

also takes into consideration the expansion of existing roles and introduction of new positions, which include Video Match Officials. A dynamic, extensive and specially curated preparatory programme spanning more than four years has been implemented to ensure Asia's top officials meet the demands of the modern game. The appointed referees will gather in Kuala Lumpur in October for a final seminar before all appointed match officials assemble in Qatar for a seven-day preparatory course prior to the competition. Additionally, more than 20 seminars and workshops have been organised to ensure the highest standards of consistency and uniformity across all levels since the conclusion of the 2019 edition.



ASIA CUP

# Sri Lanka stun Pakistan, to play against India in final

Asalanka scored 49 in 47 and took the Lankans over the line in a match that swung both ways

AFP  
Colombo

Kusal Mendis' 91 and an unbeaten 49 by Charith Asalanka helped Sri Lanka edged out Pakistan by two wickets in a last-ball thriller of the Asia Cup to set up a final clash with India.

Chasing a DLS revised target of 252 in the 42-overs-a-side contest in Colombo, Sri Lanka needed eight from the final over and achieved the target with Asalanka's winning hit on the last ball at 1.07am local time.

A raucous home crowd rejoiced but the result broke the heart of millions of fans awaiting an India-Pakistan final in the 50-over tournament, a prelude to the upcoming ODI World Cup.

The left-handed Asalanka held his nerve despite Shaheen Shah Afridi's two wickets in two balls in the penultimate over and the first four balls from Zaman Khan giving away just two runs and a wicket in the 42nd over.

Mendis set up victory with a 100-run third-wicket stand with Sadeera Samarawickrama, who made 48, but Asalanka took it on himself after their departure.

Off-spinner Iftikhar Ahmed took three key wickets including Mendis and Samarawickrama to keep the game in the balance till the last.

Earlier Mohamed Rizwan hit an unbeaten 86 to steer Pakistan to 252-7 after they elected to bat first in the rain delayed start to the match. Sri Lanka's bowlers took regular early wickets to check Pakistan's scoring, but Rizwan hit back with his 12th ODI half-century and a 108-run stand with Iftikhar, who made 47.

Fast bowler Pramod Madushan

struck first as he bowled Fakhar Zaman for four with a yorker that raised the decibels in the ground.

Abdullah Shafique (52) and skipper Babar Azam (29) then rebuilt the innings in their stand of 63 despite surviving a few close calls including an lbw review off Dumith Wellalage.

Azam looked to be getting into his groove with a few boundaries but was stumped off Wellalage, a left-arm spinner who was Sri Lanka's star in their previous loss to India with 5-40.

Shafique stood strong and hit two sixes en route to his maiden ODI fifty but soon fell to fast bowler Matheesha Pathirana, who quickly struck again.

Pakistan returned from a rain break on 130-5 with Rizwan digging deep and he got support from Iftikhar, who took his time to get his rhythm and hit two sixes in his 40-ball knock.

Pathirana sent back Iftikhar for his third wicket and Madushan took one more scalp of his own late on, but Rizwan remained unbeaten and finished with a boundary.

## BRIEF SCORES

**Pakistan 252-7 in 42 overs** (Mohamed Rizwan 86 not out, Abdullah Shafique 52, Iftikhar Ahmed 47; M. Pathirana 3-65) **lost to Sri Lanka 252-8** (K. Mendis 91, S. Samarawickrama 48, C. Asalanka 49 not out; S. Shah Afridi 2-52, S. Khan 1-55, I. Ahmed 3-50) **by two wickets.** **Playing today:** India v Bangladesh, Colombo.

Sri Lanka's Charith Asalanka (right) and Dhananjaya de Silva during the Asia Cup 2023 Super Four match against Pakistan at the R. Premadasa Stadium in Colombo. (AFP)



## New Zealand hope to avoid another Stokes masterclass at World Cup

**London:** New Zealand coach Gary Stead hopes Ben Stokes will not produce another batting masterclass against the Black Caps at next month's World Cup after the England all-rounder's record-breaking knock at The Oval.

Stokes hammered a 124-ball 182 on Wednesday to record England's highest individual score in the 50-overs format and drive his team to a rollicking 181-run victory in the third ODI.

Champions England will meet New Zealand in the opener of the one-day World Cup in India on October 5, a repeat of the 2019 final.

