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No visa delays in India MotoGP are 'first win', says Bagnaia

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19th Asian Games
Hangzhou 2022
September 23 - October 8, 2023

Qatar's flag raised at Asian Games Village



Qatar's flag was unfurled at the Asian Games village in Hangzhou, China, yesterday. The Qatar national anthem was also played at the formal ceremony, which was attended by the Qatar Olympic Committee Second Vice-President Dr Thani bin Abdulrahman al-Kuwari, Secretary-General Jassim Rashid al-Buenain, Head of the Qatar delegation at Games Rashid Adiba, other officials and athletes. The 19th Asian Games will officially kick off tomorrow in Hangzhou, a year later than planned due to the Covid-19 pandemic with more than 12,000 athletes from 45 nations competing across a whopping programme of 40 sports.



Qatar volleyball teams cruise into last 16



Qatar beat Hong Kong 3-1 (21-25, 13-25, 25-22, 21-25) to storm into the knockout stage of the men's volleyball event at the Hangzhou Asian Games in China yesterday. Qatar's spikers, who had defeated Thailand in their other Pool E match on Wednesday, will face Bahrain in their Round of 16 clash today. In football, Qatar meet Palestine in their second Pool D match today. The under-23 squad had lost to Japan in their opening match.



Qatar's beach volleyball pair Mahmoud Essam and Abdullah Nassim eased past Macau's Cheong Hou Wang and Wong Wai Hei to enter the last 16 at the Hangzhou Asian Games. Essam and Nassim won 21-12, 21-15 in their final Pool F match. Today, Qatar's top pair Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan will play their last Pool B match against Jaron Requinton and Alnakran Abdilla of the Philippines.

SPOTLIGHT

Biggest-ever Asian Games ready for liftoff in China

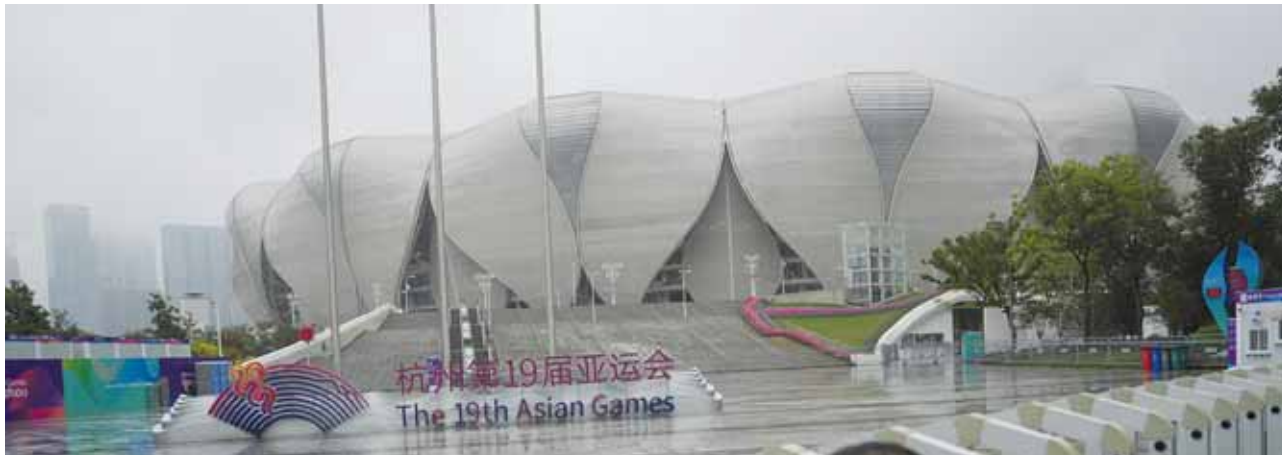
Games will be staged at 54 venues, mostly in Hangzhou but also extending to cities as far as Wenzhou

AFP
Hangzhou, China

The biggest Asian Games in history, boasting about 12,000 competitors - more than the Olympics - will open tomorrow in the Chinese city of Hangzhou after a year's delay because of Covid. Athletes including world and Olympic champions will fight for medals in 40 sports from athletics, swimming and football to eSports and bridge.

Nine sports, among them boxing, break dancing and tennis, will serve as qualifiers for next year's Paris Olympics. The Games were supposed to take place last September but were postponed because of China's strict zero-Covid rules, before China's ruling Communist Party abruptly abandoned the policy.

The 19th edition of the Games, which were first held in New Delhi in 1951, throws together competitors from 45 countries and territories across Asia and the Middle East. For China, which hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics in a Covid-secure "bubble" in Beijing, it is a chance to show off its organisational, sporting and technological prowess after the pandemic years cut the country off from the sporting world. "We have overcome a lot of challenges but we are now fully conditioned to hold a successful Games," Chen Weiqiang, chief



A general view of the Hangzhou Olympic Sports Centre Stadium in Zhejiang, China, the venue for the opening ceremony of the 19th Asian Games. (Reuters)

spokesperson for the Games, said. The Games will be staged at 54 venues - 14 newly constructed - mostly in Hangzhou but also extending to cities as far afield as Wenzhou, 300 kilometres (180 miles) south. The centrepiece is the "Big Lotus" Olympic stadium with a capacity of up to 80,000 where athletics and the opening and closing ceremonies will be staged.

