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# GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Argentina triumph without Messi as Brazil grab late win against Peru

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SPOTLIGHT

## Verratti leaves PSG, joins Al Arabi in Qatar

Agencies  
Paris

Italian international Marco Verratti has signed for Qatari club Al Arabi, his new club and his former team, Paris Saint-Germain, announced yesterday.

Al Arabi posted a video on social media showing the midfielder in club colours.

Qatari-owned PSG released a statement thanking Verratti for his 11 years at the club.

Verratti "played a major role in our great history", said club president Nasser al-Khelaifi.

"I was very proud to wear the colours of Paris St Germain for more than a decade, to rub shoulders with so many great players, and to win 30 trophies," Verratti told the club website.

"Paris, the Club and its supporters will always have a very special place in my heart. I will be Parisian forever."

Verratti, who has never played in Italy's Serie A, joined PSG in

2012 from his hometown club Pescara. The Ligue 1 side paid €12m (\$12.87m) for the then 19-year-old. Verratti, 30, has struggled with injuries.

He also has a spotty disciplinary record, collecting 141 yellow cards and six reds for PSG.

In 11 seasons at PSG, Verratti played in 416 matches, making him the club's second highest appearance maker behind Jean-Marc Pilonget (435).

**In 11 seasons at PSG, Marco Verratti played in 416 matches, making him the club's second highest appearance maker behind Jean-Marc Pilonget (435)**

Bans and injuries limited him to 29 Ligue 1 appearances last season, but that total was the most since he played 32 games in 2014-15.

New coach Luis Enrique had not selected Verratti this season.

PSG received no concrete offers from any of Europe's big clubs for Verratti, perhaps put off by his salary. French media reported that

the transfer that should bring PSG close to €50m (\$53.7m).

Verratti won nine French league titles and the French Cup six times with PSG and the European Championship in 2021 with Italy.

Verratti has won 55 international caps, scoring three goals. He was in the Italy squad who won Euro 2020, starting the final in which they beat England in a penalty shootout.

After a summer in which the Saudi Arabian League continued to attract big-name players, including Verratti's former PSG teammate Neymar who joined Al Hilal in Riyadh, the Italian is the second star to move to Qatar in less than a week. Brazilian forward Philippe Coutinho joined Al Duhail on a season-long loan from Aston Villa on Friday.

Italian international Marco Verratti is unveiled as Expo Stars League side Al Arabi's latest overseas player in Doha yesterday. (@alarabi\_club)



QTERMINALS QATAR CLASSIC 2023

## American star Sobhy stuns Gohar to reach Doha semis

'It felt very relaxed and I just wanted to go out there and take it to her and I'm just glad it paid off'

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Seventh seed Amanda Sobhy of the US yesterday stunned top seed Nouran Gohar of Egypt in straight games to reach the semi-finals of the \$187,500 QTerminals Qatar Classic squash championship.

A five-time national champion, the 30-year-old American won 12-10, 11-9, 11-1 in just 32 minutes.

In the semi-finals, Sobhy will meet Hania El Hammamy who edged Gina Kennedy of England to seal her spot in the last-four. Egypt's El Hammamy took 49 minutes to beat Kennedy 11-1, 11-7, 7-11, 12-10.

Second seed Nour El Sherbini of Egypt beat Belgium's Nele Gillis in four games to reach the semi-finals. El Sherbini won 11-0, 11-4, 8-11, 11-6 in 45 minutes on the Glass Court at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

In the semi-finals, El Sherbini will meet Belgium's Tinne Gillis who took four games to beat Egypt's Salma Hany. Gillis won 6-11, 11-7, 11-6, 11-7 in 57 minutes.

"It was a long time coming, we've played a lot of times and our head-to-heads have been close, but since 2019 she's beaten me," a delighted Sobhy said after the impressive win. "Every time I play her, I'm not afraid anymore. I want to play her because it gives me that much more confidence going in against her," she added.

"I was excited to know that I was going to face again here in Qatar after last week in Paris. I learned a lot in Paris and I translated it into Qatar, hopefully you can see a different version of me, especially emotionally. I'm so pumped," she said. "I sometimes get off to a slow start and with her pace it's easy to get blown out of the court, but even when I was 10-6 down, I felt like I was still in it and I just thought that I had nothing to lose."

"It felt very relaxed and I just wanted to go out there and take it to her and I'm just glad it paid off," she said. On her telephone cel-



Seventh seed Amanda Sobhy of the US celebrates beating top seed Nouran Gohar of Egypt at the QTerminals Qatar Classic squash tournament at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex in Doha yesterday.



Nour El Sherbini of Egypt signs autographs after beating Belgium's Nele Gillis yesterday. Right: Tinne Gillis of Belgium in action against Salma Hany of Egypt yesterday.



Tinne Gillis of Belgium in action against Salma Hany of Egypt yesterday.



Hania El Hammamy of Egypt in action against Gina Kennedy of England.

bration, Sobhy added: "I saw that at the US Open, Ben Shelton did it, then (Novak) Djokovic did it, Ben Shelton and I just absolutely love the savageness of it, so when I saw that happen I was like, 'I have to do it, I have to do it' so that's been my incentive to want to do it so it might be getting old, but I'm going to roll with it - it's working."

After her hard-fought match, El Hammamy said yesterday: "I bet everyone wanted it to go to five, (but) especially not myself and I'm not sure about Gina, but I'm definitely pleased to get through in four. It's very dangerous playing against her because both of us are extremely physical so if you don't get your tactics right then

you're going to be in trouble. "I got myself in trouble in the last two games. I thought I played really well in the first two games and got my tactics right and got my targets correct. Definitely I'm positive today after being able to push and find a way in the fourth."