Asked whether he was sick of the sight of New Zealand-born Stokes, Stead told reporters he hoped his bowlers had seen the best of him. "Ben Stokes played an amazing innings, Eng-

land's best," he said. "That was pretty special to watch.

"I don't mind Ben Stokes. I'd rather he score them now than on October 5."

England have taken a 2-1 lead in the see-sawing, four-match series after the teams split the T20 series 2-2.

Though Stokes dominated Wednesday's match, fast bowler Trent Boult's form since his return to action has been hugely encouraging for New Zealand.

He took 5-51, removing opener Jonny Bairstow for a duck and Joe Root for four to leave England 13 for two in the third over before Stokes and opener Dawid Malan (96) took over with a 199-run partnership.

The New Zealand spearhead has eight wickets from his two matches in the ODI series.

"It's great to have Trent back. He brings a lot of energy, a lot of skill," said Stead.

"It's just a pity we haven't been able to capitalise on those starts."

Stead also played down an injury to spin-bowling all-rounder Mitch Santner, who missed the match with knee soreness after a fielding mishap in the second ODI in Southampton.

"Mitch had a bit of a scan on his knee ... But it's come back positively, which is good for us.

"He's just got quite a bit of swelling around the knee still which they think is a joint problem. So it's nothing more than that."

(AFP)

## SPOTLIGHT

# Cricket Australia makes neck guards mandatory against pace bowlers

AFP  
Sydney

Australian batters will have to wear neck protectors on their helmets when facing fast or medium-pace bowlers for the 2023/24 season, Cricket Australia announced yesterday.

The governing body has recommended neck guards be used since Australian batsman Philip Hughes was killed after a bouncer hit him in the neck during a game in Sydney in 2014.

Stars such as Usman Khawaja, Steve Smith and David Warner had resisted wearing them but neck protectors will be mandatory in men's and women's matches when the new season starts in early October, Cricket

Australia said. "Protecting the head and neck is extremely important in our sport," Cricket Australia's head of operations Peter Roach said in a statement.

He said the decision was based on "a lot of advice and consultation with a wide range of experts and stakeholders".

The decision comes a week after Australian all-rounder Cameron Green had to leave the field with concussion after a bouncer hit the side of his helmet during his team's win over South Africa in a one-day international match.

Other changes announced included the scrapping of six runs being awarded automatically during Big Bash League matches to batters who hit the roof of Melbourne's Docklands Stadium.

## FOCUS

# Maharaj bouncing back to World Cup after horror injury

Reuters  
Pretoria

South Africa spinner Keshav Maharaj had little hope of competing at the World Cup in India when he first came out of surgery in March after rupturing his Achilles tendon, but he is now heading to next month's tournament with renewed confidence.

The 33-year-old suffered the injury while celebrating a wicket in a test against the West Indies in Johannesburg and had to be taken off the pitch on a stretcher.

"After I came out of surgery, I said I must I give myself every chance, but when you see how slow the initial phases of rehab are, you have negative thoughts," he told reporters yesterday.

"Three or four months after surgery I wouldn't have said I would have gotten here, but with my medical team we plotted the journey and they gave me the best chance."

Maharaj returned to the side for the on-going One Day International series against Australia, and has played in two of the three matches as both countries prepare for India. "I put my head down and sacrificed a lot, from a diet

point of view, from a rehab point of view, from a recovery point of view, making sure I was getting eight to 10 hours of sleep every night.

"I might not have got there but it was about giving yourself the best chance to get back to a place where you feel you belong.

"My forefathers are from India so I want to go back there and try to do something special for my country. That was the motivation that I needed.

"The 50-over format is very hard on the body but that's something I wanted to experience. I always like to challenge myself."

Maharaj was still in a 'moon boot' hobbling around four months after surgery.

"Then at five months, I started to believe once I started to run again. That's when I realised that dream is a reality and we can push (to be fit)."

Maharaj was one of the stars on Tuesday as South Africa beat Australia by 111 runs in Potchefstroom to reduce the deficit in the series to 2-1. "There's obviously some room for improvement but it's building up towards something. The main thing is that I can execute my skills," he added.

The fourth ODI will be played in Pretoria today.



South Africa's Keshav Maharaj delivers a ball during the third match against Australia at Senwes Park in Potchefstroom. (AFP)

## STOKES SAYS HE ALWAYS PLANNED TO PLAY AT WORLD CUP

**London:** England all-rounder Ben Stokes said he knew during the Ashes series that he was going to reverse his decision to retire from one-day cricket in time for next month's World Cup, and that he had ruled out a comeback to throw the media off the scent.

