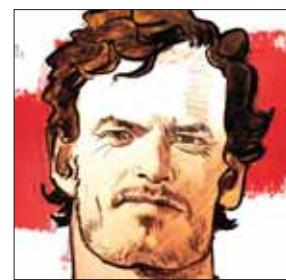


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Murray vows
to make strong
finish to 'up and
down' year



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Mbappe leads
PSG to 2-0 home
win against
Dortmund



Thursday, September 21, 2023
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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Bangladesh, New
Zealand rest key
players ahead of
World Cup

Page 2

ASIAN GAMES

Qatar's Younousse, Tijan start gold defence in style

Qatari spikers win their inaugural match against Thailand 3-1; Qatar football team go down fighting to Japan

Agencies
Doha

Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan started their Asian Games beach volleyball gold medal defence in style by beating Indonesia's Danangsyah Pribadi and Sofyan Rachman Efendi 2-0 (21-12, 21-18) in Pool B game in Hangzhou, China, yesterday.

Qatar's top beach volleyball pair Tijan and Younousse are third in the world rankings with 6,580 points, and hope to retain the gold they won in 2018 in Jakarta.

The other Qatari beach volleyball team of Mahmoud Essam and Abdullah Nassim, who defeated their South Korean counterparts in their first match, lost to Iran's Abbas Pourasgari and Alireza Aghajanighasab 12-21, 15-21.

They will face Macau side in their last Pool F match today, hoping to seal their berth in the knockout stage. As many as 27 pairs from 16 nations are taking part in the beach volleyball event.

The Asian Games do not officially open until Saturday, but several sports are already under way.

Qatar men's volleyball team won their inaugural Pool E match, defeating Thailand 3-1 (25-16, 22-25, 25-19, 25-19). Youssef Oughlaf was a standout performer for Al Annabi scoring 21 points in the match that lasted 1:41 minutes.

Meanwhile in football, Japan began their bid for a first Asian Games gold since 2010 with a 3-1 win over Qatar yesterday, as Syria and Afghanistan pulled out.

Japan were cruising 2-0 at half-time after goals by Teppei Yachida and Kotaro Uchino, before Qatar hit back in the 79th minute through substitute Abdulla al-Sulaiti. But just as the Qatars threatened to grab a point in the group-round match, defender Taichi Yamasaki popped up to make the game safe for Japan in the closing minutes.

Tuesday, the first day of action,



Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan in action against Indonesia's Danangsyah Pribadi and Sofyan Rachman Efendi in their Asian Games beach volleyball Pool B game in Hangzhou, China, yesterday.

South Korea launched their quest for a third men's football gold in a row with a 9-0 demolition of Kuwait. The men's football competition has been hit by withdrawals, however, with Afghanistan and Syria pulling out yesterday from Group C.

That means group opponents Hong Kong and Uzbekistan are into the last 16 without kicking

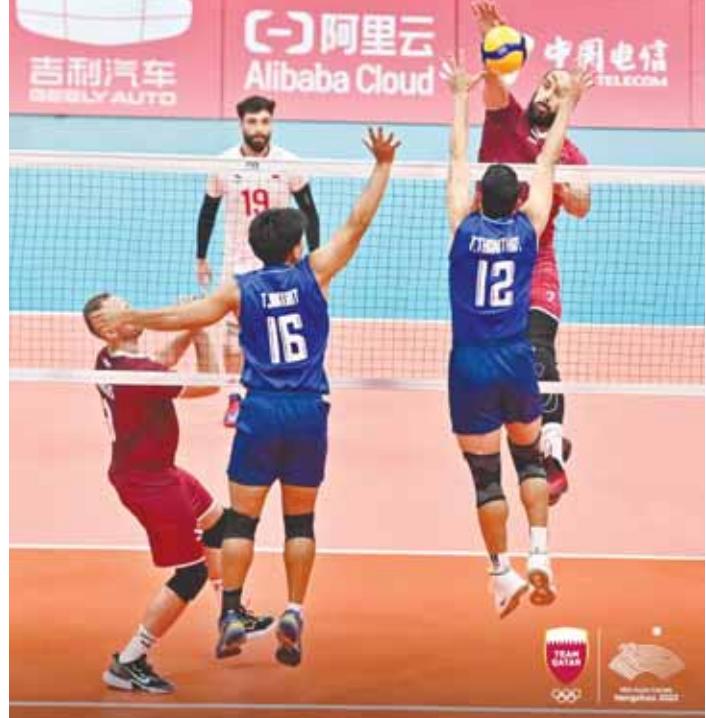
a ball. India were thrashed 5-1 by hosts China on Tuesday but coach Igor Stimac said he was just pleased to be able to field a team.

"I'm happy because I see that some teams pulled out at the last minute (because) they couldn't get enough players," said the former international defender for Croatia.

"It's a big problem for the whole tournament now!"

The Asian Games are outside FIFA's international window so clubs are not compelled to release players. Asian Games football teams are made up of under-23 squads but they can have three overage players.

Football, beach volleyball, cricket, modern pentathlon, rowing, sailing and volleyball will all take place at the Games today.



Action from Qatar-Thailand volleyball match yesterday.



