yesterday and immediately set her sights on winning a record-shattering 25 Grand Slam titles.

Andreeva, ranked at 143 in the world and making her Grand Slam debut, eased to a 6-1 6-2 win over Diane Parry of France.

The France-based Russian is the youngest player to make the last 32 since a 15-year-old Sesil Karantancheva made the 2005 quarter-finals.

She is also just the seventh player under the age of 17 to make the third round in Paris in 30 years, a group that includes the likes of serial Slam champions Serena Williams and Martina Hingis.

“My dream? I know that Djokovic did 22 Grand Slams so I want to go until 25, if it will be possible,” said Andreeva who played the junior tournament in Paris last year.

However, should she reach that mark and surpass the majors collections of Djokovic and Rafael Nadal (22), Serena Williams (23) and all-

time leader Margaret Court (24), she promised to stay grounded. “If I will be a little bit like a diva, my coach will say something to me for sure because he doesn’t like those people,” said Andreeva.

“So I’m sure I will get some words from him. I will just be me. I will just be myself, and I’m sure if I will just do my thing. I will just, let’s say, stay on the ground.”

It has been a breakout tournament and year for the teenager.

She has won five matches at Roland Garros without dropping a set while her record for 2023 stands at 22 wins and just two losses. Six of those wins have come against top-100 players.

The French Open is only her third tour-level main draw appearance.

On the eve of Roland Garros, she went all the way to the last 16 in Madrid, beginning the event when she was still 15. Andreeva could face 2022 runner-up Coco Gauff for a place in the last 16 if the 19-year-old American gets past Austria’s Julia Grabher. Gauff and Andreeva have practised together at Roland Garros.



MOTORSPORT

# Hamilton eager to see how Mercedes revs up

AFP  
Barcelona

Lewis Hamilton and his Mercedes teammate George Russell were optimistic yesterday that their heavily-upgraded car will produce improved performance and results at this weekend’s Spanish Grand Prix.

But both conceded that the runaway dominance of Red Bull and the similar improvements to be introduced by rivals Ferrari and Aston Martin, among others, made it difficult to evaluate their progress.

“Monaco was not a good place to introduce new parts, but this is the perfect test track with a lot of high-speed corners so I am sure we can learn more about where we stand here,” said seven-time champion Hamilton.

“Of course, the others have upgrades here too, but from our race here last year, I am intrigued to see what happens because we did well and had a relatively good weekend. It’s going to be very interesting to see.”



Mercedes’ British driver Lewis Hamilton (left) arrives at his team’s motorhome ahead of the Spanish Grand Prix at the Circuit de Catalunya in Montmelo, on the outskirts of Barcelona. (AFP)

Mercedes introduced a change of philosophy with the sidepods of their W14 car in Monte Carlo

along with new suspension arrangements, a revised floor and rear wing and rear brakes in a

wide-ranging package. Those changes are expected to be followed by more upgrades this

weekend as the team seek to overhaul Aston Martin and Ferrari in pursuit of Red Bull.

“We are not going to judge anything just on this weekend,” said Russell.

“Last year, we had a really competitive weekend in Barcelona. I was on the podium and Lewis was strong in the race after a puncture.

“We came away thinking all our problems were solved and then went to the following couple of races and learned that wasn’t the case at all!

“I’m sure we will have a slightly more competitive weekend here, but that won’t mean we are definitely back.”

**Verstappen says Red Bull need luck to win every race**

Max Verstappen yesterday returned to the scene of his maiden Formula One victory and sought to play down talk of Red Bull becoming the first team to win every race in a season.

The Dutchman claimed his first win as a teenager on his Red Bull debut in the 2016 Spanish Grand Prix, after the two



championship-leading Mercedes drivers Nico Hamilton and Lewis Hamilton collided on the opening lap.

The defending double world champion leads this year’s title race by 39 points from teammate Sergio Perez, with Red Bull dominating. Verstappen has won four of six races so far, with Perez winning the other two.

Their imperious consistency has raised the prospect of a unique sweep, despite Perez’s lapse in Monaco last weekend when he crashed in qualifying, started from the back of the grid and failed to score a point.

Speaking to reporters at a pre-race news conference at the Circuit de Catalunya, Verstappen was asked about that race, his teammate’s mishap and its impact on the title battle.

“I think it’s mainly just the team, of course, as they want to score more points, but that’s Monaco – it can bite you,” he said.

“I’ve been in that position myself, but now, from my point of view, it doesn’t really change anything.

“I know it’s a very long championship and you need to be very consistent.

“You can barely afford mistakes, especially when it’s one team, one opponent, really.

“And at the moment, it looks like ‘best case you win’ and ‘worst case you’re second’ so you can’t really lose too many points like that.

He said he plans to “keep grinding every single weekend.”

“It doesn’t really change anything for me. It’s not like I came out of Monaco relieved, or whatever.

“I’m planning to gain seven points every single weekend.”