The Cairo-born 23-year-old added: "I think there's a lot of

things that I need to focus on for tomorrow. It's a positive performance and I'll keep in mind the things I need to do tomorrow."

"I'm pretty much speechless at the moment," Gillis admitted after beating Hany. "For me, it's always the hardest moments when you're so close and yet so far. You have to think that she could still come back and it could go either way so I had to focus, which is something that I struggle with at these crucial points," Gillis added.

"I just said to myself, 'just keep the rally going, don't rush anything, just pretend it's 5-5, but don't think you're match ball up and just try to keep your focus'."

**ElShorbagy, Hesham reach men's quarter-finals**

In the first men's round three match of day five in the QTerminals Qatar Classic, England's Mohamed ElShorbagy beat Youssef Ibrahim in an 81-minute epic and Mazen Hesham defeated his fellow Egyptian Aly Abou Eleinen to book their places in the quarter final. Later in the day, Diego

Elias defeated Youssef Soliman in straight games.

**RESULTS**

**Men's Round Three**  
(3) Mohamed ElShorbagy (ENG) bt Youssef Ibrahim (EGY) 3-2: 6-11, 11-6, 16-14, 8-11, 11-7 (81m)  
(6) Mazen Hesham (EGY) bt Aly Abou Eleinen (EGY) 3-0: 11-7, 11-2, 11-6 (33m)  
(2) Diego Elias (PER) bt Youssef Soliman (EGY) 3-0: 11-3, 11-2, 11-5 (38m)  
(9/16) Karim Abdel Gawad (EGY) 3-1 (9/16) Nicolas Mueller (SUI) 11-9, 7-11, 11-8, 11-9 (43m)

**Women's Quarter-Finals:**

(7) Amanda Sobhy (US) 3-0 (1)  
(1) Nouran Gohar (EGY) 12-10, 11-9, 11-1 (32m)  
(3) Hania El Hammamy (EGY) 3-1  
(8) Gina Kennedy (ENG) 11-1, 11-7, 7-11, 12-10 (49m)  
(9/16) Tinne Gillis (BEL) 3-1 (9/16) Salma Hany (EGY) 6-11, 11-7, 11-6, 11-7 (57m)  
(2) Nour El Sherbini (EGY) 3-1 (6) Nele Gillis (BEL) 11-0, 11-4, 8-11, 11-6 (45m)

SPOTLIGHT

# Rahul's form gives India a 'good headache' for World Cup

Reuters  
Colombo

Ishan Kishan has usually been India's go-to wicketkeeper for limited-overs matches this year but it is clear he cannot take his place for granted with **KL Rahul** hitting top form after returning from injury at the Asia Cup. Kishan appeared to be first-choice for the gloves, not just because he has four fifties in his last five one-day knocks but also for the left-handed variety that he brings in a batting lineup dominated by right-handers.

Rahul's first two knocks since returning from a thigh injury, however, have ensured he remains in contention, creating the "good headache" that chief selector Ajit Agarkar had anticipated after picking both in the World Cup squad.

Rahul had only five minutes to prepare for the blockbuster Asia Cup match against Pakistan after Shreyas Iyer was a last-minute withdrawal due to a back spasm. But in his first outing since his coming back from injury he smashed an unbeaten 111 and forged a brilliant stand with fel-

low centurion Virat Kohli to set up India's comprehensive victory against their arch-rivals.

The elegant right-hander featured in another crucial partnership, this time with Kishan, in Tuesday's low-scoring contest against hosts Sri Lanka, which India won by 41 runs.

Rahul also kept wicket for the majority of the Pakistan innings and throughout the Sri Lankan innings. "I have been keeping wicket for a long time, more than two years now actually," Rahul told reporters, adding that he was comfortable with the dual role.

"So it's not new for me, and the team management has told me that this would be my role in the squad - to play in the middle order and keep wicket."

Primarily a versatile batter comfortable in any position in the top and middle order, Rahul said he had honed his keeping skills during his rehabilitation from injury. "During my recovery, I worked on both aspects," the 31-year-old said. "Earlier, I'd work mostly on my batting. But this time I had enough time to work on my keeping. Hopefully I can do both the roles well."

REYNOLD  
GULFTIMES  
14-09-2023



## Gill rises to second in ODI batting rankings

Shubman Gill, the Indian opener, has earned a career-high second position and is the highest-ranked of three Indian hitters who are now in the top 10 of the ICC men's ODI rankings released yesterday. The other two Indians in the top ten are captain Rohit Sharma (8th) and the incompromisable Virat Kohli (9th). The last time three Indian batters were in the top ten in ODIs was in January 2019. At the time, the three batters were Rohit, Kohli, and out-of-favour veteran Shikhar Dhawan. Gill, who scored 58 and had a 121-run opening stand with Rohit Sharma in the Asia Cup encounter against Pakistan, has risen one rank in the current chart, while Kohli has risen two spots apiece. Rohit has three half-centuries in a row in the present Asia Cup, while Kohli advanced with an unbeaten 122 against Pakistan. Pakistan captain Babar Azam leads Gill by more than 100 rating points.

ASIA CUP

# Pakistan look to Zaman in must-win game vs Sri Lanka

Pacer Naseem out of team's Super Four match against the hosts

AFP  
Colombo

Pakistan bowling coach Morne Morkel yesterday said injuries to their premier quicks is a big blow ahead of a must-win Asia Cup match but a "fantastic opportunity" for up-and-coming talent.

Naseem Shah has been ruled out of the team's final Super Four match - effective semi-final - against Sri Lanka in Colombo today. Pakistan Super League star Zaman Khan came in as replacement and walks directly into the team, which was announced on the eve of the key match.