Japan's Manato Yoshida (right) and Qatar's Tameem al-Abdullah jump to head the ball during the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games football match at the Xiaoshan Sports Centre Stadium in Hangzhou yesterday. (AFP)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Bellingham saves Madrid with late winner against Union Berlin

AFP
Barcelona

Jude Bellingham rescued Real Madrid with a 94th-minute strike to earn the Spanish giants a 1-0 win over Champions League debutants Union Berlin yesterday.

Carlo Ancelotti's side, 14-time winners of the competition, were thwarted at every turn by their stubborn German opponents, who were only promoted to the Bundesliga four years ago, until Bellingham prodded home at the death. The England international has started his Madrid career in stunning goalscoring form with six goals in six games for the club across all competitions.

Madrid seemed destined to take only a point after Union Berlin goalkeeper Frederik Ronnow frustrated them and Rodrygo and Jóselu both hit the woodwork.

Real Madrid have only failed to score in one of their last 68 home matches in the Champions League, and on few occasions at the Santiago Bernabéu have they seemed as toothless as in the first

half. Without injured forward Vinicius Junior the Madrid attack has lacked dynamism in recent weeks, even as midfielder Bellingham's goals have earned them a 100 percent record in La Liga after five games.

The English midfielder made his Champions League debut in the competition for Madrid after his move from Borussia Dortmund in the summer. Bellingham arrived after Madrid's thrashing by Manchester City in last season's semi-finals, a new star to help Madrid try to win the competition they crave the most. Despite Madrid's illustrious history, the visitors were calm, composed and above all, well-drilled defensively, under Swiss coach Urs Fischer.

Record signing Robin Goseins warned his Union Berlin teammates they could not play with "awe and fear" and they responded with a disciplined display.

Perhaps it should have been no surprise, with veteran Italian defender Leonardo Bonucci making his debut at the back for the visitors. The German side sat deep, surrendered the ball to Madrid and succeeded in frustrating the hosts.

Joselu wasted Madrid's best chance in the first half, heading narrowly wide, while his teammates were reduced to pot-shots from distance. Madrid turned the screw in the second half as the minutes ticked away, with Ronnow making a superb save to deny Rodrygo at the near post, before the Brazilian cracked another effort against the woodwork.





CRICKET

Key players rested as Bangladesh and NZ eye ODI series

LOCKIE FERGUSON TO LEAD THE VISITORS IN THE FIRST GAME

AFP
Dhaka

New Zealand and Bangladesh will both rest their captains and several other key players in their three-match one-day international series starting today ahead of the World Cup.

Instead of Kane Williamson, Lockie Ferguson will lead the Kiwis, who included only five members of their World Cup squad for the series at Dhaka's Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium.

Tim Southee - who is to have a thumb operation - and Tom Latham are the highest-profile other Kiwi absences.

But pacer Trent Boult, all-rounder Rachin Ravindra, spinner Ish Sodhi, and batsman Will Young are included.

"This is a big series for us and a very challenging one," Ferguson, who is on his maiden tour of Bangladesh, said yesterday.

"From our point of view, it's good build-up for a World Cup," he added.

"We know how strong Bangladesh are on their home conditions, so it's a good challenge for us."

The visitors will be looking to win their first ODI series in Bangladesh in over 15 years, having lost all seven matches to the hosts in the previous two series respectively in 2010 and 2013.

Bangladesh spinners also tested New Zealand in a 3-2 win of a five-match series in 2021, but Ferguson said they were ready to face the challenge.

"But our batters have been preparing," he said. "They're used to spinning tracks, having played around the world."

Bangladesh have yet to name their World Cup squad but rested regular captain Shakib Al Hasan, along with all-rounder Mehidy Hasan Miraz, batsman Mushfiqur Rahim, and pace trio Taskin Ahmed, Hasan Mahmud and Shoriful Islam.

Stand-in Bangladesh captain Litton Das said the series would be a great opportunity for his



Bangladesh's captain Litton Das (left) and New Zealand's captain Lockie Ferguson shake hands after unveiling the series trophy at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka on the eve of their first one-day international. (AFP)

teammates to stake a claim to the World Cup squad. "The players who will play have been out of international cricket for a long time," he said. "Everyone has a chance."

Bangladesh have recalled senior campaigner Mahmudullah Riyad for the series, with the right-hander last playing an ODI in March against England.

Veteran opening batsman Tamim Iqbal also returned after his retirement U-turn and injury layoff that forced him to miss the recent Asia Cup.

Bangladesh failed to reach the Asia Cup final but defeated ultimate winners India in their last match to finish the tournament on a high.

The second and third ODIs will be held at the same ground on September 23 and 26.

The series will be the last for both teams before the World Cup starts in India on October 5.

SQUADS

Bangladesh: Litton Das (capt), Tamim Iqbal, Soumya Sarkar, Anamul Haque, Towhid Hridoy, Mahmudullah Riyad, Nurul Hasan Sohan, Mahedi Hasan, Nasum Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Tanzin Hasan Sakib, Tanzid Hasan Tamim, Zakir Hasan, Rishad Hossain, Khaled Ahmed.

New Zealand squad: Lockie Ferguson (capt), Finn Allen, Tom Blundell, Trent Boult, Chad Bowes, Dane Cleaver, Dean Foxcroft, Kyle Jamieson, Cole McConchie, Adam Milne, Henry Nicholls, Rachin Ravindra, Ish Sodhi, Blair Tickner, Will Young.