The talismanic 32-year-old, the architect of England's maiden 50-overs World Cup triumph in 2019, announced his shock ODI retirement last year citing his heavy workload.

As speculation that he might return to the format for England's title defence swirled during the Ashes in June and July, Stokes quashed talk of a possible return to the ODI squad, citing a nagging knee injury. However, he returned to the England set-up last month ahead of their World Cup title defence in India, and gave another example of his explosive batting in the third ODI against New Zealand on Wednesday, smashing 182 off 124 balls.

"Obviously I've been asked a lot about my knee over a long period of time, so I just said that to leave it," Stokes said of his previous comments about the possibility of an ODI return.

"I knew that I'd be playing in these games and potentially in the World Cup then when I said that, but it was just the easiest thing to say that and put you (the media) off the radar."

England have agreed to play him as a specialist batter, preferably at number four, and he said the clarity about his role helped him bat with more freedom.

"This is the first time that I've been clear in my mind that that's the one thing I can focus on," Stokes said.

"I think over the last 18 months, every day has been, 'will I bowl, will I not bowl?' Now, I know that I can just focus on that ... Having that clarity in my head contributes to that." England take on New Zealand in the final ODI at Lord's today.

(AFP)



CYCLING

# Kuss close to Vuelta victory, Evenepoel claims stage 18

‘IT’S GETTING CLOSER AND TODAY WAS ANOTHER IMPORTANT DAY’

Reuters  
Madrid

Belgium’s Remco Evenepoel claimed his third victory in this year’s Vuelta a Espana with a solo attack on a mountainous stage 18 and Jumbo-Visma’s Sepp Kuss moved a step closer to winning his first Grand Tour yesterday.

Evenepoel blasted out of a breakaway group on the first of two climbs of the Puerto de La Cruz de Linares late in the 179km ride from Pola de Allande and was in a class of his own.

The peloton, featuring the Jumbo-Visma trio of Kuss, Jonas Vingegaard and Primož Roglic finished nearly 10 minutes back with Kuss emerging still in the maillot rojo after surviving the last big day in the mountains unscathed.

American Kuss, who was shepherded through the dramatic Asturian landscape by his illustrious teammates, even extended his lead over Tour de France champion Vingegaard to 17 seconds and is just over one minute ahead of Giro d’Italia champion Roglic with both of them now acting as ‘super domestiques’.

With a flat stage today followed by a demanding penultimate stage tomorrow, Kuss is now favourite to retain the red jersey all the way to Madrid and with the Jumbo-Visma trio well clear of the field, the Dutch outfit look certain to become the first team to win all three Grand Tours in a year.

“It’s getting closer and today was another important day,” Kuss said. “I knew I had to be really concentrated and put in a good performance to stay in the jersey.” Evenepoel’s hopes of fighting



Team Jumbo-Visma’s US rider Sepp Kuss wearing the overall leader’s red jersey celebrates on the podium after stage 18 of the 2023 La Vuelta cycling tour of Spain, a 178.9km race between Pola de Allande and Puerto de La Cruz de Linares, yesterday. (AFP)

the Jumbo-Visma riders for the overall title evaporated on stage 13 when he was dropped on the Col d’Aubisque and lost 27 minutes.

But the 2022 champion has bounced back in stunning fashion by winning stage 14 and now soloing to victory on Thursday for what was the 50th professional win of his career.

“The legs were super good today and I was the strongest in the breakaway group so I just had to go for it today,” Evenepoel told Eurosport after wrapping up the king of the mountains title. “It was an amazing stage to win again.” He finished four minutes and 44

seconds ahead of Italy’s Damiano Caruso (Bahrain Victorious) and 5:10 ahead of Denmark’s Andreas Kron (Lotto Dstny) who came third.

“It was a super good opportunity to take the points for my jersey – I took all the points – and my third stage win is amazing to end the Vuelta with.”

Kuss had looked vulnerable to attacks from his own teammates in the past week but the American now has Vingegaard and Roglic effectively working for him with both of them appearing more than happy to do so.

He even put in a late kick to

cover an acceleration by fourth-placed overall Juan Ayuso (UAE Team Emirates) and Enric Mas (Movistar) to open up a bigger gap on Vingegaard.