Naseem and fellow quick Haris Rauf were injured in the team's previous Super Four clash of the 50-over tournament, a prelude to the upcoming ODI World Cup.

"A big blow, picking up those little niggles, but in this same sort of thing what a fantastic opportunity for the guys coming in," Morkel, a former South Africa fast bowler, told reporters. "After going down against India, it's a must-win game for us come tomorrow and I'm quite excited to see the new guys stepping in, to see their character, to see how they respond."

Zaman, 22, flew in from Pakistan and is already a popular name in national cricket after his heroics in this year's PSL for champions Lahore Qalandars.

"I'm excited just to work with him, connect with them and build that relationship and help him develop, because he's a match winner," Morkel said of the quick who defended 13 runs of his last



Pakistan's Zaman Khan delivers a ball during a practice session at the R. Premadasa Stadium in Colombo yesterday, on the eve of the Asia Cup 2023 Super Four ODI against Sri Lanka. (AFP)

over to star in Lahore's title defence this season.

Shaheen Shah Afridi leads the Pakistan pace attack that rattled India in the Asia Cup group match, which was washed out after just one innings. But Shaheen and company took a hammering in their last meeting with India, who posted 356-2 in a match played across two days due to rain. Morkel said the 228-run loss to India has been a good learning experience ahead of the 50-over

showpiece event where they will meet their arch-rivals on October 14. "Those are fantastic learnings for us," said Morkel, who rated Shaheen as "world-class".

"The more tough situations we can face leading into the World Cup, that's brilliant. You know, we're gonna grow from this and then come back stronger."

Critics have pointed at Pakistan's lack of quality spinners, a major drawback on turning Sri Lankan wickets, but Morkel insists the slow

bowlers remain ready to perform. Pakistan made five changes to their team that lost to India with Mohamed Haris, Saud Shakeel, Mohamed Nawaz, Mohamed Wasim and Zaman coming in.

**Pakistan XI:** Mohamed Haris, Imam-ul-Haq, Babar Azam (capt), Mohamed Rizwan (wkt), Saud Shakeel, Iftikhar Ahmed, Shadab Khan (vice-capt), Mohamed Nawaz, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Mohamed Wasim, Zaman Khan.

FOCUS

# Stokes hits England ODI record 182 in win over New Zealand

AFP  
London

Ben Stokes struck the highest score by an England batsman in a one-day international yesterday, his 182 setting up a rout of New Zealand at The Oval and sending a warning to the champions' World Cup rivals just weeks before they begin the defence of their 50-over title in India.

Stokes's stunning innings almost accounted for all of England's 181-run margin of victory as they went 2-1 up in a four-match series ahead of tomorrow's finale at Lord's. England were struggling at 13-2 after Trent Boult's early double strike.

But Stokes and Dawid Malan (96) turned the tide with a third-wicket partnership of 199 as England recovered to 368 all out. Either side of Stokes's remarkable innings, Boult kept New Zealand in the game with an impressive return of 5-51 in 9.1 overs.

England were set for a huge total at 348-5 when Stokes was dismissed. But they lost their last five wickets for 20 runs, left-arm quick Boult wrapping up the innings with 11 balls to spare.

England, however, had more than enough runs, with pacer Chris Woakes (3-31) doing the damage as New Zealand - without regular skipper Kane Williamson while the star batsman completes a pre-World Cup recovery from a knee injury - slumped to 37-4. Glenn Phillips kept England at bay with a 57-ball fifty, but when he was lbw for 72 to spinner Liam Livingstone the Black Caps were all but beaten 173-8. Livingstone (3-16) ended the match with 11 overs to spare when he had last man Ben Lister stumped by England captain Jos Buttler as New Zealand were bowled out for 187.

Earlier, Boult had Jonny

Bairstow caught at deep backward square off the first ball of the match before inducing Joe Root to inside-edge a drive onto his stumps. But Stokes, who only recently reversed his ODI retirement, hit back in stunning fashion. His stunning 124-ball innings, including 15 fours and nine sixes, surpassed Jason Roy's previous England record of 180 against Australia at Melbourne in 2018.

But one worrying sign for England was the familiar sight of Stokes, whose previous ODI top score was 102 not out, occasionally grimacing in pain thanks to a chronic knee problem he hopes to manage all the way through the World Cup. Boult again troubled an England top-order once more missing Roy after the opener suffered a fresh back spasm.

But the returning Malan, who missed England's 79-run win in Southampton on Sunday to attend the birth of his son, responded with a 52-ball fifty as he looked to cement his place in a 15-man World Cup squad. Stokes took 15 runs off a single Lockie Ferguson over, including three fours, despite the fast bowler reaching speeds of 94 mph and also hoisted left-arm spinner Rachin Ravindra for three huge sixes. Malan, fell just shy of what would have been his fifth hundred in 20 ODIs when he got a faint edge to wicket-keeper Latham. Stokes broke Roy's record in style with a six off Lister, only to hole out off the paceman two balls later.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**England 368 all out, 48.1 overs** (B Stokes 182, D Malan 96; T Boult 5-51, B Lister 3-69) **bt New Zealand 187 all out, 39 overs** (G Phillips 72; Livingstone 3-16, C Woakes 3-31)  
**Result:** England won by 181 runs  
**Series:** England lead four-match series 2-1



England's captain Ben Stokes celebrates his century during the third ODI against New Zealand at The Oval in London yesterday. (AFP)

## Naveen back, Naib dropped from Afghanistan World Cup squad

Afghanistan recalled fast bowler **Naveen-ul-Haq** in the 15-man World Cup squad announced yesterday, but all-rounder Gulbadin Naib was dropped despite recent good performance.