President Xi Jinping will attend the opening ceremony and meet Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad there, along with

other visiting leaders, Chinese state media says. Assad is making his first visit to ally China since the war erupted in Syria in 2011. Russian President Vladimir Putin likewise attended the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, along with Xi, and weeks later launched the invasion of Ukraine.

Hangzhou, a city of 12 million people an hour's bullet train from Shanghai, is famed in China for its ancient temples, gardens and its beloved West Lake. It is also the

unofficial home of China's tech industry, notably the birth place of Jack Ma's Alibaba. The Games will showcase some of the latest tech to come out of the city, including driverless buses, robot dogs and facial recognition.

Hosts China have topped the medals table at every Asian Games since 1982 and are expected to do so again by the time the curtain comes down on October 8. They should reign in swimming, with Qin Haiyang fresh from his heroics at

the world championships, where he announced himself as the new undisputed breaststroke king. The 24-year-old swept all three men's events and set a new world record in the 200m.

In athletics, another of the most closely watched sports, India's Olympic and world champion Neeraj Chopra will defend his Asian Games javelin crown. His nearest competitor should be world silver medalist Arshad Nadeem from arch-rivals Pakistan and the countries are also on a collision course in cricket and hockey.

eSports, in what is seen as a step towards Olympic inclusion one day, will make its full Asian Games debut having been a demonstration sport five years ago. Lee Sang-hyeok, better known as "Faker", has god-like status in League of Legends and will lead the South Korean charge at the futuristic-looking China Hangzhou Esports Centre.

There is an added incentive which has caused controversy in South Korea - winning gold will exempt them from having to do military service. A feature of the Asian Games is that it includes sports that are a little more quirky than the Olympics.

Xiangqi - also known as "Chinese chess" - the card game bridge and the ancient wrestling discipline of kurash are all on the menu. Although the Games officially open tomorrow, the sporting action began on Tuesday.

CRICKET

Fit-again Cummins hopeful of playing all 3 ODIs vs India

'My wrist is all healed now. Hoping to play all three games'

Reuters
Mohali, India

Australia captain Pat Cummins is hopeful of playing in all three one-day internationals against India on his return from a wrist injury but confirmed fast bowler Mitchell Starc and all-rounder Glenn Maxwell will miss today's series opener in Mohali.

Starc has been recovering from a groin injury sustained during the Ashes series in England, while Maxwell will join the squad today having recovered from an ankle injury.

"My wrist is all healed now ... hoping to play all three games," Cummins said yesterday before the start of their final warm-up series before the World Cup in India starting on Oct. 5.

Batting mainstay Steve Smith is also set to return from a wrist injury but opener Travis Head has been ruled out with a fractured hand that makes him doubtful for the World Cup.

"We want to strike the balance between getting used to these conditions, hopefully winning some games, but we also don't want to get to that first (World Cup) game and already be cooked," Cummins said.

"No doubt we'll be trying a few different combinations, a few different players will get a chance but ideally we'd like to structure up pretty closely to how we'll play in the World Cup."

Marcus Stoinis shared the new ball on the recent tour of South Africa and Australia have two more pace-bowling all-rounder options in Cameron Green and Sean Abbott. "You need five bowlers, so the more all-rounders you have you can really bolster your batting," Cummins said.

"It gives us flexibility to pick four genuine bowlers or maybe three bowlers and bat an all-rounder at No. 8. Hopefully Maxi (Maxwell) comes back later in the series, but the other three guys have been bowling fantastically."



Australia captain Pat Cummins addresses a media briefing at the Punjab Cricket Association Stadium in Mohali yesterday. (AFP)



India's coach Rahul Dravid (right) talks with Rituraj Gaikwad during a practice session in Mohali. (Reuters)

India coach Rahul Dravid said T20 batting star Suryakumar Yadav is part of the World Cup plans.

"I don't think he needs to worry about the 27th; we've picked our team for the World Cup and Surya is in it," Dravid said ahead of the first ODI against Australia in

Mohali. "We've made that decision and we completely back him because he's got a certain quality and ability that we've seen. Yes, we've seen those qualities at the moment in T20 cricket, but we know the kind of impact a player like him can make batting at six. "He can change the course of a

game, so we've completely backed him. We're very clear about that. There's been total clarity on the fact that we're completely behind him and we know hopefully he'll be able to turn it around.

"These three games, he is someone who will get all three games, or at least the first couple certainly to be able to again develop and keep growing in his journey as a one-day cricketer, but in terms of selection, no, we've made our decision."