Provided he avoids any mishaps today and tomorrow, Kuss will be a popular champion in Madrid.

Vingegaard, who has been helped often by Kuss, warned that there is still a tough stage tomorrow and that the team needed to keep fighting.

“It’s sure nice to be able to pay Sepp back,” the Dane said. “He has done so much for me and Primož. Saturday is a tough long stage though so we have to be careful.”

TENNIS

## Djokovic says looking forward to Paris Games in hectic 2024

Reuters  
Valencia

Chasing an elusive Olympic gold medal will be one of Novak Djokovic’s main goals for next season even though the 24-times Grand Slam champion knows he will have to be physically and mentally ready to cope with a crammed schedule.

Djokovic won bronze in Beijing 2008 and fell short in London 2012, Rio 2016 and Tokyo two years ago, but the Serbian who will turn 37 before the next Games begin is still fighting fit after claiming three Grand Slam titles in 2023.

The world number one also made the Wimbledon final earlier this year, where he was beaten in five sets by Carlos Alcaraz, and he is in no mood to slow down.

“My plan for now is to play the Olympic Games, so I’m hoping that I will be able to play, that I will be ready physically and mentally,” Djokovic told reporters in Valencia, where he turned up to play in the Davis Cup just days after his US Open triumph.

“It’s going to be a very congested and challenging schedule next year, with Roland Garros on clay, Wimbledon on grass, the Olympics on clay and then the US Open and the tournaments before that on hardcourts.

“It’s going to be challenging for players, but my plan is to play the Olympics, because it’s one of the most important events in the history of the sport. That’s where you also represent the country and the feeling of being part of it is a huge honour.”

Djokovic missed Serbia’s 3-0 victory over South Korea in the Finals group stage this week as he was travelling, but is likely to feature against a Spain side missing Alcaraz on Friday.

“I don’t feel very fresh, obviously, after an exhausting several months with a lot of tennis and a lot of matches but I think this is in a way a positive tiredness I feel because of the success I had in America,” Djokovic said.

“There’s not much time to recover, I have to maintain the intensity and do everything I can to adapt my body to the new time zone, new conditions and be able to contribute to my country with a point.”



Serbia’s Novak Djokovic holds a press conference during the finals group stage of the 2023 Davis Cup at the Fuente San Luis Sports Hall in Valencia yesterday. (AFP)

## Canada kick off Davis Cup defence in style, US dig deep

Canada opened their title defence by downing Italy as Great Britain upset Australia on the second day of Davis Cup final group stage action on Wednesday.

The Czech Republic won their tie against a Spain side sorely missing world number two Carlos Alcaraz, while US Open men’s doubles champion Rajeev Ram helped the United States team battle past Croatia.

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

Canada stayed on course for the grand finale in Malaga next month courtesy of straight set wins in the opening singles by Alexis

Galarneau and then Gabriel Diallo. Galarneau and Vasek Pospisil then claimed a tense 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 7-6 (7/3) win over Matteo Arnaldi and Simone Bolelli to defeat the Italians 3-0 in Bologna.

Canada are trying to become the first nation in a decade to win the tournament back-to-back. The last country to achieve the feat, the Czech Republic in 2012-2013, exploited the absence of Alcaraz in Valencia to beat Spain 3-0 and join Serbia at the top of Group C.

Over in Manchester the Great Britain captain Leon Smith’s gamble in opting to select Jack Draper and Dan Evans in preference to his highest-ranked team member

Cameron Norrie or experienced veteran Andy Murray as his singles players paid off handsomely.

Davis Cup debutant Draper, who made it through to the US Open fourth round, repaid Smith’s faith in him with a 6-7 (6/8), 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) win over Thanasi Kokkinakis. In front of a 9,000 crowd Draper broke Kokkinakis when his Australian rival was serving for the match, and then fired a final backhand winner down the line to clinch the deciding tie break after almost three hours play to get the hosts off to a dream start.

Evans then got the better of world number 12 Alex de Minaur 6-1, 2-6, 6-4 to sink last year’s finalists. Last year’s runners-up Australia

took the doubles to leave the home side 2-1 winners, with the 2015 champions second to France, who beat Switzerland 24 hours earlier, in Group B. Draper was buzzing from his first taste of Davis Cup competition. “There’s nothing better. It was a real battle, massive crowd in here,” he said on court yesterday. The United States had to dig deep in Split to overcome hosts Croatia 2-1. Mackenzie McDonald got the record 32-time winners off to a positive start with a 6-4, 6-2 win over 18-year-old Dino Prizmic. Borna Gojo then levelled the tie by topping US Open quarter-finalist Frances Tiafoe (USA) 6-4, 7-6 (8/6).



