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FOCUS

PGA Tour, LIV merge to end golf’s ‘civil war’

AFP
Miami

The PGA Tour and DP World Tour announced yesterday that they have merged their commercial operations with the Saudi-backed LIV Golf and ended all litigation, bringing to a close the sport's bitter two-year rift.

In a bombshell agreement that caught the golf world by surprise, the US-based PGA Tour said they had signed an agreement that combines its activities with the Saudi financiers' golf-related businesses and those of the DP World Tour to form "a new collectively owned, for-profit entity".

LIV Golf was launched in October 2021 and lured top PGA Tour talent with record \$25mn purses and money guarantees. The competition is currently in its second season.

The PGA Tour responded to the emergence of a rival tour by banning LIV players while the DP World Tour has handed out heavy fines to its players. The rift had led to a series of lawsuits and caused acrimony between players such as major winners Phil Mickelson and Brooks Koepka, who signed lucrative deals with LIV, and those such as Rory McIlroy and Tiger Woods, who remained loyal to the PGA Tour.

"After two years of disruption and



Saudi Public Investment Fund governor Yasir al-Rumayyan.

distraction, this is a historic day for the game we all know and love," said PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan.

"This transformational partnership recognises the immeasurable strength of the PGA Tour's history, legacy and pro-competitive model and combines with it the DP World Tour and LIV - including the team golf concept - to create an organisation that will benefit golf's players, commercial and charitable partners and fans," he added.

The deal was given swift backing by six-time major winner Mickelson, the most prominent of the defectors to the LIV Tour.



PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan.

for membership with the PGA Tour or the DP World Tour following the completion of the 2023 season".

The Board of Directors of the new commercial entity will have the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) governor Yasir al-Rumayyan as chairman and Monahan as Chief Executive Officer.

There was noticeably no mention of LIV chief executive Greg Norman in the statements.

Norman's combative approach to the conflict had seen him recently snubbed by Augusta National who did not offer him an invite to April's Masters tournament.

future plans.

"Today is a very exciting day for this special game and the people it touches around the world," said al-Rumayyan.

"We are proud to partner with the PGA Tour to leverage PIF's unparalleled success and track record of unlocking value and bringing innovation and global best practices to business and sports worldwide.

"There is no question that the LIV model has been positively transformative for golf.

"We believe there are opportunities for the game to evolve while also maintaining its storied history and tradition. This partnership represents the best opportunity to extend and increase the impact of golf for all."

The announcement comes as Saudi football clubs are poised to make a series of major investments, backed by PIF, to sign big-name players.

Yesterday, Real Madrid's Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema signed for Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad for three years starting next season, a source in the Jeddah-based club told AFP.

If the move is confirmed, Benzema will join his former Real Madrid teammate Cristiano Ronaldo in the Gulf kingdom.

Saudi Arabia has drawn up a list of more than 10 top international players that it wants to lure to its league, a source close to the negotiations has told AFP.

TENNIS

Djokovic into French Open semi-finals for 12th time

Sabalenka beats Svitolina to reach semi-finals, Muchova pummels Pavlyuchenkova to enter last four stage

AFP
Paris

Novak Djokovic closed in on a potential blockbuster French Open semi-final against Carlos Alcaraz yesterday as Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka reached the last four at Roland Garros.

Djokovic, chasing a third French Open crown and record 23rd men's Grand Slam singles title, recovered from dropping his first set of the tournament to defeat 11th seed Karen Khachanov 4-6, 7-6 (7/0), 6-2, 6-4.

The 36-year-old Serb is in his 12th Roland Garros semi-final - his 45th at the majors - and will take on world number one Alcaraz or 2021 runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas for a place in Sunday's final. After falling behind for the first time this fortnight, Djokovic dominated the second-set tie-break and then broke Khachanov to begin the third set after a favourable bounce off the net to take control.

"It was probably the turning point of the match. Winning the second set or losing the second set would be quite a big difference," said Djokovic.

"I managed to have a perfect couple of minutes of tennis and turned things around, and then just the energy of the court shifted to my side."

Djokovic hit 19 winners and just one unforced error in the third set, conceding a solitary point on his serve before breaking the Russian again for good measure.

He briefly let slip a 4-2 lead in the fourth set but immediately broke back and secured a ninth win in 10 tries against Khachanov with an ace on match point.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates his victory over Russia's Karen Khachanov in the French Open quarter-final in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

In the night session, tournament favourite Alcaraz goes up against Greek fifth seed Tsitsipas in his stiffest challenge so far.

The Spaniard has won all four past meetings - two of which have been on clay, most recently triumphing in the Barcelona Open final in April.