RUGBY WORLD CUP

Tale of two halves as Italy beat Uruguay

AFP
Nice, France

Il-disciplined Italy scored 31 unanswered second-half points to take temporary charge of Pool A with a 38-17 World Cup victory over Uruguay in Nice yesterday.

Visions of Uruguay repeating their shock victory over Fiji four years ago in Japan were vivid as the South Americans finished the first 40 minutes 17-7 up as Italy had two players sent to the sin bin.

But the Italians made the most of a yellow carding for Uruguay skipper Andres Vilaseca early in the second-half with two converted tries that turned the tide at the Stade de Nice.

"This is a real group, we are a family and that is with all 33 players that are here," said Italy captain Michele Lamari. "I am really proud of the boys tonight."

"It was a really tough game, but I told all the Uruguayan lads to be so proud of their performance."

Having seen off Namibia 52-8 in their opening match, Italy bagged another try-scoring bonus point to set themselves up perfectly ahead

of two massive matches against pool favourites New Zealand and France, both in Lyon, on September 29 and October 6 respectively.

Uruguay had pushed a second-string France side close in their opener before going down 27-12 and will target their match against Namibia on September 27 as their must-win game from the pool phase.

Felipe Etcheverry missed an early penalty for Uruguay, but Italy spurned a chance of their own given early dominance in the scrum and from a re-set, Lorenzo Pani scored on an inside crashball. Tommaso Allan kicked the extras.

Uruguay put the rolling maul that worked so effectively against France into action, but the ball spilled just as the forwards neared the Italian tryline.

Etcheverry pulled a second penalty wide of the posts, but then enjoyed Uruguay's closest chance for a try as he intercepted a pass and sprinted away towards the line.

Allan just made it back with a try-saving tackle, but Los Teros finally got on the scoreboard after Australian referee Angus Gardner awarded a penalty try either side of yellow cards for Italy prop



Italy's Montanna Ioane celebrates scoring their third try during their Rugby World Cup 2023 Pool A match against Uruguay at Allianz Riviera, Nice, France, yesterday. (Reuters)

Danilo Fischetti and lock Niccolò Cannone for dragging down Uruguay's maul. With Italy down to 13,

Uruguay further capitalised after Allan was pinged for a high tackle, going through multiple phases on

the Italian line before the ball was worked to the short side and Nicolas Freitas slid in for a well-taken

try. Etcheverry converted from the touchline and then hit an opportunistic drop-goal from halfway to make it 17-7 at half-time and with it all to do for a ragged-looking Italy.

The turning point came when Vilaseca was sin-binned at the start of the second period for a head-high tackle and Italy pounced with two converted tries.

First Giacomo Nicotera had a try denied by the television match official before the ball was recycled and Lamari crossed for Italy's second try, converted by Allan.

Italy retook the lead in the 52nd minute after Australian-born winger Monty Ioane bundled his way over under the posts, Allan kicking the extras to make it 21-17.

It suddenly looked like Uruguay's staunch first-half defence had taken its toll physically, as Italy dominated possession and executed effectively.

Next over the whitewash was Lorenzo Cannone for his team's fourth try to guarantee an attacking bonus point, closely followed by Juan Ignacio Brex.

Paolo Garbisi booted a simple penalty as Uruguay ran out of steam.

GOLF

Former champ McIlroy to play DP World Tour Championship in November

Reuters
Dubai

Rory McIlroy plans to play in the DP World Tour Championship in November at Jumeirah Golf Estates in Dubai.

McIlroy is a two-time DP World Tour Championship winner and ended the 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2022 seasons first in the season standings.

"Playing at the DP World Tour Championship is always an amazing experience. Over the years, I've been fortunate to enjoy a lot of success in Dubai and at this event in particular," McIlroy said.

"The fans have been great, it's amazing to have that support out there for us. When you have the top 50 golfers from the DP World Tour, you know it is going to be a fantastic competition. I've won here on a couple of occasions and I would love to be right there come Sunday with both trophies to my name."

The tournament is played Nov 16-19.

McIlroy, 34, won the Hero Dubai Desert Classic and Genesis Scottish Open and leads Spain's Jon Rahm by more than 2,100 points in the Race to Dubai Rankings.

McIlroy played in three more DP World Tour tournaments than Rahm, notching two wins, one runner-up, one third-place

finish and finishing 4-10 three times. New Zealand's Ryan Fox is currently third (2,345 points), Poland's Adrian Meronk fourth (2,065 points) and Australia's Min Woo Lee fifth (1,992).

Rahm earlier this month confirmed he will play in the event, which includes the top 50 golfers on the DP World Tour.

Travel mixup leaves Kang without clubs at Solheim Cup
Danielle Kang has had a stressful start to the Solheim Cup week as the American golfer's clubs never made it onto her connecting flight to Spain where the prestigious international tournament begins in three days.

A day after Kang and US captain Stacy Lewis made desperate pleas on social media to locate her golf bag and get it on the next flight to Spain, the American was still without her clubs.

"It's been an adventure. If it wasn't a dramatic entrance, it wouldn't be my life, so it's okay. It's all good," Kang told reporters at Finca Cortesin in Andalucia.