When asked about the presence of veteran spinner R Ashwin, Dravid said: "Having someone of Ashwin's experience to come back is always good for us. Also, he's got the ability to be able to contribute with the bat at No. 8. He's someone who we've always thought of where in case there were certain injuries or opportunities opened up, he was always part of our plans. I know he hasn't played a lot of one-day cricket in the last bit, but someone of his experience can deal with that really well."

FOCUS

India and Pakistan reach Asian Games cricket semi-finals

AFP
Hangzhou, China

India and Pakistan's women's cricket teams both reached the last four of the Asian Games yesterday despite their matches being washed out in Hangzhou.

India batted first in the Twenty20 encounter against Malaysia and piled up 173-2 in their rain-interrupted 15 overs.

Malaysia faced just two balls and were 1-0 in reply when the rain returned and the match was abandoned with no result.

India progressed to the semi-final because of their higher world ranking.

The incessant showers meant Pakistan went through for the same reason against Indonesia in the later game without a ball being bowled as the covers remained on at the Zhejiang University of Technology Pingfeng Cricket Field.

India will face the winner of today's quarter-final between Bangladesh and Hong Kong for a place in the final. Pakistan will play either Sri Lanka or Thailand in the last four.

Jemimah Jessica Rodrigues

scored an unbeaten 47 off 29 balls for India and star batter Shafali Verma smashed 67 off just 39 with five sixes and four fours as Malaysia were given the runaround in the field before the washout.

"The partnerships we had with everyone ticked off at the right time," said Rodrigues.

"It gives us a lot of confidence. And we take it from here into the semi-finals. So it's a big, big plus point for us."

Malaysia coach Thusara Kodikara said it was a shame that his batters did not get the chance to test themselves against India's bowling attack.

"We are very disappointed because we wanted to play and give our best in this tournament," said the Sri Lankan-born coach.

"We are here to learn a lot of things from this kind of team (but) we can't do anything because of the rain. It was out of our control," she said.

Pakistan won gold on both previous occasions women's cricket featured at the Asian Games, at Guangzhou 2010 and Incheon 2014.

The sport was not played at the Jakarta Asiad five years ago.

Rain washes out 1st Bangladesh clash against New Zealand

Dhaka: Incessant rain washed out the first one-day international between Bangladesh and New Zealand in Dhaka yesterday. Match officials declared the game abandoned after rain halted the New Zealand innings at 136-5 in 33.4 overs. Will Young was the highest scorer for New Zealand with 58 off 91 balls and shared 97 runs with Henry Nicholls for the third wicket to help the visitors recover from 2-16.

Bangladesh earlier won the toss and elected to bowl first, but rain stopped the game for more than two hours after just 4.3 overs. Mustafizur Rahman dismissed Finn Allen for nine and Chad Bowes for one in successive overs after play resumed. The rain truncated the game into a 42-overs-a-side contest. Young and Nicholls repaired the damage, before Mustafizur broke their partnership by trapping Nicholls leg-before for 44.

Left-arm spinner Nasum Ahmed soon removed Young and Rachin Ravindra to halt New Zealand's progress. The second and third ODIs will be played at the same ground on September 23 and 26.



New Zealand's Tom Blundell plays a shot during the first ODI against Bangladesh in Dhaka yesterday. (AFP)

New Zealand have not won an ODI series in Bangladesh in the last 15 years, having lost all seven matches to the hosts in the last two series in 2010 and 2013.

BRIEF SCORES
New Zealand 136-5 in 33.4 overs (Will Young 58, Henry Nicholls 44; Mustafizur Rahman 3-27, Nasum Ahmed 2-21)
Result: Match abandoned
Toss: Bangladesh
Series: 0-0 in three-match series

SPOTLIGHT

South Africa World Cup cricket blow as fast bowlers Nortje, Magala ruled out

AFP
Johannesburg

Fast bowlers Anrich Nortje and Siyanda Magala have both been ruled out of the Cricket World Cup because of injury, Cricket South Africa announced yesterday.

They will be replaced by all-rounder Andile Phehlukwayo and fast bowler Lizaad Williams.

The loss of Nortje is a particularly heavy blow for South Africa's chances because of his ability to bowl match-changing spells at high pace.

One of the fastest bowlers in the world, capable of speeds of 150km an hour and more, he was named Cricketer of the Year at CSA's awards function in July. Nortje had to leave the field because of back

spasms after bowling five overs in his only appearance in South Africa's recent five-match series against Australia.

According to a CSA statement he has a suspected lower back stress fracture.

It is the second successive World Cup that Nortje will miss because of injury. A broken right thumb ruled him out of the 2019 tournament in England.

The heavily-built Magala also played in only one game against Australia and has not fully recovered from a left knee injury.

Williams, 29, has only played in a single one-day international, against Ireland in 2021, although he played in the recent Twenty20 international series against Australia.