"We have played great matches. I won every match that we have played. But it doesn't mean that I'm going to win every match that we play," said Alcaraz. Tsitsipas also reached this year's Australian Open final, losing to Djokovic, and has been steady rather than spectacular in 2023. He is yet to win a

title this season but has made serene progress through the draw in Paris, dropping just the one set in his opening round. "Right now he's one of the biggest obstacles and challenges for any player to compete against," Tsitsipas said of Alcaraz.

"Rivalries like this, they are the toughest thing you can get in our sport."

Earlier in the day, Sabalenka ended Elina Svitolina's surprise run in the highest-profile match between two players whose countries are on opposing sides of the conflict. Sabalenka won a politically-charged match 6-4,

6-4 to extend her Grand Slam winning streak to 12 matches following her first major title at the Australian Open in January.

Sabalenka has now reached the last four at each of the Grand Slams and will face 43rd-ranked Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic for a place in Saturday's final. The unseeded Muchova matched her best run at a major by knocking out 2021 finalist Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova 7-5, 6-2 to reach the last four at Roland Garros for the first time. The 26-year-old Czech also made the semi-finals of the Australian Open in 2021.

Muchova declared the sky was the limit after she stormed into the French Open semi-finals yesterday a year after leaving Roland Garros in a wheelchair with an ankle injury.

Muchova's tearful exit in last year's third round followed a lengthy spell out with an abdominal problem after the 2021 US Open and she had slipped to number 235 in the world last August. But the unseeded 26-year-old has steadily battled back and a 7-5 6-2 win over 2021 Paris runner-up Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova in this year's quarter-finals is expected to propel her back into the top 20 from number 43.

"I don't really think about these things, like where I see myself. I'm really glad for this run and that I got my ranking a little bit better than it was," Muchova told reporters.

"I mean, at the end of last year I was I think around 200, so this is very nice. It will for sure help me coming into other tournaments with the seeding and all.

"But, yeah, the sky is the limit. I'm not really thinking like I can be number one, I can be number five. I just take it step by step and I'm really glad where



Czech Republic's Karolina Muchova celebrates after winning against Russia's Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova in quarter-final yesterday. (AFP)

I am now. I'll try to push my limits for sure. And who knows where the limits are." The 2021 Australian Open semi-finalist, who has beaten the likes of Karolina Pliskova and Ash Barty at the Grand Slams, began her Paris campaign with a victory over eighth seed Maria Sakkari and said that win had set the tone for her success.

"To beat such a great player, top 10 player, it always helps," Muchova said. "It was really tough because it was the

first round and first rounds are always tricky. "To play Maria in the first, I think it was a tough draw for both of us. Glad that I was the one who left the court as the winner."

Up next for Muchova is Belarusian second seed Aryna Sabalenka, who beat Ukraine's Elina Svitolina to advance. "She's a great player. Very aggressive. Tough match ahead," Muchova said. "I'll try to do my best to find a way to make it complicated for her."

FOCUS

World Test final takes centre stage amid T20 boom

AFP
London

The World Test Championship final between Australia and India at the Oval starts today against a backdrop of fears for the long format given the growth of Twenty20 franchise leagues. Not that there's anything new about cricket-lovers worrying about the future of their sport. Indeed it was following an 1882 Test at the Oval, after Australia had inflicted England's first defeat on home soil, that the *Sporting Times* published a mock obituary of English cricket that referenced its cremation, with "the Ashes taken to Australia". The Ashes has since become a shorthand for Anglo-Australian Test cricket, with a five-match series in England starting next week - just days after the scheduled finish of the WTC final. One current concern is that the riches on offer to leading

players from T20 tournament such as the Indian Premier League, and the vastly shorter time it takes to earn the money than by playing five-day Test cricket, makes the traditional format of the game much less attractive to leading modern-day players. The International Cricket Council's response was to devise the WTC, a two-year cycle of games culminating in a final, in order to give Test cricket greater context. This week's match marks the culmination of the second edition, with New Zealand having defeated India in the inaugural 2021 final at Southampton. Australia and India are two of cricket's major on and off-field powers, together with England, and the 'Big Three' play the majority of five-match Test series. The proximity of the first Ashes Test at Edgbaston starting today has led to the WTC final being labelled a "warm-up" game for Australia. But Australia star batsman