"You just kind of roll with the punches. It's life, it's golf, you know, it's okay."

Kang also said equipment manufacturer Ping provided her with a temporary set on Tuesday that she was able to play with while Titleist, one of her sponsors, was making a second set that will be flown in

overnight. Despite not having her golf bag, Kang said she does have her putter since she travels with it separately, in a rifle case, to prevent it from being damaged.

"I put it in a separate case to travel with because I don't have the means to get my putter checked every week and, yes, the clubs do get bent on the plane and, yes, they matter, to all the people wondering," said Kang.

"So thankfully the putter didn't get lost. But it's okay. The other 13 are coming. It's coming. We have faith."

"Stacy is on it. I mean, she's putting out fires, and I'm pretty sure I'm the only one causing fire right now."



TENNIS

Murray vows to make strong finish to '23

AFP
Zhuai, China

Three-time Grand Slam champion Andy Murray said yesterday he is "still going in the right direction" and is determined to make a strong finish to an "up and down" year.

The 36-year-old former world number one was speaking at the Zhuai Championships in China, days after playing his part in Britain's Davis Cup victory over Switzerland.

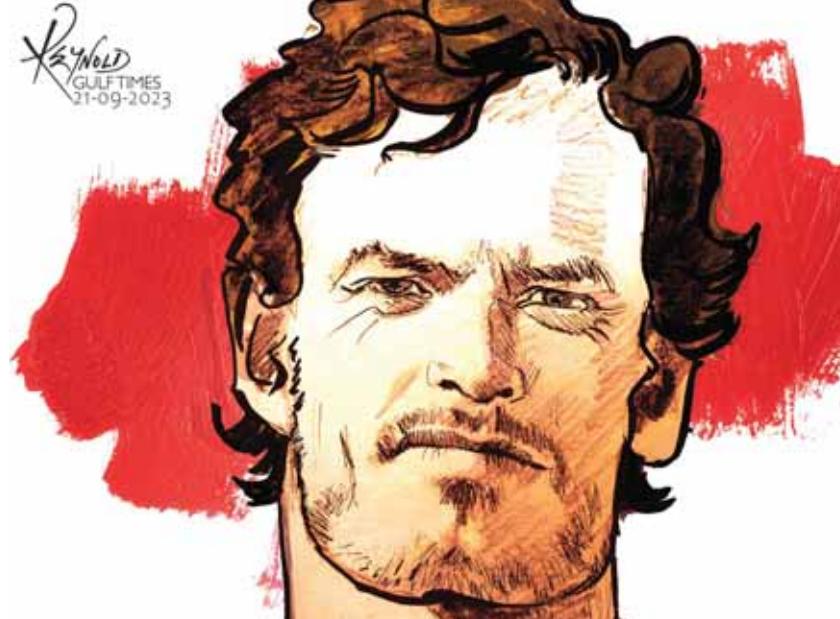
He revealed after defeating Leandro Riedi at Manchester Arena on Friday that he had missed his grandmother's funeral to play.

Reflecting on his year so far, Murray, now ranked 41 in the world, said: "Look, I would like the year to have gone better, for sure."

"There have been some good moments, but also some tough losses as well," said Murray, who had career-saving surgery in 2019 and now plays with a metal hip.

His five-set defeat in the second round at Wimbledon to fifth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas, having been ahead when the match was forced into the next day because of a tournament curfew, still rankles.

Murray suffered an abdominal injury at the Canadian Open last month and went



out in the second round at the US Open, where he is a former champion, in straight sets to Grigor Dimitrov.

Murray, who felt he started 2023 especially well and reached the final in Qatar, said: "It's been up and down. I got up to my highest ranking a few weeks ago since I

had the hip operation so that's positive and shows that although it's not as fast a trajectory as I would have liked, I'm still going in the right direction.

"I've got an opportunity with these last five or six tournaments at the end of the year to have a strong finish, so that's

what I'm hoping for here." Murray, whose last ATP title came in 2019, faces Chinese wildcard Mo Yecong in his opener in Zhuai.

"I really enjoyed my last visit to Zhuai. It's a beautiful city and a great city with great fans. I'm looking forward to seeing you all in September," Murray said.

"It's great to be playing tennis in China again and I am really looking forward to coming back to play at the Hengqin International Tennis Centre," Murray added.

Federer offers Laver Cup advice, touts 'Superstar' doubles combos

Swiss legend was a three-time winner with Team Europe. Each match may come down to individual or doubles-tandem brilliance, but Roger Federer believes team integration remains the key for Laver Cup success.

The Swiss great helped Team Europe to victory against Team World in 2017, 2018 and 2019 before bringing his career to a close in emotional scenes at the 2022 edition of the annual team event. What advice does the former World No. 1 have for the seven Laver Cup debutants set to compete inside Vancouver's Rogers Arena this weekend?

"I think it's (all about) thriving in the team environment, being well prepared and embracing a big crowd," said the Swiss

great in Vancouver ahead of this weekend's action. "It always depends on when you play, obviously, whether it's opening day or the second day, but listen to the ones who have already been at Laver Cups before, and they can give you some sound advice.

"I'm sure they'll be fine. They're all excellent players here, we're talking about world-class players."

The Swiss believes that part of the beauty of the Laver Cup is the opportunity it gives fans to witness top ATP Tour singles stars join forces on the doubles court.

