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CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Martin, Bagnaia split by 0.007s as Fernandez tops practice

At Lusail circuit, it was a day for the youngsters as Gresini Ducati's Giannantonio was second fastest

By Sports Reporter
Doha

RNF Aprilia's Raul Fernandez enjoyed a dream practice session yesterday at the MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar as he not only bagged himself a spot in Q2 but was the fastest of the bunch as his 1:52.892 saw him snatch top honours by just 0.049s.

Under the floodlights at the Lusail International Circuit, it was a day for the youngsters as Gresini Ducati's Fabio Di Giannantonio was the closest contender to the Spaniard. The Italian looked strong from the off and took P2 ahead of Maverick Vinales (Aprilia Racing) who despite setting the fastest lap of the session, was denied the top spot after his lap was cancelled following a yellow flag.

With the Grand Prix of Qatar serving as the penultimate round of the season, it's game on in the championship fight as just 14 points split Francesco Bagnaia (Ducati Lenovo Team) and Jorge Martin (Prima Pramac Racing). It was even closer out on the circuit last night as the duo were locked together with just 0.007s between with Martin in 7th and Bagnaia in 8th.

There were Q2 spots up for grabs as the riders hit the Lusail circuit for a full hour of track time. Bagnaia and Martin struggled through most of the session as they were running 1.5s off the pace. The tensions rose in the title battle as the final 10 minutes came around and it was time to bite the screen on soft rubber.

The red sectors came flying in and it was Fernandez who went top before the riders came back into the pits for a change of rubber. The second run of laps was underway and the timing screens were being lit up with red sectors once again. Fast laps came in every direction but a yellow flag saw laps cancelled and it was down to the final minute to decide the order.

It was looking like a disaster for Martin as he found himself outside of Q2 contention until the Spaniard pulled together a flyer to put himself in P6 and bag a spot in Q2. Bagnaia was one of the riders who had a lap cancelled as he dropped down the order from P4. The Champion responded however as he set another flyer to slot himself just behind Martin.



RNF Aprilia's Raul Fernandez in action during the second practice session of the MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday.

Brad Binder (Red Bull KTM Factory Racing) was very much in the mix as he took fourth place. The South African got the better of Aleix Espargaro (Aprilia Racing) who rounded out the top five.

Luca Marini (Mooney VR46 Racing Team) put in a very late run and was looking good for the top spot as he proceeded to put down red sectors with no other riders circulating at pace. The Italian only managed P6 in the end but demoted the title contenders Martin and Bagnaia down a place each as they took 7th and 8th.

Augusto Fernandez (GASGAS Factory Racing Tech3) was just behind in 9th place, with Marc Marquez (Respol Honda Team) taking full advantage of a Pecco Bagnaia

to round out the top ten and take the final Q2 spot.

There are some heavy hitters set for battle in qualifying 1 today. Jack Miller (Red Bull KTM Factory Racing) was the first to miss out on a Q2 spot as the Aussie fell just 0.014s short of the top 10 in P11.

Miller will be joined by the Alex Marquez (Gresini Racing) as well as Franco Morbidelli (Monster Energy Yamaha), Pol Espargaro (GASGAS Factory Racing Tech3), Marco Bezzecchi (Mooney VR46 Racing Team), and Johann Zarco (Prima Pramac Racing). The action has only just started at the Lusail International Circuit. The title fight is on with MotoGP enjoying some of the closest racing in its history.



Francesco Bagnaia and Jorge Martin (below) made it through to Q2 for today's qualifying despite a scrappy session yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil



WORLD CUP 2026 AND ASIAN CUP 2027 QUALIFIERS

Queiroz sets perfect target for Qatar after a resounding start

Carlos Queiroz has set Qatar the target of winning all their matches following a resounding start to their Preliminary Joint Qualification - Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 campaign on Thursday.