Steve Smith, whose side just missed out on the inaugural final, after losing their last home series India, is adamant it is a match his side want to win just as much as a 50-over or T20 World Cup final. "We're all just looking forward to this (match against India)," Smith told reporters at the Oval on Monday. "It's two years in the making, of getting to the final of the World Test Championship, it's a big week for us and India, so we'll get through this then we'll focus after that. Every game you play for your country is important." And India coach Rahul Dravid said: "It's something you aspire to, to be in the top two teams so you get an opportunity to play this game." The former India batsman added the fact New Zealand had won the first final after qualifying via the ICC's weighted points system, was proof of how teams whose cricket economics mean they are often restricted to two-Test series, could still be com-

petitive at Test level. "If you play less you still have the opportunity to make it to the final, as New Zealand showed last time," said Dravid. "Actually playing less gives you an opportunity to protect your resources." When India, now cricket's financial powerhouse, won the 1983 one-day World Cup final, it transformed the format's status in the sport's most populous nation and with it the economy of the global game. It was a similar story in 2007 when Indian officials' scepticism about T20 cricket evaporated after India's dramatic victory over arch-rivals Pakistan in the 2007 World Twenty20 final in South Africa. Dravid, however, was sceptical over whether a victory for India, set to be roared on by thousands of passionate fans at the Oval, the south London headquarters of county side Surrey, would have a similar effect. "Test cricket faces unique challenges, which are not necessarily going to change as a result of one game," he said.



Australia's Steve Smith (left) and Alex Carey during practice session yesterday, on the eve of ICC World Test Championship final against India at The Oval in London. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

India captain Rohit coy over Ashwin's role in WTC final

'THAT IS WHAT YOU PLAY FOR. IT WILL BE NICE TO WIN SOME TITLES, SOME EXTRAORDINARY SERIES'

AFP
London

India captain Rohit Sharma was tight-lipped on whether star spinner Ravichandran Ashwin would feature in the World Test Championship final starting today. Rohit's men will bid to be crowned Test world champions for the first time when they face Australia at the Oval. The last time India played a Test at the London ground, in 2021, they left out Ashwin despite the star off-spinner's excellent record - 474 wickets at 23.93 in 92 matches. Instead they opted to play spin-bowling all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja alongside four seamers in a match in which India beat England by 157 runs. Both bowlers are in India's 15-man squad for the WTC final. "In terms of the combination, better we wait until tomorrow (Wednesday) - that's a common answer, I think," Rohit said with a smile during a pre-match press conference at the Oval today. Early season surfaces in England generally do not give spinners much help and Rohit said the Oval pitch and the overhead conditions looked as though they would assist seam bowlers. "When we played the last Test match here at the Oval, it looked very similar to this and then as the game went on, it got better and better and slower and slower, then the reverse-swing came into play on the fifth day," he said. "We are going to consider all those factors." Today's match is only the second WTC final - India lost the inaugural showpiece match by eight wickets to New Zealand in Southampton in 2021. Rohit said his men were determined to learn from their mistakes on that occasion. "The last time we played (in the final) we made a few mis-



India's Rohit Sharma (right) with head coach Rahul Dravid during a practice session yesterday, on the eve of the ICC World Test Championship final at The Oval in London. (Reuters)

takes, which we've already spoken about in this group," said the 36-year-old. "It's a good challenge to have and we know exactly what went wrong for us in the last Championship final, so hopefully we won't repeat those kinds of things." Australia, who will remain in England for a five-match Ashes campaign, boast an impressive

pace attack led by captain Pat Cummins. But India have won their past four Test series against Australia, including a 2-1 success on home soil earlier this year. "We've played the opposition a fair bit in the last two or three months so we know what they are capable of... the next five days will be quite challenging for us," said Rohit.

It is now a decade since India last won a major International Cricket Council tournament. "That is what you play for," said Rohit. "It will be nice to win some titles, some extraordinary series. "Having said that, I genuinely feel we don't want to put too much pressure on ourselves by over-thinking this kind of stuff."

Cummins says WTC final, Ashes can secure legacy for Australia

LONDON: Australia captain Pat Cummins said yesterday the World Test Championship final against India and the subsequent Ashes tour of England will define his side's place in cricket history. Cummins' men face India in just the second WTC final at the Oval starting today, the first of six Tests in eight weeks, including a five-match Ashes series. New Zealand beat India in the inaugural 2021 WTC final in Southampton, while it is 22 years since Australia last won an Ashes campaign in England. "Whether we like it or not, these big series are where you look back at eras of cricket teams and judge their performances," Cummins told reporters at the Oval. "That's an exciting opportunity for us... No doubt this will be the last Ashes away tour for a lot of the guys." The 30-year-old fast bowler added: "Missing the first one (WTC final), this second one feels like it is a bit more significant. It is the only trophy that Australian cricket hasn't won." This week's match takes place against a backdrop of fears over the future of Test cricket during the growth of global franchise Twenty20 tournaments. But Cummins said he wished the final, the culmination of a two-year programme, would strengthen the place of the WTC in cricket's congested international calendar. "I hope this week shows that it does work," said the skipper. "Every day is a sell-out. I just had a meeting where they said it will be the most-watched Test ever played. "So hopefully this event is a real event that is here to stay." The WTC final will be Aus-