Phehlukwayo, 27, has played in 76 one-day internationals.

He had not been a regular member of the team in the past two seasons but was added

to the squad against Australia because of the injury to Magala.

The injuries could affect South Africa's tactics for the World Cup.

Coach Rob Walter said when the squad was announced on September 5: "Our strength has been in fast bowling and we want to be able to have four high-quality fast bowlers on the park in most situations."

"It's hugely disappointing for Anrich and Siyanda to be missing out on the 50-over World Cup," Walter said. "We sympathise in their omission and will continue to provide all the necessary support as they work towards their return to competitive action."

"This provides an opportunity for Andile and Lizaad on the global stage. Both players have been part of our winter programmes as well as having represented

South Africa in the recent white-ball tour against Australia. They offer great skill sets and we're excited to have them complete the 15-player squad for this year's World Cup." The injuries leave Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi as the only experienced fast bowlers in the squad. South Africa leave for India tomorrow and play their warm-up games against Afghanistan on September 29 and New Zealand on October 2. Their first game of the tournament is against Sri Lanka on October 7.

REVISED SQUAD

Temba Bavuma (capt), Gerald Coetzee, Quinton de Kock (wkt), Reeza Hendricks, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Lungi Ngidi, Andile Phehlukwayo, Kagiso Rabada, Tabraiz Shamsi, Rassie van der Dussen, Lizaad Williams.



PETTERSEN EYEING SOLHEIM CUP GLORY AS EUROPEAN CAPTAIN

Casares, Spain: Suzann Pettersen, one of the Solheim Cup's greatest players, believes her European team are more than capable of beating the United States this week and giving her victory as captain. Europe are aiming for an unprecedented third straight win and go into the event in Spain as marginal favourites.

"We are all very ready to go," said Norwegian Pettersen who retired from playing after holing the winning putt in 2019 at Gleneagles. "We have the strongest team that I've ever been part of, and that's based on great performances over the last few years. "But with good results, there's also expectations. "But these girls are up for it and we can't wait." Europe have three rookies - Linn Grant, Maja Stark and Gemma

Dryburgh - while the USA have five, albeit world number two Lilia Vu is a double major winner this year and Allisen Corpus is the reigning US Open champion.

Three newcomers
The other three newcomers are Cheyenne Knight, Andrea Lee and the charismatic Rose Zhang. The most experienced European is Anna Nordqvist, with the three-time major winner combining her eighth appearance with a role as vice-captain. "It's been really cool being involved behind the scenes," said the Swede. "I am getting the chance to see the process. It makes you appreciate the experience of playing inside the ropes even more." Stacy Lewis is the USA captain aiming to regain the Cup for the first time since the Americans' win

in Ohio six years ago. "We've hit the ground running," she said. "As a player, the early part of the week seems to go on forever but, as captain, the days have flown past. "Everybody has had great practice rounds." Zhang, a record-breaking amateur, won her first event on the LPGA Tour in May and has had a string of top-10 finishes in majors. Back in April, she did not expect to be in Spain. "One hundred percent not," she admitted. "When I played in my first event I just hoped to make the cut. Making the Solheim Cup was never one of the goals for the season. "But I'm very grateful for all the experiences I've been granted so far." Vu, who was playing on the

second-tier Epson Tour just two years ago, has enjoyed a meteoric rise this season, lifting the Chevron Championship and Women's British Open titles. "I was almost done with golf a couple of years back, so it is almost unbelievable," she said. "But this has always been a dream of mine." The player under perhaps the greatest pressure is home favourite Carlota Ciganda who will be playing in her sixth Solheim Cup. "It's a dream come true to play at home," said the 33-year-old. "The course is tricky with the wind. "More than pressure, it's excitement." Both Pettersen and Lewis will be in charge again next year when the Solheim Cup takes place in Florida, with one of the pair going for back-to-back wins.

MOTORSPORT

No visa delays in India MotoGP are 'first win': Bagnaia

Buddh International Circuit set for first MotoGP spectacle in India



Ducati Lenovo Team's Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia plays cricket on the track ahead of the Indian MotoGP Grand Prix at the Buddh International Circuit in Greater Noida on the outskirts of New Delhi yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Greater Noida, India

World champion Francesco Bagnaia yesterday lauded his manager for a timely arrival at India's first MotoGP – unlike the visa issues faced by other riders.

The debut race in the world's most populous country witnessed teething problems when some MotoGP personnel and riders had problems getting visas.

"I did not have any problems with the delay of the visa, so that was a first win," Bagnaia, also known as "Pecco", told reporters.

"Our logistics manager did an incredible job."

The race at the Buddh International Circuit is the first MotoGP spectacle in India.

Italy's Bagnaia, on a factory Ducati, and previous race winner Jorge Martin are among the world's top riders set to compete on a track on the outskirts of the capital New Delhi that once hosted Formula One.

Bagnaia leads the championship, ahead of Martin by 36 points.