## LIGUE 1

# Clermont game to be last of Messi 'this season', says PSG

Star forward has not yet renewed his deal with the Ligue 1 champions

Reuters  
Paris

Paris St Germain's home game against Clermont will not necessarily be Lionel Messi's last for the capital side, a club source said after coach Christophe Galtier said yesterday it would be 'his last match at the Parc des Princes'.

Messi, who has 21 goals and 20 assists for PSG in all competitions this season, moved to the French capital from Barcelona in 2021 on a two-year contract. He has not yet renewed his deal with the Ligue 1 champions.

"It will be his last game this season," the source told Reuters.

The 35-year-old, who led Argentina to the World Cup title in Qatar and also boasts a record seven Ballon d'Or awards, won the Ligue 1 title in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons with PSG as well as the French Super Cup in July 2022. "I had the privilege of coaching the best player in the history of football. This will be his last match at the Parc des Princes, and I hope that he will receive the warmest of welcomes," Galtier told reporters.

Last month, French media reported that Messi was suspended for two weeks after an unauthorised trip to Saudi Arabia when he was supposed to train with his team following their 3-1 defeat at home to Lorient in the league. "This year, he has been an important part of the team, always available. I don't think any of the comments or criticisms are justified," Galtier said. "He's always been there for the team. It's been a great privilege to accompany him throughout the season."

Messi's future at PSG had been the subject of much speculation recently, with a source close to the Argentina captain saying that he had received a formal offer to join Saudi Arabian club Al Hilal next



Paris Saint-Germain's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi (centre) attends a training session with teammates at club's training ground in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, west of Paris, yesterday. (AFP)

season. He has also been linked in the media with a move back to boyhood club Barcelona, with the United States' Major League Soccer club Inter Miami also being touted as a possible destination.

Tomorrow's game, however, will not be a joyous affair. Galtier said the club's title celebrations have been put on hold following goalkeeper Sergio Rico's accident. Rico was involved in a riding accident while participating in an annual pilgrim-

age in southern Spain, the day after PSG wrapped up the title with one game to spare.

Rico has been in intensive care after suffering "a serious mishap due to a mule cart and a horse that hit him", his family said in a statement late on Sunday. Spanish paper *Marca* reported that Rico had been riding a horse himself.

"There will be no celebrations, it's been a very difficult week. We're all af-

fectured because we went from winning the French title on Saturday to waking up in more than a little pain on Sunday morning," Galtier told reporters ahead of PSG's final league game of the season.

"We're all affected, and we're trying as best we can to take our minds off things through the training sessions... We're very united in sending out lots of positive vibes and energy to Sergio, his mum, his wife and his loved ones."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Sevilla in 7th heaven after Europa win



Sevilla players celebrate on the team bus yesterday in Seville after winning the Europa League. (Reuters)

AFP  
Budapest

Sevilla found their Europa League magic formula on Wednesday night, beating Roma 4-1 on penalties in Budapest to make it a perfect seven out of seven in finals in the competition. The game finished 1-1 following extra-time after Paulo Dybala's opener was earlier cancelled out by an own goal from Roma defender Gianluca Mancini.

A bad-tempered but gripping match went to a shootout at a raucous Puskas Arena, with Sevilla goalkeeper Yassine Bounou proving the hero with two saves. Gonzalo Montiel, who scored the winning penalty in the 2022 World Cup final, netted the decisive spot-kick after Mancini and Roger Ibanez had failed to convert for Roma.

The win is a remarkable achievement for 62-year-old Jose Luis Mendilibar, who only took over at Sevilla in March and is now celebrating his first major trophy. "We are going to enjoy this because it has cost a lot and right now I don't know if I will renew or not and I don't care," said the Spaniard, who is not certain to be at the club next season.

The veteran coach was brought in to save the club from relegation and has led them to safety as well as European glory. "When I arrived I told the players that they were very good but that they were not mentally in the right place and that was my job," he said. "They have shown me in the end that they

are very good."

Defeat spells heartbreak for Roma boss Jose Mourinho, who has lost a European final for the first time after five successes. The fans created a crackling atmosphere before kick-off but the early stages of the game did not match the colour in the stands.

Dybala repaid Mourinho's gamble on his fitness in the 35th minute when he latched onto Mancini's through ball from the centre circle, coolly slotting his shot past Bounou. Sevilla, finally finding some fluency, came agonisingly close to levelling deep into the seven minutes of added-on time when Ivan Rakitic drilled a fierce left-footed strike from distance that cannoned back off an upright.

Mendilibar brought on forwards Suso and Erik Lamela for Oliver Torres and Bryan Gil at the break and the Spanish side began the second period on the front foot. They were level after 10 minutes when Mancini bundled a Jesus Navas cross from the right into his own net from close range. Roma seemed certain to re-take the lead against the run of play midway through the second half but the Sevilla defenders somehow scrambled the ball away after several stabs at goal from close range.