Australia's Scott Boland with Pat Cummins (right) during a practice session yesterday. (Reuters)

tralia's only match in England before next week's first Ashes Test at Edgbaston after officials ditched fixtures against county sides that have traditionally been a part of the tour programme. Cummins, however, was adamant the final was a key game in itself and not merely a warm-up for the Ashes. "It's absolutely an event," he said. "It feels like it is the bookend of the past two years' campaign. "We have played great cricket over that campaign, and after this Test match it means nothing. We start again, starting with a series that doesn't get much bigger than an Ashes away series. "It does feel like a final." India have yet to name their team but Australia have confirmed that seamer Scott Boland

will play. Josh Hazlewood has been ruled out of the final with a side injury and that left Boland and Michael Neser, a late call-up to the squad after impressing for Glamorgan in England's County Championship, competing for a place. Australia, however, have stuck with Boland, who enjoyed a stunning international debut during the 2021/22 Ashes, with his return of 6-7 in Melbourne helping seal a series win. The 34-year-old has now taken 28 wickets in seven Tests at a remarkably low average of 13.42. "Someone like Scotty, it's just a really simple game plan - you hit your good areas and you stay there all day and hopefully the ball will do the work for you," said Cummins.

Moeen considering Test return ahead of Ashes

London: England all-rounder Moeen Ali is considering a comeback to Test cricket ahead of the Ashes against Australia after spinner Jack Leach was ruled out with a lower back stress fracture, British media reported. The 35-year-old, who announced his retirement from the longest format of the game in September 2021, is said to have been contacted by England skipper Ben Stokes and coach Brendon McCullum over a potential return to Test cricket. British media said Moeen, who was part of Chennai Super

Kings' squad that went on to win the 2021 and 2023 Indian Premier League, has been given some time to make a decision. Moeen made his Test debut in 2014 and scored 2,914 runs in 64 Tests at an average of 28.29, picking up 195 wickets with his off-spin. England are seeking a replacement for Leach, whose injury was the latest setback to their bowling department in the build-up to the series, with fast bowler Jofra Archer also ruled out due to an elbow injury. The Ashes gets underway at Edgbaston on June 16. (AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

Afghanistan upbeat about World Cup chances

AFP
Suriyawewa, Sri Lanka

A confident Afghanistan hope to beat Sri Lanka and make a serious showing at the Cricket World Cup, their skipper has said ahead of the deciding game of the three-match ODI series. "It will mean a lot to us to come here to Sri Lanka and beat them in their own backyard," Hashmatullah Shahidi told reporters on Monday, on the eve of the final one-day international at Hambantota with the series squared 1-1.

Afghanistan earned automatic qualification for the sport's showpiece later this year in India, ahead of more fancied teams like Sri Lanka and West Indies, who are former world champions. Hashmatullah said conditions at World Cup hosts India "will suit our spin bowlers". The ICC ODI Rankings for bowlers is dominated by Afghans, with three of their spinners featured - Rashid Khan, Mujeeb Ur Rahman and Mohamed Nabi - a higher number than any other country. "Our ratings are improving day by day and match by match," Shahidi said. "We believe that we can do something special in this World Cup."

The Afghan attack also has chinaman bowler in Noor Ahmad, who doesn't feature in the top 10. "Before the World Cup of course we have the Asia Cup, and we are confident of doing well in that event as well," Shahidi added. The Afghans are high in demand in the IPL, giving many of their players valuable experience of playing in India. Bowling is not Afghanistan's only strength, as they have both big hitters and technically sound batsmen in the line-up. Opening batsman Ibrahim Zadran has had a sensational start to his international career, having scored three hun-

dreds and two half-centuries in just ten ODIs. "He is one of the brightest prospects around," Shahidi said. "I always felt that he had it in him to make it big at the international level." Afghanistan hope that leg-spinner Khan could make a comeback on Tuesday, having missed the first two ODIs due to a back injury. "He is obviously our star performer," Shahidi said. "We didn't want to take any risks with him, as we have the Asia Cup and the World Cup. We will assess his situation during training and make a call whether he is ready to feature in the final game."



FOCUS

Sabalenka: I don't support war, I don't support Lukashenko

'I don't want my country to be involved in any conflict. I said it many times'

AFP
Paris

Belarus tennis star Aryna Sabalenka outrightly condemned her country's role in the war in Ukraine yesterday and insisted she is not a supporter of president Alexander Lukashenko.

"I'm not supporting the war. I don't support war, meaning I don't support Lukashenko," the world number two said after reaching the French Open semi-finals by defeating Elina Svitolina of Ukraine. The 25-year-old had come under increasing pressure to distance herself from her apparent close relationship with Lukashenko, a key military ally of Moscow in the ongoing conflict.

"We played a lot of Fed Cups in Belarus. He (Lukashenko) was in our matches taking pictures with us after the match. Nothing bad was happening that time in Belarus or in Ukraine or in Russia," she told reporters.