He finished third behind Marco Bezzec-

chi and winner Martin at Misano earlier this month.

But Bagnaia's effort won praise after he suffered a horror crash at Catalunya and went into the previous event on painkillers.

Bagnaia said he is "a lot better" than what he felt at the last race.

Honda rider Marc Marquez arrived in Delhi yesterday after visa trouble, which the organisers called a "technical glitch".

But the six-time MotoGP world champion played down the impact of his late arrival.

"No change (in my plan or strategy)," said Marquez, who now has a bright new helmet with Indian colours. "I have to think that I have arrived in normal time."

A bike or a scooter is the preferred mode of transport for many Indians, and the roads are full of them.

It was a sight MotoGP riders could not escape.

"Considering the amount of bikes we see on the streets, it's incredible that we don't have any Indian riders (in the MotoGP)," said Bagnaia.

"So maybe it's (the MotoGP India debut) also something that will push someone to arrive in the world championship – an Indian

rider."

There have been some concerns raised about the safety of the track, which hosted F1 races for three years till 2013, with particular fears about the walls that are too close to the asphalt.

But the riders were looking forward to the challenge of a new track.

Bagnaia said, "the track is interesting and different", while Martin "liked the layout".

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

MotoGP world championship standings

1. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati)	283 pts
2. Jorge Martin (ESP/Ducati-Pramac)	247
3. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Ducati-VR46)	218
4. Brad Binder (RSA/KTM)	173
5. Aleix Espargaro (ESP/Aprilia)	160
6. Johann Zarco (FRA/Ducati-Pramac)	147
7. Luca Marini (ITA/Ducati-VR46)	135
8. Maverick Vinales (ESP/Aprilia)	128
9. Alex Marquez (ESP/Ducati-Gresini)	108
10. Jack Miller (AUS/KTM)	104
11. Fabio Quartararo (FRA/Yamaha)	85
Selected	
19. Marc Marquez (ESP/Honda)	31

RUGBY WORLD CUP

Argentina focus on execution for Samoa showdown today

Reuters
Saint-Etienne

Argentina assistant coach Felipe Contepomi said the Pumas do not need a new mentality for today's Pool D clash against Samoa, they just needed to avoid the mistakes they made against England in their World Cup opener.

The 27-10 loss to an England side who played with 14 men for most of the match have triggered some nerves among fans of the twice World Cup semi-finalists, not helped by the almost two-week wait for their second fixture.

Contepomi, though, said the squad had faith in the structures they had put in place under Michael Cheika over the last 18 months and just needed to execute properly at Stade Geoffroy-Guichard.

"I do respect every opinion, but what's important is what we think," he told reporters through a translator yesterday.

"We prepared well for the England game. We're not looking to change our mentality but just not to make the same mistakes we made against England. Every game is a new match and we're confident in the work we have done.

"The easiest way to have a good result is to have a good game. And to do that we have to focus on everything we can control and nothing else."

Argentina have played Samoa only four times and not since 2005, but Contepomi said the availability of video meant the few Pacific islanders who did not play at the top level would be familiar enough.

"We haven't played Samoa for a long time but most of their players are playing in Europe so they play week in, week out against our players also they know each other pretty well," he added.

Samoa have won three of the four matches against the Pumas, including victories at the 1991 and 1995 World Cups.

Contepomi said although the Pumas were not taking Samoa lightly, such results were hardly relevant given the strides made in Argentinian rugby since they reached the World Cup semi-finals for the first time in 2007.

"Which team between Argentina and Samoa have improved most?" he asked.

"I can't tell you, but I can tell you that Argentina since 2007 have had the chance to regularly play tier one teams. The possibilities of evolution for Samoa were not as great."

Farrell, Smith and Arundell start for England against Chile

England's Owen Farrell will make his first appearance at the Rugby World Cup when he starts at fly-half against Chile in Lille tomorrow with Marcus Smith at fullback and Henry Arundell on the wing as coach Steve Borthwick shuffles his resources.

Farrell missed the wins over Argentina and Japan as part of his four-game suspension for a dangerous tackle and comes in as captain to replace George Ford, who moves to the bench after two man of the match performances.

Smith, nominally a flyhalf, has come off the bench at fullback in recent games, bringing some much-needed vibrancy to England's attack. He has never started a game at 15 for England or his club Harlequins. In all there are 12 changes from the team that beat Japan 34-12 for what should be the easiest of England's Pool D fixtures against the World Cup debutants. Exciting 20-year-old Arundell starts on the right wing and Max Malins on the left, with Smith completing a new back three.

England are already virtually assured of a place in the quarter-finals after their two wins against the strongest sides in the group but victory tomorrow would confirm it before they sign off against Samoa. They would then have a Marseille quarter-final against Wales, Fiji or Australia.