"I always get very excited about Laver Cup doubles teams because they're usually always teams that we haven't seen in the past," said Federer. "(This year for Team Europe) I'd like to maybe see (Hubert) Hurkacz and (Andrey) Rublev play together. On the World side, I think there's tonnes of doubles teams there. Ben Shelton, I see him playing quite a few, also Frances (Tiafoe), I can see him playing some. Maybe also Taylor Fritz, I'd like to see how he plays doubles."

"I just like superstar combinations; I think that's always very exciting."

As the first anniversary of his retirement approaches, Federer's said: "Tennis is a great live sport, so I'm really happy to be back here in Vancouver and seeing some live tennis again."

FORMULA ONE

Verstappen ready to roar back at 'old school' Japan GP

'I CANNOT GO INTO DETAILS BUT I FEEL GOOD ABOUT SUZUKA'

AFP
Suzuka, Japan

Runaway Formula One championship leader Max Verstappen will be determined to roar back at Sunday's Japanese Grand Prix after his record streak of 10 straight wins ended in Singapore.

The Dutchman finished fifth under the Marina Bay lights after starting 11th on the grid, meaning he will not be able to clinch his third straight world title at Suzuka.

But Verstappen, who has won 12 of the 15 races so far this season, can move to the cusp of retaining his crown while his Red Bull team can seal the constructors' championship.

The 25-year-old told reporters after struggling with Singapore's street circuit, where overtaking is all but impossible, that "this track is so different to Suzuka and it doesn't relate".

"We have learned a bit from today and have a few ideas with what we got wrong," he said after Carlos Sainz triumphed for Ferrari to ruin Red Bull's perfect record this season.

"I cannot go into details but I feel good about Suzuka."

Verstappen certainly enjoyed his last visit to Japan, beating Ferrari's Charles Leclerc to clinch last season's championship there.

The Dutchman won a chaotic race shortened by rain and then saw nearest rival Leclerc relegated to third by a five-second penalty, handing Verstappen the title.

Verstappen was only informed



Max Verstappen reveals his helmet that he will use at this week's Japanese Grand Prix at Suzuka. (@redbullracing)

he had clinched the championship midway through the post-race TV interview, and even the driver himself was not sure if he had secured the title.

With Verstappen a whopping 151 points clear of Red Bull teammate and nearest challenger Sergio Perez in the current campaign, he could be crowned champion again as early as next month's Qatar Grand Prix.

'Old-school' circuit

This year's race in Japan has been shifted two weeks earlier in the Formula One calendar and the forecast is for dry conditions.

That should give Verstappen the chance to cut loose on Suzuka's sweeping bends and dramatic elevation changes.

He could barely contain his excitement last year as the race returned after a three-year ab-

sence because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Nothing feels like here in Suzuka because of just the old-school nature – the gravel and the grass," he said.

"You know you have to really build up your confidence and really build up to the limit."

Perez finished eighth in Singapore in a rare weekend to forget for Red Bull, whose hopes of sweeping every race in 2023 came to an end.

The last time neither Verstappen nor Perez stood on the top step of the podium was in Brazil in November 2022.

Instead it was Ferrari's Sainz who took the honours in Singapore, ahead of McLaren's Lando Norris and Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton.

Hamilton's teammate George Russell was pushing hard for the victory until he crashed on the final lap.

After the drama and unpredictability of Singapore, the Red Bulls will start as heavy favourites to restore normal order on Suzuka's high-speed circuit.

Red Bull lead nearest challengers Mercedes by 308 points in the constructors' championship and will clinch the title this weekend with a one-two finish with the fastest lap.

Like with Verstappen, it is only a matter of time.

"I'm expecting Red Bull to be dominant again for the next few weekends," conceded Norris.

"We're getting there, we're making progress and that's the best thing that we can do at this time."

NOVAK DJOKOVIC IS THE BEST IN HISTORY, SAYS ARCH-RIVAL NADAL

Madrid: Rafael Nadal's last Grand Slam win came at the French Open in 2022, but with Novak Djokovic having overtaken his impressive haul of most major titles in men's tennis, the Spaniard conceded the Serbian is the best player in history.

Djokovic's recent win at the US Open, his third Grand Slam title this year, took his tally to 24 Grand Slams, two ahead of Nadal's total. "I believe that numbers are numbers and statistics are statistics. In that sense, I think he (Djokovic) has better numbers than mine and that is indisputable," Nadal said in an interview with AS published yesterday. "This is the truth. The rest are tastes, inspiration, sensations that one or the other may transmit to you, that you may

like one or the other more," the Spaniard said.

"I think that with respect to titles, Djokovic is the best in history and there is nothing to discuss about that." Nadal has suffered with injury issues in recent years, also missing out on the US Open in 2021 with a foot problem which had troubled him all year. However, he doesn't want this to be used as an excuse. "As always, everyone can see the story as they wish, saying that I suffered many injuries. Bad luck for me or bad luck that I had my body this way," he said. "He has had another one and in some ways that is also part of the sport. "I congratulate him for everything he is achieving and it doesn't cause me any kind of frustration,"

he said. The 37-year-old also spoke about fellow Spaniard, the new kid on the block Carlos Alcaraz, winner of this year's Wimbledon.