Britain’s Jack Draper celebrates winning his match against Australia’s Thanasi Kokkinakis on Wednesday. (Reuters)

MOTORSPORT

# Verstappen, Perez wary of ‘really painful’ Singapore GP

AFP  
Singapore

Runaway Formula One championship leader Max Verstappen conceded yesterday that his win streak was under threat at this weekend’s Singapore Grand Prix where his car is “not as competitive”.

The Red Bulls have been unstoppable in 2023, winning all 14 races, with flying Dutchman Verstappen taking the chequered flag 12 times.

He said he would spare no effort to extend his record of consecutive wins to 11, but conceded the nature of Singapore’s high downforce layout would enable Ferrari, Mercedes and Aston Martin to get closer.

“We are not as competitive here as other tracks, street circuits are a bit tougher for our car,” said Verstappen, who could wrap up a third world title in a row as early as the Japanese Grand Prix next week.

“It will be very tight. The key (at Singapore) is adapting as every single session can be different,” he added, as he guns for a maiden victory on the Marina Bay track.

Verstappen’s Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez won in wild conditions a year ago, when the race start was delayed by more than an hour because



Aston Martin’s driver Fernando Alonso (right) chats with Red Bull Racing’s driver Max Verstappen as they take part in a press conference ahead of the Singapore Formula One Grand Prix night at the Marina Bay Street Circuit in Singapore yesterday. (AFP)

of a huge tropical storm that soaked the track. The Mexican will make his 250th grand prix start on Sunday, becoming just the 11th driver in history to hit that milestone, and knows that qualifying will be crucial on a track where overtaking is near impossible.

“This one, we know if Saturday goes well, it can go really well,” Perez told reporters. “There is nothing in the middle in Singapore – it’s either a strong result or really painful.” Ferrari and Mercedes are scenting a

chance to end Red Bull’s season-long dominance.

Carlos Sainz was third behind Verstappen and Perez at Monza a fortnight ago.

“I feel more at one with the car since the beginning of the season, it’s just been putting the weekend together,” said the Spaniard.

“As to who we are racing against this weekend, I have no idea – could be Aston Martin, could be Mercedes, could be McLaren. Red Bull will be

one step ahead.” His Ferrari teammate, Charles Leclerc, said: “It’s difficult to know what will happen. Low downforce we seem to be strong, high downforce we seem to struggle more.”

“But there are quite a lot of inconsistencies between the teams on high downforce tracks. And it’s a city track so the driver can make a difference.”

The Singapore lap times will be quicker this year because of construction work near the city-centre circuit which has meant the removal of four 90-degree corners towards the end of the lap.

The total number of corners has dropped from 22 to 19 and seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton thinks it could help the Mercedes cause.

“I’m just trying to prepare as best I can and see how that new section works. It should bring us closer together, less corners for Red Bull to get ahead,” he joked.

Verstappen says he feels no extra pressure after winning a record 10th grand prix in a row in Monza.

“No, I never really looked at the number eight, nine, 10. I just always want to do the best I can,” he said.

“Naturally every single weekend it’s basically the same amount of pressure you put on yourself to try and get the best result out of it. So, nothing really changes.”

## Wolff ‘Wikipedia’ comments slapped down by Verstappen

World champion Max Verstappen snapped back at Toto Wolff yesterday, saying the Mercedes boss spent too much time talking about Red Bull and should concentrate on improving his own team.

Wolff had dismissed Verstappen’s achievement in becoming the first driver to win 10 grands prix in a row at Monza two weeks ago, sniffing that it was “for Wikipedia and nobody reads that anyway”.

“No, I’m not disappointed in that,” Verstappen said about Wolff’s comments ahead of this weekend’s Singapore Grand Prix.

“I mean they had a pretty s\*\*\* race, so probably he was still pissed off with their performance,” added Verstappen, referring to the Italian Grand Prix where Mercedes pair George Russell and Lewis Hamilton finished fifth and sixth.

Mercedes are a distant second in the constructors’ championship, 310 points behind Red Bull, and Verstappen thinks Wolff should recognise their achievements.