Sabalenka had cancelled two previous press conferences at Roland Garros, claiming she didn't feel "safe" after facing a barrage of questions over her links to her country's strongman leader. As Australian Open champion and potential world number one after the French Open, she was pressed by Ukraine rivals to individually stand up against the war.

"I don't want my country to be involved in any conflict. I said it many times. You have my position. You have my answer," she said. "I don't want sport to be involved in politics, because I'm just a 25-year-old tennis

player. And if I would like to be political I wouldn't be here. I don't want to be involved in any politics."

Sabalenka has had close associations with Lukashenko in the past. In 2018, she requested a one-to-one meeting with him, according to Belarusian state news agency Belta.

The following year, in an interview with the country's largest independent news site Tut.by – since shuttered following a brutal crackdown after historic demonstrations against Lukashenko – she spoke glowingly of the Belarusian leader.

On December 31, 2020, after a year marked by the crushing of pro-democracy demonstrations in Belarus, Sabalenka toasted the new year with Lukashenko in Minsk. Lukashenko praised Sabalenka when she won the Australian Open in January.

At the end of yesterday's match, Svitolina chose not to shake the hand of Sabalenka, a common practice now in the sport when a Ukrainian player meets a Russian or Belarusian opponent. Svitolina was booed by the crowd while Sabalenka stood at the net. The Ukrainian accused Sabalenka of deliberately "inflaming" the situation.

"It just was an instinct like I always do after all my matches," said Sabalenka of her decision to approach the net.

Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka gestures a thumbs up as she waits to shake hands with Ukraine's Elina Svitolina after winning the French Open quarter-final in Paris yesterday. (AFP)



TENNIS

Rune's rise accompanied by reputation for theatrics

AFP
Paris

Former French Open junior champion, Holger Rune is touted as a future Grand Slam winner, but controversy has often stalked the 20-year-old Dane on his rise towards the top.

In the quarter-finals for a second time at Roland Garros, Rune will face Norway's Casper Ruud in a repeat of last year's ill-tempered clash after which the then-teenager was told to "grow up" by his opponent.

Rune's rollercoaster last-16 win Monday over Francisco Cerundolo was marked by a double-bounce incident that went his way, far from the first flashpoint in his young, flourishing career. He captured his first Masters title in Paris last November, beating five top-10 players in a run which culminated with a win over Novak Djokovic in the final.

But even that triumph began with Rune being chided by Stan Wawrinka for "acting like a baby" after he saved match points in the opening round against the Swiss.

Rune has for the most part let his racket do the talking since, backing up a strong finish to 2022 by reaching the finals of both the Monte Carlo Masters and Italian Open this spring. He arrived at the French Open at a career high of sixth in the world, and is in rare company as one of just three active players to beat Djokovic multiple times and own a winning record against him.

But his most recent victory over the Serb – a three-set



win in Rome last month – was marred by spats with the chair umpire, prompting Rune to call Mohamed Lahyani "an absolute joke" following a botched line call. That came after Rune reignited the Wawrinka feud at Indian Wells in March when he asked the three-time Grand Slam champion if he had anything to say after winning their third-round clash.

While Rune received support from volatile Australian Nick Kyrgios, US tennis great John McEnroe – once dubbed "SuperBrat" for his temper melt-downs and expletive-laden insults – suggested the Dane tone down the antics for the sake of his career. "I've said this before, I'll say it again, it's hard to be a total asshole and be on the tennis tour, okay? It's possible to do it but you end up living a very lonely existence," McEnroe said recently on his brother's podcast Holding Court with Patrick McEnroe.

"He likes to ham it up, he likes to engage the crowd, but he does it in a way that kind of irritates his opponents at times. Certainly irritates the crowd. So what's happening is, he's developing a reputation," Rune's theatrical behaviour is not uncommon for a player his age – he was born six days before Carlos Alcaraz – but he hopes his

quarter-final with Ruud will be remembered for the right reasons this time.

"Obviously there was drama last year and I hope we can make less drama this year," said Rune, who at one point even appeared to order his own mother to leave the stadium.

Rune accused Ruud of taunting him in the locker room after their 2022 tussle, but struck a more conciliatory note this week when asked about his upcoming opponent who he beat in Rome two weeks ago.

"He's a good player. I respect him. There's no problem. We're good. Should be a match without problems, hopefully," said Rune.

CYCLING

Laporte stretches Dauphine lead with stage three win

AFP
Le Coteau, France

Frenchman Christophe Laporte extended his overall lead in the Criterium du Dauphine by winning the third stage yesterday.

Jumbo-Visma's Laporte pipped Irishman Sam Bennett in second place and Dutch rider Dylan Groenewegen in third after a 194.1km ride finishing in Le Coteau, to the east of Lyon.