"He has been the world number one until recently. Although he's very young right now, practically the only rival I see for him is Djokovic," Nadal added. Despite losing his record of Grand Slam titles to current world number one Djokovic, Nadal is more than happy with what he has achieved in his career to date. "I said it when I was the one with the most Slams, I said it when we were tied and I say it now that I am behind. I am not going to be the one who tries, through a personal struggle, to want to be what I am not," he said. "What is, is, and what is not, is not.

I say this, I am very satisfied with everything that I have done."

Nadal, in another interview, said he'd give a fitness update by November. "My hope is that in two months, mid-November, I'll be able to say where I am. How I am physically, and above all the injury is. We haven't set a timeframe. First, I have a recovery process, I'm training 40 minutes, three days a week. This is my day-to-day schedule and I work a lot of hours in the gym and on recovery. Will it be my last year? Have I planned it that way? Well, what if that's not the case? What if, suddenly, after a long break, my body recovers and I feel strong enough and have enough energy to continue? Why would I lie and then say something else?"



Novak Djokovic (left) and Rafael Nadal

India hosts its maiden MotoGP on Sunday as the premier motorcycling championship looks to tap a potentially lucrative new fan base and succeed on a track where Formula One stalled.

Two-wheelers are India's most popular means of petrol-powered transport with more than half of all households owning at least one motorbike or scooter, compared to just eight percent with cars.

Sales figures show an increasing appetite for high-end, high-octane motorbikes, and organisers are banking on the trend to fuel interest in the sport in the world's most populous country.

"We have more than a million bikes in the 250cc-plus category selling every year in India, which means more than a million people are buying bikes for more than just transportation," Vaibhav Sinha, chief executive of Indian MotoGP promoters Fairstreet Sports, said.

"They are using it for thrills, adventure, sports and leisure riding," he added. "We intend to tap this potential to make biking a very big sport in our country." But the lead-up to the race has seen concerns raised about the safety of the Buddh International Circuit, with particular fears about walls that are too close to the asphalt.

"In India all the riders together are going to walk the track before we get on the bike to understand the situation," Spanish rider Aleix Espargaro was reported as saying.

Some MotoGP personnel and riders also had problems getting visas for India, but organisers on Tuesday blamed a technical glitch and said it was on the way to being resolved.

Fairstreet Sports signed a seven-year deal with MotoGP's commercial rights holder Dorna Sports to hold a race in India, which has the world's fifth-biggest economy.

India is a critical market for the growth of MotoGP, Dorna's chief sporting officer Carlos Ezpeleta said.

"For us breaking into India,



which is a whole continent in itself, is very important," he told Sportstar magazine.

"It's the biggest two-wheeler market in the world and very important for us, our stakeholders and the manufacturers."

Avoiding pitfalls

The Buddh circuit on the outskirts of New Delhi was previously home to the Indian leg of Formula One.

India hosted F1 for three years in 2011-2013 but lost the rights with two years still left on the contract over financial and bureaucratic setbacks. Back then the government refused to recognise Formula One as a sport, meaning the organisers needed to pay tax and duties on everything connected with the race. Declining attendances also hurt the event.

MotoGP's local backers are hopeful that they will be able to steer clear of the pitfalls that doomed India's last international motorsport fixture.

Organisers expect tens of thousands of people to flock to the circuit for the sound of roaring engines and burning rubber.

The action starts on Friday with practice, followed by practice, qualifying and a sprint race on Saturday, with the race on Sunday.

India is the 13th stop of 20 on this year's MotoGP calendar.

In the previous race, in San Marino, Spaniard Jorge Martin cruised to victory for Ducati satellite team Pramac to close the gap on reigning world champion Francesco Bagnaia of Italy.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Mbappe leads PSG to 2-0 home win against Dortmund

'It was an almost perfect evening. I enjoyed practically everything about it'

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain got their Champions League campaign off to a winning start on Tuesday as a Kylian Mbappe penalty set them up for a 2-0 victory over Borussia Dortmund at the Parc des Princes.

The French champions had dominated the first half without overly troubling the Dortmund defence, but they went ahead four minutes after the break when Mbappe scored a spot-kick awarded for a Niklas Sule handball. Achraf Hakimi added a memorable second, and PSG could have won the Group F encounter by a far more handsome margin in the end.

The result immediately puts them in control of the group, after AC Milan and Newcastle United drew 0-0 earlier, and coach Luis Enrique will hope they can build on this performance when they visit the English side next in a fortnight.

"It was an almost perfect evening," said Luis Enrique.

"I enjoyed practically everything about it, our intensity from the very beginning, the way we controlled the game for the first 75 minutes. We could have scored at least another goal but this win gives us confidence going forward. This is going to be a difficult group for everyone."

Dortmund, meanwhile, were nowhere near their best and must improve when they entertain Milan next in what is an unforgiving section. They are still adapting to life without Jude Bellingham and coach Edin Terzic also dropped Sebastien Haller here, with the big striker enduring a difficult start to the campaign.

PSG are in the early weeks of a new era following the departures of Lionel Messi, Neymar and Marco Verratti, and Luis Enrique's arrival.