Naib, 32, led Afghanistan in the last World Cup held in England four years ago where the team lost all nine matches and he was sacked. But the medium pacer took seven wickets in the last three ODIs, including 4-60 against Bangladesh in the Asia Cup encounter in Lahore last week.

Naveen played the last of his seven ODIs against Ireland in January 2021. Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) said the squad is strong and is expected to do well.

Hashmatullah Shahidi leads the squad that has four changes following a two-match loss in the Asia Cup and a 3-0 series wipe



out against Pakistan in Sri Lanka. Besides Naib, also out are Karim Janat, Sharafuddin Ashraf and Sulliman Safi.

Afghanistan open their 2023 World Cup campaign against

Bangladesh in Dharamsala in India on October 7. Afghanistan will hope their spin quartet of Rashid Khan, Mohamed Nabi, Mujeeb Ur Rahman and Noor Ahmad do well on the spin pitches of India.

**Afghanistan World Cup squad:** Hashmatullah Shahidi (captain), Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Ibrahim Zadran, Riaz Hassan, Rahmat Shah, Najibullah Zadran, Mohamed Nabi, Ikram Alikhil, Azmatullah Omarzai, Rashid Khan, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Noor Ahmad, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Abdul Rahman, Naveen-ul-Haq

**Bangladesh's Mushfiqur to miss India match in Asia Cup**  
Bangladeshi batsman Mushfiqur Rahim will skip tomorrow's Asia Cup Super Four match against India to spend time with his wife and newborn daughter, the cricket board said. Bangladesh is already

out of the race for the September 17 final after India defeated Sri Lanka by 41 runs in Colombo on Tuesday, in the tournament that is a prelude to the upcoming ODI World Cup in India.

Mushfiqur had returned to Bangladesh for the birth of his second child, born on Monday. He was initially expected to rejoin the team for the India match in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo. He will now remain in Dhaka, the Bangladesh Cricket Board said.

Skipper Shakib Al Hasan, who also returned home with Mushfiqur after their defeat against Sri Lanka on September 9, rejoined the team in Colombo yesterday.

They will wrap up the campaign with the India game, before preparing for a three-match series against New Zealand at home next week. (AFP)

TENNIS

# France off to a flyer as Davis Cup group stage finals begin

'I wasn't expecting such a small crowd, it was almost cold out on court'

AFP  
Paris

France swept aside Switzerland and Chile crushed Sweden as the Davis Cup group stage finals got underway on Tuesday. Serbia, with Sunday's US Open champion Novak Djokovic taking a well-earned breather, were equally emphatic winners over South Korea while the Netherlands felled Finland 2-1.

The top two from each of the 16-team four group round robin will move into the knockout phase in Spain in November.

And 10-time previous titleholders France made the best possible start to their Group B campaign in Manchester.

In front of massed ranks of empty seats – as the home crowd awaited the arrival on court of Andy Murray and his Great Britain team's clash with Australia – France gave Switzerland short shrift.

Adrian Mannarino got the ball rolling for Sebastien Grosjean's team, despatching 21-year-old Dominick Stricker who made the last 16 at the US Open at Flushing Meadows, in three sets, 3-6, 6-1, 6-4.

Making reference to the near-deserted arena Mannarino said: "I wasn't expecting such a small crowd, it was almost cold out on court!"

Ugo Humbert made it 2-0 for the French when beating Stan Wawrinka, 38, who delivered the Davis Cup for Switzerland alongside Roger Federer in 2014, 6-4, 6-4, saving a match point before succumbing.

Earlier Warwinka had also drawn attention to the sparse turnout, poking fun at the former organisers of the Davis Cup, ex-footballer Gerard Pique's Kosmos company.

The three-time Grand Slam champion played in Switzerland's 2014 triumph, when they beat France in the final, under the old format of knock-out ties played home and away.

Kosmos changed the tournament format in 2019 to include a group stage which is now played in several cities across Europe. It has been widely criticised for late finishes and smaller crowds.

"Thank you Gerard Pique and the ITF!... lol!" Wawrinka posted on social media, along with a video showing the largely empty Manchester Arena.

The French wrapped up their 3-0 win in the doubles with Nicolas Mahut and Davis Cup



France's Adrian Mannarino reacts as he plays against Switzerland's Dominic Stricker during their Davis Cup finals Group B match at the AO Arena in Manchester yesterday. (AFP)

debutant Edouard Roger-Vasselin seeing off Wawrinka and Marc-Andrea Huesler 6-2, 6-2.

"It's the best way to start the competition," said captain Grosjean.

"We have a day to prepare for (28-time winners) Australia – we're going to watch the matches tomorrow and then give 100 percent," he added.

In Bologna, Chile made an early statement in a Group A which includes reigning champions Canada and hosts Italy.

Christian Garin was made to sweat for his opening 7-6 (8/6), 3-6, 7-5 win over Leo Borg, the 20-year-old son of the legendary Bjorn Borg.

Nicolas Jarry had an easier time of it sending Elias Ymer packing with the loss of only six games before Marcelo Tomas Barrios and Alejandro Tabilo took the closing doubles 6-4, 7-5.

For Jarry this was the latest high in what has

been a "rollercoaster" few weeks. Last month he had to pull out of Cincinnati to attend the birth of his second child.

He then flew to New York for the US Open, returned home after losing in the third round, before flying to Bologna, arriving with his luggage missing.

"I'm very happy, very emotional, a rollercoaster of things happening, travel and beautiful things," he smiled.

With Djokovic sitting out the group phase Serbia relied on Dusan Lajovic and Laslo Djere in the singles and doubles pairing Nikola Cacic and Miomir Kecmanovic to sweep past South Korea 3-0 in Valencia.