Argentina's centre Matias Moroni (left) and scrum-half Tomas Cubelli speak while holding a ball during the captain's run training session at Stade Geoffroy-Guichard in Saint-Etienne, France, yesterday. (AFP)

Superstar Biles to compete in sixth world championships

New York: Simone Biles is set to compete in her sixth world championships this month after posting the top all-around score at a US qualifying competition, USA Gymnastics said yesterday. Biles, a four-times Olympic champion and 19-times world gold medalist, headlines the five-woman team heading to Antwerp, Belgium, where she won the first of her five world all-around titles in 2013 at the age of 16.

"Back to where it all started, see you soon Belgium," the 26-year-old wrote on Instagram. Biles will become the first woman to represent the US at six artistic world championships, according to USA Gymnastics, after earning automatic qualification by topping the all-around standings at this week's two-day selection camp in Katy, Texas. She will be joined by Shilese Jones, Leanne Wong and Skye Blakely – all part of the team that won last year's world championships – and 17-year-old Joscelyn Roberson. The championships run from Sept. 30 to Oct. 8. Biles returned to competition in

August after a two-year break from the sport, having withdrawn from multiple events at the Covid-delayed Tokyo Olympics in 2021 due to the "twisties", a loss of spatial awareness in mid-air. She won a record eighth all-around title at the national championships and said earlier this month that her goal was to compete at next year's Paris Games.

The world's top gymnasts will compete for a total of 14 gold medals at these World Championships in Antwerp's Sportpaleis, as well as those all-important Olympic qualifying places. For individuals, there will still be qualifying opportunities at the Apparatus World Cups and Continental Championships next year. But for the coveted team places, this is the last chance to qualify.

While three teams each for men and women already earned their Olympic qualification at the 51st FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Liverpool (GBR), a further nine teams will be allocated in Antwerp, completing the line-up of 12 teams each for men and women in Paris 2024.



FORMULA ONE

Emotionless Verstappen ready to bounce back

AFP
Suzuka, Japan

Runaway Formula One leader Max Verstappen said yesterday he felt "no emotion" at seeing his record winning streak end as he looks to bounce back at this week's Japanese Grand Prix.

Verstappen failed to extend his run of 10 straight wins at last weekend's Singapore Grand Prix, finishing fifth behind winner Carlos Sainz of Ferrari.

The flying Dutchman, who has won 12 of 15 races this season, is still a nailed-on certainty to win his third straight championship even though he can't seal the deal this week in Suzuka.

Verstappen was in no mood to dwell on last weekend's rare failure, telling reporters he was ready to "move on and try again".

"No emotion, we stopped winning for one race – **** happens, we won 10 in a row before that," he said. "Of course, I would have liked to have won there as well but we also know that there is always going to be a day where you have that weekend where you are not winning or things go wrong."

Verstappen holds a whopping 151-point lead over Red Bull teammate and nearest championship challenger Sergio Perez with seven races to go.

Verstappen clinched last season's title at Suzuka after a chaotic race shortened by rain. Red Bull, however, can still wrap up the constructors' championship in Japan.

Sainz's win in Singapore ruined Red Bull's perfect record this season but Verstappen believes it could be the team's only blemish.

"I still think that from now onwards we can



Red Bull's Max Verstappen and Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso ahead of the Japanese Grand Prix at the Suzuka Circuit, Japan, yesterday. (Reuters)

win every single race, even with people getting upgrades," he said.

"Maybe here and there they might have the opportunity of winning, but I still think that our car is capable of winning every race."

Sainz finished first 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.

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

The race was hailed as a Formula One return to competitiveness after Red Bull's dominance this season but Verstappen said he had "zero

interest in that". "For me, it was just that we got beaten, and in a very clear way," he said.

"I don't think about what is good for Formula One – I don't think it's necessarily bad what was happening to Formula One, because we were just better than everyone else. If people can't appreciate that, then you're not a real fan."

Verstappen has talked in the past of his love for the Suzuka circuit and for the passion of the Japanese fans. The race returned last year after a three-year absence because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's almost like they're driving the car themselves," he said. "It's very different and very cool to see. They love motorsport."

FIBA U-16 ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Qatar beat India in thriller to reach quarter-finals

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Hosts Qatar booked their place in the quarter-finals of the FIBA U-16 Asian Championship yesterday. At the Al Gharafa indoor courts, Qatar beat India 87-84 in a thrilling pre-quarter-final match to advance to their maiden last eight appearance. Qatar will now face New Zealand in the quarters today.

It was a reverse of results and revenge for Qatar as India had beaten them 77-51 in the previous edition of the competition last year. In that game in 2022, Mohamed Massamba Ndao scored 13 points and Abdullah Yassin Mousa went scoreless.

This time, however, the two combined for 60 points to help lead their team into the next round. Ndao continues his spectacular run of performances, posting an EFF of 38 as a result of recording 29 points, 11 rebounds, 6 assists, 2 steals, and 3 blocks while also making 4 three-pointers.