“I think you should be able to appreciate when a team is doing really well, which I think we’ve done in the past as it worked as a kind of inspiration,” said Verstappen, who is close to wrapping up a third world title.

“We knew that we just had to work harder, try to be better, and try to get to that level.

“He almost sounds like he’s an employee of our team sometimes, but luckily not,” he added.

“I think it’s just important that you focus on your own team, that’s what we do, and what we did in the past as well when we were behind them and when they were dominating.”



## CRICKET

# Qatar face Bahrain as six nations battle for Gulf T20 title

The inaugural tournament will be played in round robin format



Captains of the six countries pose for a picture after a press conference yesterday, on the eve of the T20I Gulf Cricket Championship.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**Q**atar will host the inaugural edition of the T20I Gulf Cricket Championship at the West End International Cricket Stadium from today, with the host kicking off their campaign against Bahrain. The tournament opener will be played between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia at 4pm, followed by the Qatar-Bahrain clash at 8:30pm.

The other two teams in the nine-day championships, which is backed by the global governing body International Cricket Council, are Gulf heavyweights Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

The tournament will be played in round robin format with two top teams entering the final to be played on September 23. This inaugural promises to showcase the best of cricket talent from the Gulf region and provide a platform for these nations to compete at the international level.

“We are looking forward to some quality cricket and we wish our best to all the competing teams,” Qatar Cricket Association (QCA) Secretary-General Khalid Saleh al-Rumaihi said at a press conference yesterday.

The QCA by hosting the inaugural event is keen to play a pivotal role in the growth and development of cricket in the Gulf region. Former Pakistan all-rounder Mudassar Nazar, who is now the head coach of the UAE, believes the Gulf Championship will promote the sport and encourage young talent.

“Cricket in the Gulf is growing very fast and the teams here have the potential to beat quality sides which makes this tournament exciting,” said Nazar, who played 76 Tests and 122 ODIs for who represented Pakistan in 76 Tests and 122 ODIs.

He was also effusive in his praise of Qatar for taking the lead in organising the six-nation tournament. “The training pitch we got was great and can be compared with any track in the world. We are very happy with the facilities,” said Nazar after leading the UAE training session at the West End International Cricket

Stadium at Asian Town yesterday.

Sri Lanka great Duleep Mendis is in Qatar as Oman coach and the former batsman felt the tournament should be held regularly. “The Gulf Cricket T20I Championship 2023 is a very good initiative by Qatar and hopefully this would be an annual event and go from country to country,” said Mendis, who played 24 Tests and 79 ODIs.

“Players of all the teams are keen to do their best and excel in the championship and to make their mark. In this format any team can win on a given day, the team which plays well consistently throughout shall emerge as the best,” said the 71-year-old, who is also the Chief Development Officer for Oman Cricket.

Former South Africa star Herschelle Gibbs, who is guiding the Kuwaiti team, also praised the event saying, “It’s a great initiative and a wonderful opportunity for all the Gulf nations. Lovely to be a part of it and I am looking forward to the tournament. Out team mentally is in a good space which is important and our first game against Saudi Arabia would give us an indication of the form too.”

## Messi, Mbappe and Haaland among FIFA Best award nominees

**Budapest:** Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe and Erling Haaland are on the short-list for The Best FIFA Men’s Player Award, while Spain’s Alexia Putellas is among the nominees for the Best Women’s Player on the back of winning the Golden Ball at the World Cup.

Half of the dozen nominees in the men’s category were part of Manchester City’s 2022-23 treble-winning squad, while City’s Spanish manager Pep Guardiola is nominated for Best Men’s Coach. Spain’s World Cup win sees four of their players among the 16 nominees for the women’s award. World Cup runners-up England have four players on the list, with

Sarina Wiegman up for the women’s coaching award, while Australia have three players.

World Cup winners Messi of Argentina and Spain’s Alexia Putellas are the current holders of the top player awards. The nominees were shortlisted by a panel of experts that included retired players Mia Hamm and Didier Droghda.

### MAN CITY’S WALKER SIGNS TWO-YEAR CONTRACT EXTENSION

Manchester City defender Kyle Walker signed a two-year contract extension with the treble winners yesterday. Walker agreed the new deal just weeks after his future with Pep

Guardiola’s side was in doubt amid links to Bayern Munich.