In Split, Finland's Otto Virtanen won the opening singles but the Dutch fought back with Tallon Griekspoor levelling and Wesley Koolhof and Matwe Middelkoop completing a tense win in the closing doubles.

CYCLING

# American Kuss clings on to Vuelta lead on Queen stage

AFP  
Alto de l'Angliru, Spain

Sepp Kuss emerged from mountain mists clinging stubbornly to the Vuelta a Espana lead by eight seconds yesterday as his teammate Primož Roglic won the stage with another Jumbo rider Jonas Vingegaard finishing second.

Tour de France champion Vingegaard remains second overall but closed the gap on Kuss from 29 to eight seconds on a day of utter dominance by the Dutch team.

Kuss is now in an unexpected position to win the Vuelta, but must survive the ascent of three peaks on stage 18, and a series of rolling hills on stage 20.

His chief threat is his team leader Vingegaard, who says he would love Kuss to win the race.

"We wanted to win the stage and keep the 1-2-3 in the overall," said the pale and slender Dane. "I'm happy Sepp is in the jersey and I'd love to see him win this Vuelta."

With two ascents of the Puerto de la Cruz de Linares on stage 18 the most likely location of any final change Kuss was cool and cheerful at the mountaintop finish in Asturias.

"I came here with no expectations and was just looking to help out the guys like always. Then I came into this beautiful jersey and I discovered a new

level of self-confidence and racing instinct," said the willowy climber who took the overall lead on stage eight.

The final climb up the Angliru mountain was 12km at around 10 per cent with visibility limited by fog and clouds where Jumbo's rivals dropped off the pace one by one.

Defending champion Remco Evenepoel made a go of it and joined an early escape and attacked from there, but was caught before the final reckoning. Evenepoel retains the king of the mountains jersey on 91pts from Vingegaard's 51.

Roglic is third overall at 1min 08sec with Team UAE Emirates rider Juan Ayuso fourth but four minutes off Kuss' pace, while Mikel Landa is up to fifth from seventh. The Slovenian Roglic won the Giro in May and after Vingegaard stormed the Tour de France in July Jumbo now look unstoppable in their bid to become the first team to win all three Grand Tours with different riders in a single season.

Team boss Grigori Niermann said after the stage: "I think everyone would like to have Sepp in the lead and he's still in the lead, but they also want to win the stage and we agreed that everybody is allowed to go for it."

The 3,153.8 kilometre race started with a team time trial in Barcelona on August 26 and ends in Madrid on Sunday after 21 stages.



Overall leader Team Jumbo-Visma's US rider Sepp Kuss crosses the finish line in third place followed by Team Bahrain's Spanish rider Mikel Landa (right) during the stage 17 of the La Vuelta in Alto de l'Angliru yesterday. (AFP)

## Chinese athletes must 'improve political awareness' at Asian Games

Chinese athletes must "improve their political awareness" and "be good hosts" when the Asian Games start next week in Hangzhou, the country's top sports official has said. The Games open on September 23 after a year's delay because of Covid and the hosts will expect to Hoover up the medals, having topped the table at every edition of the competition since 1982. For China's ruling Communist Party it is an opportunity to showcase the country's sporting, organisational and technological prowess, having been largely closed off during the pandemic. The home nation will have 886 athletes in action, among them 36 Olympic champions. "All delegation members must improve their political awareness and firmly remember the great causes of the nation," General Administration of Sport director Gao Zhidan told athletes in Beijing on Tuesday. (AFP)

## SWIATEK PULLS OUT OF GUADALAJARA

Iga Swiatek has withdrawn from the penultimate WTA 1000 event of the season in Guadalajara this month to stay fit for the rest of an "intense" season, the world number two said yesterday. The 22-year-old Pole was beaten by Jelena Ostapenko in the US Open fourth round last week, a defeat which meant Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus took over as the top-ranked player. Swiatek had said she needed a reset after her

75-week run as world number one came to an end. "Unfortunately I need to withdraw from the tournament in Guadalajara due to a change of schedule," Swiatek posted on social media platform X. "I need to listen to my body and the season is very intense - our number one priority is to play it until the end in good health and plan it wisely so we wouldn't risk an injury."

French Open champion Swiatek, who was set to make her debut in the September 17-23 Guadalajara tournament, said she would return to action in Tokyo at the start of next month. US Open champion Coco Gauff, defending Guadalajara champion Jessica Pegula, 2022 runner-up Maria Sakkari and Tunisia's Ons Jabeur have all entered the Mexico event. (Reuters)

GOLF

# Johnson ready for blame if US should fall at Ryder Cup

AFP  
San Francisco

US Ryder Cup captain Zach Johnson said he is ready to handle criticism if the Americans lose to Europe in two weeks at Italy after a dominating 2021 triumph.

Seeing the disappointment over a fourth-place finish by US NBA stars at the Basketball World Cup, Johnson accepts he might pay a price if the Americans cannot snap a 30-year win drought on European soil.

"I've thought about it," Johnson said. "I kind of know what I'm signing up for. That being said, I didn't know all of what was going to be shot at me. There's no way to really know that."

"All the arrows, some of them you just deflect and some of them you've got to veer and just try to navigate what you can. I don't mind it."

"I love responsibility, I love difficulty, I love being pushed and somewhat being uncomfortable if that makes sense."

Johnson said full credit for victory should go to his 12-man team but he accepts his share of blame for a defeat.

"If we lose this, there's probably some merit some of that can go on me," Johnson said. "I fully accept that, that's what I signed up for."

"I hope that's not the case but



I'm at peace with whatever comes my way."

Johnson spoke ahead of the PGA Tour's Fortinet Championship, which starts Thursday at Napa, California.