Mousa led the team with 31 points while raining in 7 made shots from beyond the arc. Lavish, the returning player from India's side, had his best game of the competition so far with 23 points, 8 rebounds, and 6 assists but could not knock down the last-second three-point that could have tied the game up and



Mohamed Massamba Ndao (left) and Abdullah Yassin Mousa combined for 60 points to help Qatar beat India at the FIBA U-16 Asian Championship yesterday.



potentially forced overtime. Jordan, Iran and the Philippines also reached quarters, with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and China having already

sealed their place. Joaquin Ludovice was in fine form as he led the Philippines to a 95-71 win, their first ever against Korea in the history of

the competition – and at the youth level in FIBA. The Philippines will face Japan. The two teams played against each other in 2022 with Japan winning 73-67.

Jordan will play against Australia after beating Malaysia 70-64. Iran made it to third straight quarters after knocking out Lebanon and will face China today.

FOOTBALL

Liverpool fight back again to edge LASK on Europa League return

Liverpool are playing in the Europa League for the first time since 2016

AFP
Paris

Liverpool fell behind for the fourth time in five matches this season but fought back to beat LASK 3-1 in Linz in the Europa League yesterday. Elsewhere in the early matches in the first round of the group stage of the second-tier European competition, Romelu Lukaku earned last year's beaten finalists Roma a 2-1 victory at Sheriff.

Bayer Leverkusen crushed Swedes Hacken 4-0, Rennes cruised past Maccabi Haifa 3-0 in France, Espanyol Villarreal lost 2-0 to Panathinaikos in Greece. Liverpool, playing in the Europa League for the first time since finishing runners up in 2016, changed their entire starting 11 away to LASK and quickly fell behind.

In the 14th minute, Sascha Horvath lobbed a corner to Florian Flecker just outside the Liverpool box. The Austrian midfielder controlled the dropping ball before smashing a rocket shot past Caoimhin Kelleher in the Liverpool goal. Darwin Nunez levelled with a 55th-minute penalty kick after Luis Diaz was brought down.

After 61 minutes, Liverpool coach Jurgen Klopp started to replace teenagers with regular starters. Within two minutes they were ahead when Ryan Gravenberch burst down the right and crossed low for Diaz to score from close range. Two minutes from the end Mohamed Salah, a second-half replacement, poked home a third.

In Moldova, Leandro Paredes scored four minutes into first-half injury time to give Roma the lead away to Sheriff. Colombian Cristian Tovar levelled but Romelu Lukaku gave Jose Mourinho's team a narrow victory.

In the Conference League, Aston Villa, returning to European competition after a 12-year gap, fell behind in the third minute to Legia Warsaw and despite equalising twice lost 3-2. Pawel Wszolek met a cross



Liverpool's Luis Diaz (right) vies for the ball with LASK Linz's Philipp Ziereis during the Europa League Group E match in Linz, Austria, yesterday. (Reuters)

from the left with a sliding volley to put Legia ahead. Jhon Duran levelled after six minutes heading in a rebound after a Nicolo Zaniolo shot.

But the Poles regained the lead after 25 minutes when Wszolek crossed from the right and Ernest Muci scored on the half volley. Lucas Digne levelled with a deflected

shot from the edge of the box after 38 minutes but Muci settled the game with a low shot after 51 minutes.

Croatians Zrinjski Mostar came from three goals down to beat visiting AZ Alkmaar 4-3. Myron Van Brederode, Sven Mijns and Dani de Wit put the Dutch side three goals up by half-time. Zvonimir

Kozulj started the comeback after 48 minutes and ended it in the 81st minute, sandwiching goals from Josip Corluca and Aldin Hrvanovic.

EUROPA LEAGUE RESULTS

Group E: Union Saint-Gilloise (BEL) 1 (Amoura 69) Toulouse (FRA) 1 (Dallinga 45+3-pen); LASK (AUT) 1 (Flecker 14) Liverpool (ENG) 3 (Nunez 56-pen, Luis Diaz 63, Salah 88)
Group F: Rennes (FRA) 3 (Blas 1, Truffert 31, Bertug Yildirim 56) Maccabi Haifa (ISR) 0; Panathinaikos (GRE) 2 (Ioannidis 38, Sporar 78) Villarreal (ESP) 0
Group G: Servette (SUI) 0 Slavia Prague (CZE) 2 (Masopust 32, Ogbu 59); Sheriff Tiraspol (MDA) 1 (Tovar 57) Roma (ITA) 2 (Paredes 45+4, Lukaku 65)
Group H: Bayer Leverkusen (GER) 4 (Wirtz 10, Adli 16, Boniface 66, Hofmann 70) Hacken (SWE) 0; Qarabag (AZE) 1 (Leandro Andrade 56) Molde (NOR) 0

EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE RESULTS

Group E: Legia Warsaw (POL) 3 (Wszolek 3, Muci 26, 51) Aston Villa (ENG) 2 (Duran 6, Digne 38); Zrinjski Mostar (BIH) 4 (Kozulj 48, 81, Corluca 68, Hrvanovic 71) AZ Alkmaar (NED) 3 (Van Brederode 10, Mijns 32, D. de Wit 44)
Group F: Genk (BEL) 2 (Zeqiri 12, McKenzie 85) Fiorentina (ITA) 2 (Ranieri 7, 23); Ferencvaros (HUN) 3 (B. Varga 44-pen, Owusu 45+7, Pesic 79) Cukaricki (SRB) 1 (Ivanovic 26)
Group G: Eintracht Frankfurt (GER) 2 (Marmoush 11-pen, Koch 61) Aberdeen (SCO) 1 (Polvara 22); HJK Helsinki (FIN) 2 (Bande 35, Radulovic 90+9-pen) PAOK (GRE) 3 (Koulierakis 55, Despodov 81, Brandon 90+4)
Group H: Ludogorets (BUL) 4 (Yordanov 46, Piotrowski 50, 63, Rwan Seco 90+4) Spartak Trnava (SVK) 0; Fenerbahce (TUR) 3 (Miguel Crespo 24, Batshuayi 30, Serdar Aziz 47) Nordsjaelland (DEN) 1 (Villadsen 55)

Messi unsure about 2026 World Cup

Buenos Aires: Argentina captain Lionel Messi has said he is unsure about his participation in the next World Cup to be co-hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada in 2026, when he will be 39. "I don't know if I will get there," he told Argentine media personality Miguel Garrados in an interview broadcast on YouTube yesterday. "I don't think about it yet because it is far away."

For now, Messi said he is focused on the 2024 US-hosted Copa America tournament. "After the Copa America we'll see, it will depend on how I feel," he said. "There are still three years left."

Messi led Argentina to victory against France in the World Cup final in Qatar last December. In the interview, he reiterated his disappointment with not having received sufficient "recognition" at his former French club Paris Saint-Germain after holding aloft the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

He claimed he was the only one of his Argentine teammates "who got no recognition" from his club. "It was not what I expected but I've always said that things happen for a reason," Messi said of his Paris years, adding he "wasn't well there."

The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner had already stated on numerous occasions that he was unhappy at PSG before moving to Florida to play for Inter Miami in Major League Soccer.



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Man United crisis deepens after defeat to Bayern Munich

AFP
Munich

Manchester United goalkeeper Andre Onana said he had let his teammates down after a howler set the tone for a 4-3 Champions League defeat to Bayern Munich. A third consecutive defeat ramps up the pressure on United manager Erik ten Hag and two late goals from Casemiro masked the gulf in class between the sides at the Allianz Arena on Wednesday.

However, United had started brightly until Leroy Sane's strike slipped through Onana's grasp on 28 minutes. "After my mistake we

lost control of the game. It's a difficult situation for us, for me especially because I'm the one who let the team down," Onana said. The Cameroonian starred for Inter Milan on their run to last season's Champions League final, but has struggled in the early weeks of his United career since joining in a £47mn.

The Red Devils have now conceded three or more goals in three consecutive games for the first time since 1978. "My start in Manchester is not so good, it's not how I want (to play)," added Onana. "Today is one of my worst games and it is difficult because we have big ambition, we want to win everything – it was a big opportunity for us to bounce back after the sit-



Manchester United's Bruno Fernandes (right) and Alejandro Garnacho react after their Champions League loss to Bayern Munich. (AFP)

uation we are facing. It's a tough time. We have to be together and learn from our mistakes because it's the only thing to do."

United have now lost four of

their opening six games of the season for the first time in 37 years. Ten Hag earned plenty of plaudits for his first season in charge as he led United back into the Cham-

pions League and ended a six-year trophy drought by lifting the League Cup. But his side's downward curve dates back to the latter part of last season. Since a historic 7-0 humiliation at the hands of Liverpool in March, United have lost eight of their last 12 games away from home in all competitions. Ten Hag called for character from his side to bounce back from being outplayed on home soil by Brighton 3-1 at the weekend.

Instead, the former Ajax boss will be concerned at how quickly his side crumbled after Onana's blunder and twice conceded within seconds of getting back into the game. Serge Gnabry quickly doubled Bayern's advantage after Jamal Musiala burst through the

United defence with ease.

Rasmus Hojlund's first goal for the club was the big positive of the night for Ten Hag's men. But Harry Kane had restored Bayern's two-goal cushion within five minutes from the penalty spot after Cristian Eriksen was harshly penalised for handball.

Bayern should have then ran up a far more convincing scoreline as they twice hit the woodwork and eased up by bringing off Kane, Sane, Gnabry and Musiala. Casemiro's first goal could have provoked a nervy finale had Mathys Tel not been given space to crash in Bayern's fourth within three minutes. The Brazilian then headed in his second with virtually the last action of the match.