The 33-year-old was out of favour for a period of last season and was dropped from the starting line-up for City’s Champions League final victory over Inter Milan in June.

Walker was in the final year of his existing deal with City, but the Premier League champions kept the right-back at the transfer deadline and have persuaded him to extend his stay in Manchester. “I’m thrilled to sign a new deal. My future is with Manchester City and that is the best thing for me,” said Walker, who has won 13 major trophies with City.

## Fares finishes seventh at Worlds, qualifies for Paris Olympics



Qatar’s Olympic gold medallist Fares Ibrahim booked his ticket for next year’s Paris Games after achieving a 388kg mark at the World Weightlifting Championships in Riyadh, yesterday. The 25-year-old, who has increased his weight category to 102kg, had a lift of 218kg in clean & jerk, taking silver medal in the category. But disappointingly he finished seventh overall after he could lift only 170kg in snatch. China’s Liu Huanhua won gold with an overall mark of 404kg, followed by South Korea’s Jang Yeon-hak (399kg) and Belarusian Yauheni Tsikhantsou (394kg). At Tokyo Olympics two years ago, Fares shattered two Games records as he became Qatar’s first Olympic champion in history. He set new marks for the clean and jerk (225kg) and total lift (402kg). The weightlifter will now compete in the Asian Games starting in Hangzhou from September 23.

## FOOTBALL

## Man United outcast Sancho told to train on his own

AFP  
Manchester, United Kingdom

**J**adon Sancho’s Manchester United future was plunged into further doubt yesterday as the club said the England winger will train on his own due to a “squad discipline issue”.

Sancho was dropped for United’s 3-1 defeat to Arsenal earlier this month for what United manager Erik ten Hag deemed poor performances in training. The 23-year-old responded by posting on social media that he had been made “a scapegoat for a long time”.

In a statement, United said: “Jadon Sancho will remain on a personal training programme away from the first-team group, pending resolution of a squad discipline issue.” Sancho was considered one of the brightest young talents in European football when he joined United for £73mn (\$91mn) from Borussia Dortmund two years ago.

But he has struggled to live up to that price tag at Old Trafford, scoring just 12 goals in 82 appearances. The former Manchester City youth player was given time off between October and February last season to complete an individual winter fitness programme in the Netherlands.

Ten Hag has proven to be a strict disciplinarian even with some of his biggest stars at Old Trafford. Cristiano Ronaldo’s second spell at the club was cut short after he criticised the former Ajax manager in a television interview, while Marcus Rashford was benched for a match last season after arriving late to a team meeting.

Sancho’s absence compounds a miserable start to the season for United on and off the field. Ten Hag’s men have lost two of their



opening four Premier League games. United are currently without Brazilian winger Antony after he was given a leave of absence to fight allegations of domestic abuse made by his former girlfriend.

United also received criticism for their handling of Mason Greenwood, who has joined Spanish side Getafe on loan, after agreeing with the player that his career at the club could not continue. The 21-year-old had faced charges including attempted rape and assault, but prosecutors announced in February this year that the case had been dropped after key witnesses withdrew and new evidence came to light.

Initial reports suggested United were planning to reintroduce the striker to the team before a public outcry sparked the decision to part ways. Meanwhile, protests against United’s owners, the Glazer family, remain a common occurrence at home matches as a process for the Americans to sell the club appears to have ground to a halt.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Bonucci confirms legal action against Juventus after ‘humiliating’ treatment

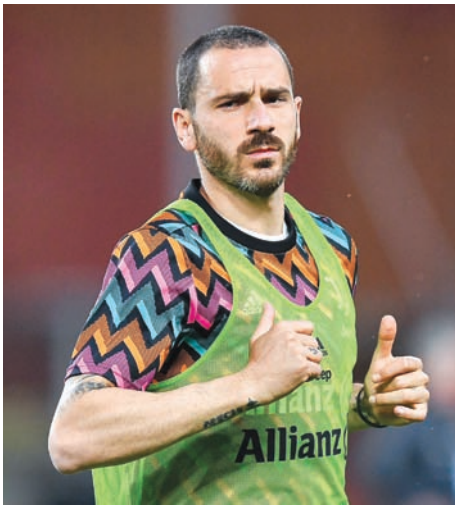
AFP  
Milan

**L**eonardo Bonucci has confirmed that he is taking legal action against Juventus, claiming that the Serie A club has not told the truth about their treatment of him after he was frozen out and eventually sold over the summer.