Two-time defending Fortinet champion Max Homa and two-time major winner Justin Thomas from the US squad will compete in the field.

Thomas, a controversial captain's pick without a top-eight finish in seven months, has not played in six weeks after missing the FedEx Cup playoffs.

Homa went 4-0 in the 2022 Presidents Cup the week after a Napa triumph.

"Ideally they get some momentum. Momentum in this game is pretty lethal and can be a really good thing," Johnson said.

"I'm not going to give their scorecard a whole lot of merit when it comes to what we're trying to do two weeks from now."

"Four days of stroke play is vastly different than five sessions of match play in three days."

Most of the US team visited the Marco Simone host course near Rome last week for a sneak peek at the challenging layout they will face.

"When we get there, they don't have to force it and push themselves to get their feet on the grounds that much because they already know what to expect," Johnson said.

US vice captain Stewart Cink said the layout will be so difficult that some players won't mind sitting out certain foursomes or four-ball sessions.

"It's so hilly and the temperature could be pretty hot, too," Cink said.

"I think guys are going to be happy to probably rest. There's not going to be a lot of disappointment for not playing."

"It's probably the most demanding physically of any Cup course I've ever seen that I've been a part of."

Johnson has already started putting together possible pairings for the US squad.

"We're starting to get into some possible pairings to see what's best for that golf course and for our team," Johnson said. "It's not like we have it set in stone yet."

"It's one of those areas that's really difficult, but it's also really exciting and fun to start to see how this team can take shape."

## MCILROY HAILS 'INCREDIBLE' ABERG

Rory McIlroy says he is at the front of the Ludvig Aberg "bandwagon" as the rising star prepares to make his Ryder Cup debut later this month. Aberg was hailed as a generational talent by Europe captain Luke Donald after he gave the 23-year-old Swede one of his six wild cards for the upcoming contest against the United States. The former world number one amateur only turned professional in June but won the final qualifying event in Switzerland and will make the quickest transition from the amateur ranks to the Ryder Cup in the contest's history. Four-time major winner McIlroy, in the field for this week's BMW PGA Championship at Wentworth, said he had played alongside Aberg in practice at the Ryder Cup venue, near Rome, this week. World number two McIlroy teamed up with Tommy Fleetwood, losing to Aberg and Viktor Hovland.

"I had an opportunity to play with Ludvig for the first time on Monday, which I was excited about," he said. "I told him I've been looking forward to this for a while."

Asked if Aberg had lived up to his expectations, McIlroy added: "Probably exceeded them. Everyone talks about what a great driver of the golf ball he is, which he is."

"The ball-striking is incredible. But I was really impressed with his wedge play and how he can sort of control his trajectory with shorter clubs. I was on the bandwagon before and I'm certainly at the front of it now."

McIlroy partnered Shane Lowry and Ian Poulter, twice, in the last Ryder Cup at Whistling Straits in 2021, but lost all three matches. He beat Xander Schauffele in the opening singles

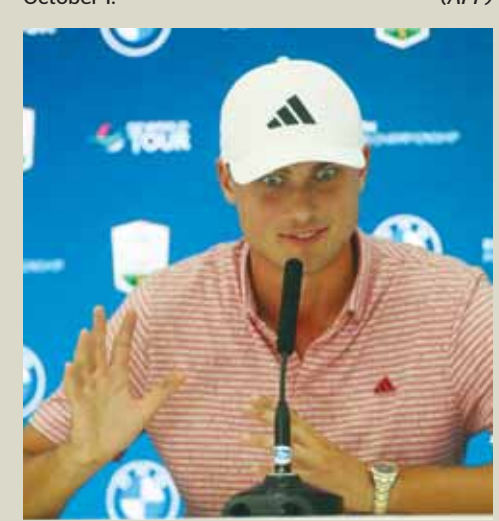
on the final day but Europe crashed to a humiliating 19-9 defeat.

The 34-year-old, who was left out of a session for the first time since making his debut in 2010, talked of the pain of the defeat.

"We're not used to playing for other people in this game, and you go out there and you're playing for your team-mates, you want to do well for them," he said.

"I felt like I didn't do that and I felt like I didn't give a good account of myself and that stung and the scoreline stung."

The Ryder Cup takes place at the Marco Simone Golf and Country Club from September 29 to October 1. (AFP)



## WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

# Argentina triumph without Messi, Brazil grab late win

Bielsa's Uruguay give up the lead to end with a 2-1 loss at Ecuador

AFP  
Montevideo

World champions Argentina rested Lionel Messi but still shined in a 3-0 victory over 10-man Bolivia in La Paz on Tuesday to maintain their winning start to South American World Cup qualifying. Brazil also have the maximum six points from two games after a superb 90th-minute winner from Marquinhos against Peru in Lima for the only goal of the match.

But Marcelo Bielsa's Uruguay suffered a setback, giving up the lead to end with a 2-1 defeat at Ecuador. Messi, who has had a hectic schedule with his club Inter Miami, watched his teammates from the bench but was not listed as a substitute, having complained of tiredness after scoring the winner in Thursday's 1-0 victory over Ecuador.

Despite the absence of their talisman Lionel Scaloni's side had too much firepower for Bolivia with goals from Enzo Fernandez, Nicolas Tagliafico and Nicolas Gonzalez securing an impressive victory. Chelsea midfielder Fernandez went close with a wonderful effort from 30 yards out superbly saved by Guillermo Viscarra, who then did well again to keep out a near-post drive from Julian Alvarez.

The lively Alvarez had a hand in Argentina's opener in the 31st minute, feeding Angel Di Maria, whose low cross was turned in by Fernandez, who had made a perfectly timed run into the box. Eight minutes later Bolivia's task got even tougher when Roberto Fernandez was sent off for an over-the-top challenge on Cristian Romero.