The former Spain coach, who won the Champions League with Barcelona in 2015, insisted on the eve of this game that he needs time to get his ideas across to his players, many of whom also arrived over the summer. There were five new signings in PSG's line-up here, including Ousmane Dembele and Randal Kolo Muani in attack.



Paris Saint-Germain's defender Achraf Hakimi (centre) celebrates with teammates Kylian Mbappe (right) and Vitinha after scoring a goal during the UEFA Champions League Group F match against Borussia Dortmund at Parc des Princes stadium in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

Preferred to Goncalo Ramos, Kolo Muani was starting for the first time since joining from Eintracht Frankfurt.

With him, PSG controlled the first half, while Dortmund and their five-man defence sat back and offered little going forward.

Vitinha hit the upright in the 19th minute and Dembele later forced a save from goalkeeper Gregor Kobel at his near post, but PSG had precious little to show for a share of possession that reached almost 80 percent going into the break.

However, they got the breakthrough just after half-time, thanks to a helping hand from Sule, and the referee.

Barely 60 seconds of the second half had been played when a shot by Mbappe struck the Dortmund defender at close range.

Sule survived a VAR check when the ball struck his arm in the area late in the first half but

this time Spanish referee Jesus Gil Manzano immediately pointed to the spot, although the award seemed harsh.

Mbappe stepped up to stroke in the penalty for his eighth goal this season, and the home side had done the hard part.

"The handball rule is not really clear," lamented Terzic.

"PSG naturally will say it was a handball and we will say it was not but in the end what annoys me the most is that we were just not aggressive enough." The home side scored again on 58 minutes as Vitinha and Hakimi combined for the latter to run through and prod home from close range.

It was a great goal, although Hakimi was helped by Mats Hummels throwing himself to the floor rather than standing up and trying to make a block.

Dortmund sent on Marco Reus and recent signing Nicolas Fueklkruug up front, but it was another

substitute who came closest to pulling one back with London-born teenager Jamie Bynoe-Gittens hitting the post with 11 minutes left.

PSG squandered several chances to score again and substitute Ramos had an effort ruled out for offside at the death.

Meanwhile Manchester City overcame an early scare to get their Champions League defence off to a solid start but nine-man Celtic endured a rough night in Rotterdam. Barcelona cruised past Antwerp to an opening win on a breathless beginning to the group stage of Europe's top club competition.

In Manchester, Pep Guardiola's City were stunned when Red Star's Osman Bukari opened the scoring in first half stoppage time. But Julian Alvarez continued his sparkling early season form by levelling just two minutes after the break.

UEA BEAT QATAR IN T20I GULF CRICKET CHAMPIONSHIP

Doha: Pacer Zahoor Khan earned career-best figures of 4-16 as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) defeated hosts Qatar by 60 runs for fourth consecutive victory at the T20I Gulf Cricket Championship yesterday. After opting to bat, UAE compiled a challenging total of 166-7, thanks to a 44-ball 58 by wicketkeeper-batter Aryansh Sharma. Captain

Mohamed Waseem (25) and Basil Hameed (26*) also played valuable knocks for the winning side. Himanshu Rathod (2-9) and Mohamed Irshad (2-26) were the main wicket takers for the home side. In reply, Qatar were bowled out for 106 in 18.1 overs with Zahoor demolishing Qatar's late batting order, dismissing Rathod (18), Uzair Amir (10), Bukhar Illikkal (1) and

Mohamed Jabir (0) to help his side maintain perfect record in the tournament. Opener Saqlain Arshad, who scored 27 runs from 22 deliveries, was top scorer for the home side. Qatar will meet Saudi Arabia today while the UAE will play their last round robin game against Bahrain tomorrow. The final of the six-team event will be played on Saturday.

BOTTOMLINE

Spanish women footballers agree to play after deal; Leon, Guijarro leave

AFP
Barcelona

Most of Spain's women's national team have agreed to stay with the squad, the government said yesterday, following a strike by the World Cup winners sparked by the disgraced former president of the football federation forcibly kissing a player.

The announcement followed hours of overnight negotiations over player demands for further changes at the Spanish football federation (RFEF) after ex-president Luis Rubiales resigned.

"We have arrived at a series of agreements which will be drawn up and signed tomorrow" between the RFEF and the Spanish government, Victor Francos, secretary of state for sports, told reporters, adding that two of the 23 called-up players did not wish to continue with the squad.

The departing duo, Mapi Leon and Patri Guijarro, were among 15

players who went on strike before the World Cup in protest at the methods of then national coach Jorge Vilda and other issues with the federation. Neither played a part in the triumphant campaign in Australia and New Zealand and upon leaving the team camp yesterday said they were "not in the right state" to play.

A total of 19 players from new coach Montse Tome's squad had been on strike over changes they want made to the RFEF, sparking concerns they would not play in upcoming Nations League games, jeopardising the team's chance of playing in the 2024 Olympics.

In the hours before the deal was announced, internationals selected by Tome gathered for training despite declaring themselves unavailable, some expressing fear of facing sanctions if they refused to play. "We have been forced to come. But if they want to sanction us, then we have to come," Leon said on her way to the camp.

The striking players issued a statement Monday in which they



Spain's midfielde Patri Guijarro (left) and Spain's defender Mapi Leon talk to the press after announcing they are leaving the national selection, in front of their hotel in Oliva near Valencia ahead of the UEFA Nations League matches against Sweden and Switzerland. (AFP)

had reiterated their wish not to be called up, while acknowledging the potential for legal consequences may force them to attend.