Following a review Bora-Hansgrohe's Bennett and Team Jayco-Alulua's Groenewegen were dropped to 33rd and 34th place after changing their line. Italian Matteo Trentin was then moved up to second place and Belgian Milan Menten third. "I always said I was quick, but not quick enough to beat those riders," Laporte told France 3 television.

"Groenewegen was a little blocked on the right, Bennett was running on empty, it allowed me to get by on the left, it made me happy," the 30-year-old added.

With less than a month to go to the Tour de France, reigning Tour champion Jonas Vingegaard finished in the main group as did 2019 winner Egan Bernal.

Ineos Grenadiers' Colombian Bernal is 12th



French rider Christophe Laporte celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the third stage of the 75th edition of the Criterium du Dauphine in Le Coteau, France, yesterday. (AFP)

overall with Jumbo's Dane Vingegaard in 16th, both 23 seconds behind Laporte.

Laporte now leads compatriot Julian Alaphilippe by 11 seconds in the overall standings thanks to a bonus for the stage victory with Ecuadorian Richard Carapaz third, 17 seconds behind.

Wednesday's fourth stage is a 31.1km individual time trial from Cours to Belmont-de-la-Loire.

Van der Poel targets Tour stage win before Worlds

PARIS: Dutch rider Mathieu van der Poel will return to competition on Saturday in a one-day race in Belgium, to start his warm-up ahead of the Tour de France and the World Championships.

"The goal is to just go and try to win the (Tour) stage and then the other objective is of course getting as good as possible to Paris and try to be ready for the Worlds," the winner of the Milan-Sanremo and Paris-Roubaix 'Monument' races this season told a video-conference from La Plagne in the French Alps.

This year the World Road Race Championships are scheduled for Glasgow from August 5, only two weeks after the arrival of the Tour de France in Paris.

"Normally I will also do the World Mountain Bike Championships the week after the Road Championship. But without any specific preparation I will try and go there without any pressure," continued the 28-year-old who has not competed for

almost two months since winning in the Roubaix velodrome on April 9.

Saturday's one-day race in the Hageland area will him help prepare for the Tour of Belgium (June 14-18) then the Dutch Championship (June 25), his last outings before the Tour de France, which he intends to complete after withdrawing during the 11th stage in his debut last year.

"Paris is the last stop before the Worlds," he said. "It's time to finish it and that's why I'm also preparing so good this year."

"I really want to have a good Tour, like the Giro last year," said Van der Poel of his stage win and wearing the pink jersey on Italian roads.

To perfect his preparation the Alpecin team leader shunned the Criterium du Dauphine and the Tour of Switzerland.

"It's better for me to go all out and try to win some stages in Belgium than to be in a gruppetto in Switzerland in the mountain stages."

(AFP)

Qatar U-23 make winning start at Maurice Revello championship in France



Qatar U-23 team beat its Australian counterparts 4-3 in penalties at the Maurice Revello football championship, which was previously known as Toulon tournament, in Aubagne, France. At the Lattre Stadium yesterday, both teams had failed to score in regulation time in the Group B match.

GB Boxing seeks associate membership of new world body

LONDON: GB Boxing will seek associate membership of World Boxing, a new rival to the Russian-led International Boxing Association (IBA), as the divided sport fights for its Olympic future, it said yesterday.

GB Boxing delivers the United Kingdom's publicly-funded World Class Programme but is not a national governing body as England, Wales and Scotland have their own separate ones. Associate membership does not carry voting rights but will allow representatives of GB Boxing to hold offices within World Boxing. The new body's interim executive board features representatives from Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Sweden and the United States.

"It is vitally important to the future of the sport in the UK and across the globe that boxing remains part of the Olympic programme," said GB Boxing chair Jason Glover in a statement. "The loss of Olympic status would have devastating consequences for boxers and everyone connected with the sport ... and we are committed to supporting World Boxing in its efforts to keep boxing at the heart of the Olympic Movement. GB Boxing has played a significant role in helping to establish World Boxing and the decision to apply for associate membership is a sign of our long-term commitment to the new organisation and a desire on our behalf to play a part in its future development."

The International Olympic Committee's Executive Board will meet on Wednesday to discuss the state of reforms by the IBA with the sport's Olympic future in the balance.

The IOC suspended the IBA in 2019 over governance, finance, refereeing and ethical issues and did not involve it in running the boxing events at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics.