Argentina went in at the break with a 2-0 lead after Tagliafico met a floated Di Maria free-kick with a header that looped over Viscarra. The three-time World Cup winners were in total control after the break with Alvarez hitting the post in the 70th minute and Viscarra kept busy by efforts from Rodrigo De Paul and Di Maria. Gonzalez wrapped up the victory seven minutes from the end with a left-footed drive after more hesitant defending from the home side, who have lost both their



Bolivia's midfielder Moises Villarroel (left) fights for the ball with Argentina's forward Angel Di Maria during the 2026 FIFA World Cup South American qualifiers at the Hernando Siles stadium in La Paz. (AFP)

opening games.

Scaloni was pleased with the performance by his team, saying they were "not afraid to play with the ball" and also offered an explanation for Messi's absence. "Leo was not ready to play, he tried to recover, but he did not feel comfortable," he said.

Brazil came up against a determined Peru side and looked set to be frustrated when Raphinha's rocket in the 72nd minute was brilliantly saved by Pedro Gallese. But in the final minute Neymar whipped in a corner and Marquinhos met it with a masterful glancing header that flashed into the far corner.

Colombia had to settle for a point in a disappointing goalless draw in Santiago, Chile. With Alexis Sanchez back in the starting line-up, Chile had the better of the game, playing some intelligent football in possession but like their opponents they lacked a cutting

edge. After an impressive start to his reign in charge of Uruguay, Argentine Bielsa saw his team lose to two goals from Ecuador defender Felix Torres in Quito.

Uruguay took the lead in the 38th minute through Agustin Canobbio but the home side levelled just before the break when Torres rose to power home a header from a Moises Caicedo cross. A penalty award gave Ecuador the opportunity to take the lead after the break but Enner Valencia's woeful effort from the spot flew wide. But Torres showed his value again to grab the winner, sliding into a crowded box to turn in a low cross from 16-year-old Kendry Paez.

Venezuela defeated Paraguay 1-0 at home thanks to Salomon Rondon's injury-time penalty to raise hopes of making the World Cup for the first time in their history. The hosts thought they had the lead in the 78th minute when

Yangel Herrera fired home, but the referee's review at the monitor concluded that the midfielder had handled the ball - to the fury of the home crowd.

But the technology worked in Venezuela's favour in stoppage time when it spotted that Paraguay defender Ivan Piris had handled during an aerial challenge in the box and Rondon confidently tucked away the spot-kick. The qualification process for the expanded 48-team World Cup, to be held in the United States, Canada and Mexico, offers two extra places for South America with six teams qualifying directly.

The seventh out of the 10 nations will head to an inter-continental play-off. After the opening two rounds Brazil lead Argentina on goal difference with Colombia third on four points, one ahead of Uruguay and Venezuela. Paraguay, Peru and Chile have a point each.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Spain, Italy step up chase of runaway Euro leaders

AFP  
Paris

Spain crashed in six in Euro 2024 qualifying on Tuesday night while Belgium were also big winners as Italy revived their campaign and Austria and Switzerland stayed on course for qualification. Substitute Ferran Torres struck twice for Spain, while Gavi, Mikel Merino, Joselu and debutant Alex Baena were also on target as they beat Cyprus 6-0 in Granada. Spain closed to six points behind runaway Group A leaders Scotland with a game in hand. The two teams meet in the next round in Seville on October 12 "Our objective is clear - win the rest of the games," coach Luis De la Fuente said. "We want to finish top of the group."

Norway kept alive their faint chance of catching either Scotland or Spain while ending Georgia's hopes of qualifying with a 2-1 victory in Oslo. Erling Haaland gave Norway the lead with his seventh goal in five competitive matches this season and his 25th in 26 internationals. Martin Odegaard added a second before Budu Zivzivadze responded deep in added time.

Davide Frattesi ensured that Italy got their Euro 2024 qualifying campaign back on track with a brace in an entertaining 2-1 win over Ukraine which moved the Azzurri second in Group C. Inter Milan midfielder Frattesi rifled in two low finishes in the first half-an-hour at the San Siro to give Luciano Spalletti his first success on his home debut as coach of the European champions.

Italy moved level on seven points with Ukraine, who scored through captain Andriy Yarmolenko four minutes before half-time, and North Macedonia. Italy occupy the second of two automatic qualifying places on head-to-head record between those three teams, six points behind England who have played a game more. "We need to be happy," said Spalletti. "The team played good football and was well-organised on the pitch."

Ukraine drew with England on

Saturday. "It was hard for us to play so soon after playing against England," said Ukraine coach Serhiy Rebrov. Next month Italy face Malta in Bari before travelling to Wembley, the site of their triumph at the last Euro, to take on England.

Belgium leapfrogged Austria at the top of Group F on goal difference even though both sides won. Romelu Lukaku scored twice as Belgium crushed Estonia 5-0 in Brussels while Austria, facing a much trickier trip to Solna, beat Sweden 3-1. "A perfect night: 5-0, clean sheet. A goal, my 150th game," said veteran Belgium defender Jan Vertonghen who opened the scoring "We have many players who are no longer part of the national team," the 36-year-old added. "I didn't feel ready for that yet."

In Sweden, Austria scored three times in 16 second-half minutes. Michael Gregoritsch hit the first and Marko Arnautovic the next two before Emil Holm replied in the 90th minute. The top two have a seven-point cushion over Sweden. "Now we can breathe a bit," said Austria coach Ralf Rangnick.