Dybala, starting a match for the first time since mid-April, was withdrawn, with midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum coming on to replace him. Sevilla thought they had a penalty with 15 minutes to go after referee Anthony Taylor ruled that Ibanez had brought down Lucas Ocampos but the decision was

overturned by VAR.

Roma squandered a glorious chance to go back in front when substitute Andrea Belotti failed to keep his shot on target with only the goalkeeper to beat. Extra-time was largely uneventful as tempers flared between the two benches but Roma defender Chris Smalling almost snatched the win when he hit the woodwork with a looping header from a corner in the dying seconds.

There were 13 yellow cards awarded, the most ever in a UEFA Europa League game. The first three spot-kicks were converted but when man-of-the-match Bounou saved penalties from Mancini and pushed Ibanez's effort onto the post, the Spanish side had a 3-1 lead and appeared certain winners. But there was more drama to come.

Montiel's effort was saved by Rui Patrício but the kick was ordered re-taken after an encroachment by the goalkeeper and this time the Argentine made no mistake.

Sevilla, 11th in La Liga with one match to play will play in the Champions League next season.

But Roma's campaign could end with a whimper after the highs of winning the inaugural Europa Conference League last year. The Italian team are sixth in Serie A with one game remaining and there are major doubts over whether Mourinho, 60, will still be manager next season. "We felt pressure against a team that has more talent than us," said the Portuguese. "We lost a game but not dignity. I've never gone home prouder than today, even when I won."

## FOCUS

## 'Tired' Mourinho raises further doubts over future at Roma

AFP  
Budapest

Jose Mourinho threw his future as Roma manager into further doubt on Wednesday, saying he was "too tired" after the bitter pain of losing his first major European final to Sevilla. The Spanish team triumphed 4-1 on penalties after the game in Budapest finished 1-1, with Paulo Dybala's opener cancelled out by an own goal from Roma defender Gianluca Mancini.

Such a defeat is a new experience for Mourinho, 60, who had won all five of his previous major European finals, including last year's inaugural UEFA Conference League final with the Italian side. "I'm too tired to do the job



as a trainer, as a spokesman of the club, to fight every time," he said in the immediate aftermath of the defeat.

Mourinho told reporters that questions over his future were "not important at the moment",

adding he was looking forward to going on holiday at the end of the season.

Roma are sixth in Serie A with one match remaining.

The Portuguese said he was disappointed with the officiating during the final and felt a number of decisions went against his men. "We felt pressure against a team that has more talent than us," he said. "We lost a game but not dignity. I've never gone home prouder than today, even when I won. We had also worked hard on penalties but we missed two - but all together, not only the penalty takers. Congratulations to Sevilla, but also congratulations to my players. The boys must go home peacefully, with pride for having done what they have done. These are my boys from Budapest."

## Fighting win for Tijan and Cherif in Ostrava



Tijan scored match-high 22-point that includes five aces. On the other side of the net, Oliveira did even better from the serving line, piling up six aces during the match. The Qatari pair will take on the second-seeded Swedes David Ahman and Jonatan Hellvig, who defeated Dutch duo Alexander Brouwer and Robert Meeuwse 2-0 (21-14, 21-17), in their second match today.

## Tudor ends reign at turbulent Marseille

**Marseille:** Coach Igor Tudor is leaving Ligue 1 side Marseille after one season, club president Pablo Longoria told a press conference yesterday. "We have accepted and respected the wish of our coach Igor Tudor not to continue the adventure next season," Longoria said. With one round to play Marseille are certain to finish third in Ligue 1, earning them a place in the preliminary round of the Champions League next season. "I took this decision to leave for professional and private reasons," Tudor, a 45-year-old Croatian, said. "I have no agreement with any other club. I'm not leaving because I'm angry with someone."

Tudor was Marseille's fifth

coach since the club was acquired by Frank McCourt in October 2016. Only Rudi Garcia stayed for more than two years. Nasser Laguet was an interim coach. The other three, Andre Villas-Boas, Jorge Sampaoli and now Tudor all chose to leave after 18 months or less. Tudor was appointed in July 2022 to replace Argentine Sampaoli.

Tudor, a defensive midfielder who played 55 times for Croatia and spent seven seasons in his first spell at Juventus, was greeted with a chorus of whistles in his first home Ligue 1 campaign, a draw with Rennes. But while Marseille were second in Ligue 1 as late as the end of April, they could not keep pace with leaders PSG.

## Rayyan, Duhail win openers at Asian Club Championship



Al Rayyan and Al Duhail won their opening matches at the 25th Asian Men's Club League Championship, which began in Isfahan, Iran, yesterday. At the Aban Arena, Rayyan beat home side Foolad 31-23, while Duhail eased past Uzbekistan's Tashkent 39-26. The competition, which will conclude on June 10, will also serve as a qualification tournament for the Super Globe, with the winner qualifying for the event to be held from October 17-23 in Saudi Arabia.