It has provisionally excluded the sport from the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics and has demanded immediate reforms but has warned repeatedly that the IBA was not doing enough. (Reuters)

Abakar claims second gold at Asian U20 Athletics with 400m win



Qatar's Ismail Dawood Abakar won the men's 400m hurdles for his second gold medal at the Asian U20 Athletics Championships in Yecheon, South Korea, yesterday. The 19-year-old, who had on Sunday clinched the 400m gold, stormed to victory in a championship record time of 49.30 secs. Japan's Ryoma Konno finished second (49.91) while Chung Wei Lin of Chinese Taipei claimed bronze (50.16). Another Qatari athlete Mahamat Abakar Abdrahman finished eighth with a time of 52.79.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Guardiola warns City players against arrogance in final

Guardiola's men, who face Inter, are one win away from completing the treble

AFP
Manchester

Pep Guardiola has warned his Manchester City's stars that their confidence ahead of the Champions League final against Inter Milan cannot slip into arrogance as they aim to complete a historic treble.

Guardiola's men are one game away from becoming just the second side to win the Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup in the same season.

City are huge favourites for the clash in Istanbul on Saturday, having thrashed Bayern Munich and Real Madrid on route to the final. By contrast, Inter finished a distant third in Serie A and enjoyed a less demanding passage to the final as they beat Porto, Benfica and AC Milan.

However, the Italians boast the richer European Cup heritage, with three triumphs to City's none, and Guardiola has urged his team not to become complacent.

"Of course we are confident, so optimistic, but at the same time I cannot deny the difficulties and qualities of the opponents," said Guardiola at City's pre-match media day yesterday. "I have never done it and especially in the final of the Champions League."

City remain on course to match the treble achievement of Manchester United's class of 1998/99 by beating the Red Devils 2-1 in the FA Cup final on Saturday. Guardiola said that was far better preparation for the Champions League final than their only previous appearance in the European showpiece two years when his side lost 1-0 against Chelsea in Porto.

But he insisted City's stunning form in the past four months will count for nothing when it comes to getting the job done at the Ataturk Stadium. City's only defeat in their last 27 games came at Brentford on the final day of the Premier League season after the title had long since been won. "We know a final is about how you



FROM RIGHT: Manchester City's Erling Haaland, Riyad Mahrez, Ilkay Gundogan and Aymeric Laporte at a training session in Manchester yesterday. (Reuters)

behave for 95 minutes. It's not about history, for history they are better than us," Guardiola said. "It doesn't matter what you do in group stage, last 16, quarter-finals, Premier League or FA Cup. It's one single game you have to be better than the opponent. It is a dream to be here, two years ago we were there but in a different situation."

The City boss heaped praise on opponents Inter's organisation and defence, with the Italian side having conceded just three goals over the course of six matches

in this year's Champions League knockout stage. "What we are trying to do in the next few days is try to understand how to play with a lot of difficulties as it is not easy to attack the defensive system Inter use," Guardiola said.

"So we will have to bring a lot of rhythm and be patient - we are not going to do it with three or four passes. We have to know the right tempo. They have a good shape not just in how they defend but how good they are with the ball in the transition when they lead with the strik-

ers. They have a really good process which starts with goalkeeper Andre Onana... so it makes our high pressing difficult."

Kyle Walker is City's only injury worry as the England right-back sat out training yesterday with a back injury. But he is expected to recover in time to be available for the final. "He has had a little bit of a disturbance in his back," Guardiola said.

"Yesterday he was not good, today he was a little bit better but we didn't want to take any risks. We will see in the next days."

EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Bowen eager to score for new twins in 'massive' final

AFP
Prague

Jarrold Bowen said he would like to score a goal for each of his newborn twins when his West Ham side face Fiorentina in the Europa Conference League final in Prague today. "The twins are here now so now I want to score. Just one would be nice but if it's two, I'll take two," Bowen told reporters.

The 26-year-old winger, who joined West Ham from Hull in 2020, has two two-week-old girls with Love Island star Dani Dyer. Back to business, Bowen hailed today's final as a "massive" game and the biggest one of his career. "I've only been here three years and if you'd told me we'd be in a European final three years later I would have bitten your hand off," he said.

West Ham have had an impressive run through European competitions in the past two seasons. In 2021/22, they reached the Europa League semi-finals



where they crashed out at the hands of eventual winners Eintracht Frankfurt. This season, they have won 13 out of 14 Conference League games, which was a consolation after a Premiership season spent close to the bottom of the table.

They only managed 11 wins in 38 Premier League matches. "Last year we were obviously so disappointed to lose in the semi-final so that probably gave us the extra bit of motivation to do it this year," said Bowen.

West Ham's only European trophy was the 1965 Cup Winners' Cup with a team featuring English World Cup heroes Bobby Moore and Geoff Hurst. "I think with the season that we've had as well, we want to make it even more special for us," said Bowen, who has scored five goals in the competition so far, including the play-off round. "To do it with your teammates and friends and to win it for everybody would be so special."