Switzerland stayed top of Group I after making hard work of a 3-0 victory of last-place Andorra. Cedric Itten gave the hosts a 49th minute lead in Sion. Granit Xhaka, in the 84th minute, and Xherdan Shaqiri with a penalty deep in added time, gave a little polish to the final score.

Romania stayed two points behind in second after they beat Kosovo 2-0 in Bucharest in a game delayed after home fans unfurled an anti-Kosovo banner in the first half. Even though the visitors played with 10 men from the 42nd minute when striker Verdat Muriqi was sent off, the hosts did not take the lead until captain Nicolai Stanciu, who had earlier missed a penalty, scored with seven minutes left. Valentin Mihailescu added a second deep into added time.

Israel left it later, Gabi Kanielchowsky scoring the only goal as they beat Belarus 1-0 in Tel Aviv in the third minute of added time to keep Israel a point behind Romania.



Italy's midfielder Davide Frattesi (centre) celebrates after scoring against Ukraine during the Euro 2024 Group C qualifying match at Stadio San Siro in Milan on Tuesday. (AFP)

## Santos sacked as Poland coach after only eight months

**Warsaw:** The Polish football federation yesterday fired their national coach Fernando Santos just eight months into his tenure with the team struggling to qualify for the Euro 2024 finals. Poland lost 2-0 to Albania at the weekend to leave them fourth in Euro 2024 qualifying Group E with only the top two guaranteed to play in the finals.

Santos left his job as coach of his native Portugal after 10 years at the helm in December and took over the Poland position in January. The 68-year-old also managed the Greece national team from 2010-2014.

### RECORD-SETTING ANDORRA CAPTAIN LIMA RETIRES AFTER 26-YEAR CAREER

Andorra's most-capped player and top goalscorer Idefons Lima has retired to end the longest career in men's international football.

The 43-year-old defender started as captain in Andorra's 3-0 loss to Switzerland in a Euro 2024 qualifier in Sion on Tuesday and came off after 23 minutes with the game still goalless.

He made his international debut at the age of 17 and became the record holder for longest men's international career in 2022, eclipsing Welsh great Billy Meredith, whose first and last international caps were one day short of 25 years apart. Former Brazil women's player Formiga holds the record for longest international career between 1995 and 2021.

Lima is also Andorra's top scorer with 11 goals. His 137 caps included more than 100 defeats and six wins. Andorra played their first international in November 1996. Lima made his international debut the following June.

At club level, Lima started at FC Andorra, who he rejoined last year. In between he had

spells in the lower divisions in Spain, Italy and Greece and in the top flight in both Mexico and Switzerland.

### RICHARLISON TO SEEK PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP ON RETURN TO ENGLAND

Tottenham Hotspur's misfiring forward Richarlison said he will seek psychological help on his return to England after shedding tears when he was substituted during Brazil's 5-1 thrashing of Bolivia last Friday. The 26-year-old Brazilian was photographed crying on the bench after being taken off 71 minutes into the 2026 World Cup qualifier in Belem.

The striker, who has scored only four goals in 40 games for his Premier League side, told Brazilian newspaper *O Globo* that he had been through a "turbulent time off the pitch" over the last five months but the storm had passed.

## BOTTOMLINE

## 'Emotional release' as Germany beat France but questions remain



Germany's Leroy Sane (right) scores past France's goalkeeper Mike Maignan during a friendly in Dortmund, western Germany. (AFP)

AFP  
Dortmund, Germany

Despite responding to coach Hansi Flick's sacking with a 2-1 victory over neighbours France in Dortmund on Tuesday, pressing questions remain for Euro 2024 hosts Germany. Usually a bitter rivalry between two of Europe's proudest footballing nations with six World Cups and five European Championships between them, France did not bring their usual intensity to Tuesday's friendly. Manager Didier Deschamps made six changes from their last outing, a 2-0 win over Ireland, including benching star striker Kylian Mbappe.

With France trailing 1-0 for most of the second half, Deschamps left

Mbappe on the bench as his side chased the game, the manager later revealing "we didn't want to risk him in this game".

The France manager admitted his changes were made with the future in mind, including leading the line with Randal Kolo Muani who "hasn't played for a while, hasn't trained (and) isn't in top form right now". Calling Flick's caretaker successor Rudi Voeller a "unique and rare coach", Deschamps congratulated his "old friend", telling reporters "I'm not happy we lost, but nevertheless I'm happy for him."

Immediately after the game, interim coach Voeller described the win, Germany's first since March and only the second since the disappointing group stage exit at the Qatar World Cup, as an "emotional release". "What I liked most was

that we brought good energy onto the field", telling the post-match press conference "it's not just about the result, but the style and manner of the performance".

Veteran Germany striker Thomas Mueller, who was named in the starting XI for the first time since Qatar, scored after just four minutes. The 2014 World Cup winner said the win was an "emotional liberation" for his side, but said "it was fun, but we don't need to overstate it - we still have a long way to go".

First point of call for Germany will be to find a manager, with interim boss Voeller reaffirming his commitment to step down as coach after the game. Voeller, who last coached at any level in 2005, again shut down speculation he may stay in the top job, saying af-

ter the match "ideally we'll have it done before the next international break" while revealing hiring a German speaker was a priority.

Voeller said he had spoken with Flick before the match and was full of praise for his predecessor, particularly for selecting Brighton's Pascal Gross, who made his debut in Germany colours at the age of 32. Gross came on midway through the first half due to an injury to captain Ilkay Gundogan and Voeller said "he had a wonderful game". "It was his idea and a wonderful decision to invite Pascal Gross, who many didn't know at all."

Germany, who qualified for Euro 2024 as hosts, will not play until fixtures against the USA and Mexico on October's American tour, where there will surely be a new figure in the dugout.