They had faced possible fines of between 3,000 and 30,000 euros (\$3,200 and \$32,100), while they could also have lost their licences

to play for up to five years.

Secretary of state for sport Francos, who is also the president of Spain's High Council for Sports (CSD), said yesterday those who decided not to play would not face sanctions.

"It's a reality that the situation for me and for Patri is different to the rest of our team-mates. We already knew this was not the right way to return, and we are not in the right state," Barcelona defender Leon told reporters.

"We are content because the truth is that changes are being made, and in this we are giving full support to our team-mates."

Guijarro said: "They are working on the changes and of course we are with our team-mates, but it's true that it's a different situation. It's quite difficult and quite hard, and ... mentally we are not right to be here."

The scandal which rocked Spanish football erupted just moments after Spain won the World Cup on August 20, when then president Rubiales forcibly kissed

midfielder Jenni Hermoso on the lips as the team received the trophy. He eventually resigned three weeks after the incident and controversial coach Vilda was sacked, but many players demanded more wide-ranging improvements and structural changes.

Hermoso was not named in the squad in order to "protect" her, the new coach Tome, Vilda's former assistant, said Monday.

That decision too proved controversial. "Protect me from what? And from whom?" Hermoso posted on X on Tuesday.

She accused the RFEF of seeking to "intimidate and threaten" the world champions by calling them up against their will for the upcoming matches.

Spain face Sweden on September 22 and Switzerland on September 26 in the Nations League.

The eventual finalists of the Nations League will qualify for the 2024 Olympic Games.

Spain plan to fly to Sweden to day morning before their match in Gothenburg tomorrow.

FOCUS

Qatar to meet India in Asian Under-16 basketball tie today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar will take on India today in the crucial quarter-final classification match of the seventh edition of FIBA Asian Under-16 Basketball Championship at the Al Gharafa Hall.

Qatar secured their place in this match after finishing third in their group, with Japan and Iran taking the top two spots and Saudi Arabia coming in fourth.

In their opening group match, Qatar scored a 91-82 win over Saudi Arabia. However, they faced defeat in the second round against Japan (68-93), and in the third round against Iran, the hosts won 86-65.

The tournament features the participation of 16 teams, divided into four groups. Qatar are in Group B alongside Iran, Japan, and Saudi Arabia. Group A consists of Australia (the defending champions), India, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka, while Group C includes New Zealand, Korea, South Bahrain, and Jordan. Group D comprises the Philippines, China, Malaysia, and Kazakhstan.

The Asian Championship serves as a qualifying stage for the U-17 World Championship, which will be hosted by Turkey from June 29 to July 7, 2024.

The top four finishers in the Asian Championship will directly qualify for the Junior World

Cup in Turkey. So far, Egypt, Guinea, Spain, Italy, Lithuania, France, Germany, Argentina, the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, and the host country Turkey have secured their spots.

Mohamed Saad al-Mughaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation (QBF), has expressed his satisfaction with the progress of the Asian Under-16 Championship.

He has emphasized that the competition is fierce and exhilarating and everyone is enjoying the exceptional atmosphere and excitement. Al-Mughaiseeb further stated that it was evident how well-prepared the teams participating in the Asian Championship are, and their strong desire to compete for the title.

The QBF president also said that the federation is actively seeking to identify talented individuals and integrate them into global training camps. These individuals will undergo an intensive training programme and participate in various tournaments.

He expressed his pride in organizing the championship and the accolades received from all the participants at the Asian Junior Championship.

He assured that QBF will provide unwavering support to the age groups in order to cultivate promising teams for the future and will continuously strive to create a suitable and ideal environment for the next stage.



Ronaldo's Man United return 'turned out wrong': Solskjaer

Former Manchester United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has admitted the club's re-signing of Cristiano Ronaldo "turned out wrong". Solskjaer was in charge when United brought the five-time Ballon d'Or winner back to Old Trafford in a much-hyped move in August 2021. At the time the transfer was viewed as a coup that could potentially fuel a Premier League title challenge for the Red Devils, who had finished second the previous season. But things soon unravelled as the team struggled and Solskjaer was sacked in November that year. Ronaldo left the club in acrimonious fashion 12 months later and currently plays his football in the Saudi Pro League with Al Nassr. "It was about taking the next step to challenge for the title. And, unfortunately, it just didn't work out," Solskjaer told the *Athletic*. "It was a decision that was very difficult to turn down and I felt we had to take it, but it turned out wrong. It felt so right when he signed and the fans felt that at that Newcastle game (when he scored twice), when Old Trafford was rocking. He was still one of the best goalscorers in the world, he was looking strong." But the Norwegian added: "When you have a group you need everyone to pull in the same direction. When things didn't go right, you could see certain players and egos came out." Solskjaer was also the manager when the club signed England defender Harry Maguire in 2019. The Norwegian feels the recent criticism, and even ridiculing of Maguire, has been unfair. He said: "Harry Maguire - it's a disgrace that he's getting so much abuse. I feel sorry for him, but he's a strong lad and I hope it turns for him. "He raised our defence big time when he arrived and lifted the mood around the place."

(AFP)