Veteran defender Bonucci, who has won a host of trophies with club and country over his long career, was shunted aside by Juve in pre-season, missing out on July’s tour in the USA and training away from the first team. And the 36-year-old said he had made the “hard decision” to sue the club for which he played over 500 times and won eight league titles for what he considers “humiliating” treatment.

“It’s a decision that’s been a long time coming and is due to the fact that I’ve read and heard a lot of things that aren’t true,” said Bonucci in an interview with Mediaset released yesterday.

Bonucci, who signed for Union Berlin last month, claims he was only told in mid-July that he was no longer in Juve’s plans, contrary to the club’s version of events in which he was told twice, in October last year and February. “I didn’t have any discussion with the club on that date, nor did I with the coach (Massimiliano Allegri), who called me into his office at the end of March... he told me in his way that I should quit



at the end of June because I wanted to be a coach so I needed to speed things up,” Bonucci added. “I told him that I respected his decision but that I intended to play on until at least the end of the European Championship next year. The conversation ended there.”

Bonucci claims that he was then told by Juve after their last home match of last season that he would be fifth or sixth choice for the coming campaign, and says his reply was “no problem”. He says he then heard nothing from the club

until a home visit in from sporting directors Giovanni Manna and Cristiano Giuntoli who told him that his “presence in the dressing room was holding Juve back”.

“I am simply asserting my rights provided for in (professional football’s) collective bargaining agreement... which says players should be put in the condition to train with the team, regardless of any selection decisions, and have the right to acceptable physical preparation for the coming season,” said Bonucci. “I wasn’t given that... I wasn’t given the chance to go out onto the training field with my own teammates, take part in training matches. I felt empty and humiliated, and not put in the condition to do what I love most and that’s play football.”

Bonucci, who says he will donate any proceeds from his legal action to charity, was also left out of Luciano Spalletti’s first Italy squad this month, losing his captaincy of the national team. He was Azzurri skipper under former coach Roberto Mancini following the retirement of Giorgio Chiellini last year, and became a national hero in 2021 as a key part of the team which won the last European Championship.

Last month Juve denied claims by the head of the player’s union, Umberto Calcagno, that Bonucci’s “dignity is being trampled on”. Juve defended the “legitimacy of its actions towards all registered players who are recognised and are fully guaranteed all the rights” agreed in football’s collective bargaining agreement.

## Barca hit by spending limit cut

**Barcelona:** Barcelona were dealt a blow yesterday when the Spanish champions’ spending limit for the season was cut to 270mn euros (\$290mn) by La Liga. The Spanish top flight has strict spending controls which prevent clubs from continuing to overspend on player wages and transfers.

Barcelona’s previous limit was 649mn euros (\$697mn), a figure inflated by the sale of future television rights income among a series of financial “levers” the club pulled. The Catalans’ current level of salary expenditure is around 400mn euros (\$429mn) per Spanish reports. The punishment for exceeding the limit is being put under the division’s spending cap, in which Barcelona will only be allowed to use around 50 percent of income to improve their squad, until they make cuts to fall under the new limit.

The current situation means it is unlikely Barcelona will conduct significant transfer business in January, with further cuts needed if they are to be in a position to reinforce next summer.

This is despite the departures of Sergio Busquets, Jordi Alba, Ousmane Dembele and several other players. Goalkeeper Marc-

Andre ter Stegen signed a new deal with the club in August until 2028, which allowed Barcelona to register new signings including loanees Joao Cancelo and Joao Felix.

“We have to thank him for restructuring his contract because it has allowed other players to register,” said club president Joan Laporta yesterday. La Liga president Javier Tebas said he did not know when Barcelona’s financial situation would return to normal.

“It depends on Barca and their business strategy,” Tebas told a news conference. “Maybe they sell a great player and will take a giant step forward. We don’t know if they will.”

“The whole medium and long-term strategy is set by the club, we don’t set it for them.”

Real Madrid, by contrast, have a spending limit of 727mn euros (\$780mn). Atletico Madrid are second behind Los Blancos, with a 296mn euro limit (\$318mn). The expenses covered by La Liga’s spending limit include salaries for players and staff, transfer amortisation costs, agent fees, bonuses and more. The calculation to decide teams’ limits involves subtracting their debts and non-sporting expenses from their revenue.