But the East Londoners are aware of the firepower facing them as Fiorentina, who finished eighth in Serie A, have scored 36 goals in 14 Conference League games this season. "It's a final and you don't get into a final for being a bad team. We respect them a lot," said Bowen. "They've scored a lot of goals in this competition so that's

one of their main threats. (But) this is a final and we'll try and stop what they're good at."

West Ham manager David Moyes also relished the moment. "This is something more special than we have envisaged for a long time ahead," he said. "It's a big thrill for me," the Scot told reporters, adding he expected a clash of "two different cultures" in the game. "We hope we can get the right balance between that. We want to be really committed and we're going to fight for everything we possibly can."

Fiorentina coach Vincenzo Italiano said he wanted "to make life hard" for West Ham. "They've got great players, strong players in each position on the pitch, but we have reached the final too," said the 45-year-old. "I hope we'll give our best tomorrow. I trust the players, we are self-confident."

Last week, Roma - who had won the maiden Conference League trophy last year - failed to overcome Sevilla in the Europa League final, losing on penalties.

SPOTLIGHT

Benzema joins Saudi side Al Ittihad

Reuters
Riyadh

Ballon d'Or winner **Karim Benzema** has joined Al Ittihad as a free agent on a three-year deal, the Saudi Arabian champions said yesterday, after the French striker's departure from Real Madrid. According to media reports, the contract is estimated to be worth more than 100mn euros (\$106.89mn).

"I am excited to experience a new football league in a different country. I have been fortunate to achieve amazing things in my career and achieve everything I can in Spain and Europe," the 35-year-old Benzema said. "It now feels the time is right for a new challenge and project ... I am looking forward to joining my new teammates and, together with them, help take this amazing club and the game in Saudi Arabia to new levels."

Al Ittihad last month clinched the Saudi Pro League title for the first time since 2009. "Benzema's arrival is the most impactful transfer in the club's history to date," Al Ittihad said in a statement. "It also marks another huge step in the Saudi Pro League's journey to become one of football's leading destinations for the world's very best after its biggest season to date."

At Real, Benzema won the Champions League five times, four La Liga crowns and three Spanish Cup trophies as well as five Club World Cups and four UEFA Super Cup titles. But after a stellar 2021-22 season, he was troubled by injuries in the just-completed season and had to miss France's World Cup cam-



paign with a thigh problem.

Benzema joins his former Real Madrid teammate Cristiano Ronaldo in the Gulf kingdom after the five-time world player of the year moved to Al Nassr from Manchester United following last year's World Cup.

Lionel Messi, who is leaving Paris Saint-Germain after two seasons, has also been linked with a move to Saudi Arabia. Senior officials from another Saudi Arabian club, Al Hilal, have flown to France to try and seal a deal for Messi after the 35-year-old Argentinian played his last game for PSG at the weekend, two sources with knowledge of the matter told AFP on Sunday. The Saudi delegation plans to meet Messi's father and agent, Jorge, with the aiming of completing the signing as soon as possible.

Saudi Arabia has drawn up a list of more than 10 players who have won either the Champions League or the World Cup that it wants to lure to its league, a source close to the negotiations has told AFP. The list includes Real Madrid and Croatia midfielder Luka Modric, Tottenham goalkeeper Hugo Lloris and his France teammate N'Golo Kante.

Duhail, Rayyan reach Asian Club handball semis



Qatar's Al Duhail and Al Rayyan entered the semi-finals of the 25th Asian Club Handball League Championship in Isfahan, Iran, yesterday. Both teams finished on top of their respective groups after winning their last group matches. Duhail topped Group B as the three-time champions beat hosts Shahid Shamsi Kazeroun 29-23, while Rayyan finished atop Group A after a clinical 40-26 win over China's Junior Club.



Tottenham appoint Australian Postecoglou as new manager

London: Tottenham have appointed Ange Postecoglou as their new manager on a four-year deal, ending their long search for a new coach. The 57-year-old Australian, who won the domestic Scottish treble with Celtic this season, will replace Antonio Conte at the Premier League club.

Conte left Spurs by "mutual agreement" in late March, with Cristian Stellini and then Ryan Mason taking temporary charge. Postecoglou will officially join the London club, who finished a disappointing eighth in the Premier League this season, on July 1.

the challenge of trying to revitalise Spurs after a disastrous 12 months.

The club were still challenging for a top-four place when Conte departed but they ended up missing out on European competition. Former Bayern Munich coach Julian Nagelsmann and ex-Barcelona, Spain boss Luis Enrique and Feyenoord manager Arne Slot were among the big names touted for the job.

But Levy has finally got his man in Postecoglou, who takes the next step on a nomadic career that has included spells in Australia and Japan. He also managed the Australia team. Celtic handed Postecoglou his chance in European football in 2021 and he did not disappoint, dethroning Rangers as Scottish champions.