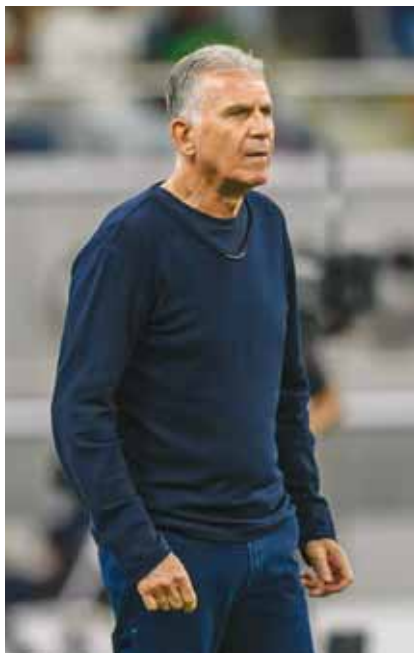
The reigning AFC Asian Cup champions were at their best as they cruised to an 8-1 win over depleted Afghanistan in a Group A tie at the Khalifa International Stadium.

Queiroz, taking charge of his first official match since being appointed head coach, was pleased with his side's focus and drive. "We will play to win all matches regardless of the other results in the group. This will be our way to achieve our target and qualify," said the highly experienced Queiroz.

Almoez Ali led the way with four goals, with Hassan al-Haydos, Mostafa Meshaal, Ahmed Alaa and Tameem Mansour all netting one each. "Our team spirit is very high, which is a very important thing as it makes things easier at the technical side. We managed to win today but our target is to develop the team and we will now concentrate on the second match," Queiroz said.

Qatar's journey to qualify for the FIFA World Cup Finals on merit for the first time takes them to India on Tuesday, with the South Asian side having opened their campaign with a 1-0 defeat of Kuwait.

Meanwhile, India coach Igor Stimac said he was not surprised that his team beat Kuwait. The home side were the favourites going into the match but a disciplined and



focused performance saw Manvir Singh striking 15 minutes from time to earn India a flying start.

"I am not surprised by the outcome, but I always maintain respect for our opponents. Nevertheless, I have complete confidence in our team and their abilities," said Stimac. "Our goal was to win the game, although it is important to exercise caution when expressing such sentiments,



Qatar Football Association president Jassim bin Rashid al-Bueinain felicitated Qatar strikers Akram Afif and Almoez Ali for reaching the remarkable milestone of 100 international matches for the national team. The celebration took place right after Qatar's 8-1 victory over Afghanistan at the Khalifa International Stadium on Thursday.

as it may be perceived as underestimating our opponents. I have utmost trust in our team and the effort they have put in over the past four and a half years.

"We have worked diligently with them,

supporting and guiding them, acknowledging their mistakes and urging them to persevere. And now, we are beginning to see the results of our efforts. We maintained complete control over the game

and denied Kuwait any opportunity. I had some concerns as we were missing three key players due to significant injuries, but the players who took their place did an exceptional job," Stimac added.

SPOTLIGHT

Farida Mudhar stars at Al Shaqab International Arabian Horse Show

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The two-day Al Shaqab International Arabian Horse Show began yesterday under the patronage of President of the Qatar Olympic Committee and Chairman of Al Shaqab HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani.

Organised by Al Shaqab, a member of Qatar Foundation, at Al Shaqab indoor and outdoor arena, the inaugural day of event saw fierce competitions among participants. The equestrian spectacle has attracted a total of 272 horses amid greater participation of horse owners from Qatar and beyond.

In Yearling Fillies section A (Class 1A) competitions, Farida Mudhar owned by Sheikh Hamad bin Ali al-Thani won the first place, followed by D Rayah owned by Al Rajhiah Stud in second place and Jood Al Yacoub owned by Al Yacoub Stud in third place.

Rahaf Mudhar owned by Sheikh Hamad bin Ali al-Thani claimed the first place in the Yearling Fillies Section B (Class 1B) competitions, followed by Hariryah Al Nasser owned by Al Nasser Stud and Sabha Al Khor owned by Al Dawasir Stud, respectively.

In Fillies 2 Years Old Section A (Class 2A), Mzoon Al Diriyah owned by Al-Diriya Stud finished in the first place, while Sab'ah Al Shahamia owned by HE Sheikhha Iman Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani and Joud Al Hamad owned by Sheikh Hamad Khaled al-Sabah won the second third places, respectively.



The Al Shaqab International Arabian Horse Show has attracted a total of 272 horses amid greater participation of horse owners from Qatar and beyond.

Al Shaqab International Arabian Horse Show is classified as a B show by the European Conference of Arab Horse Organisations (ECAHO), allowing winning horses to qualify for international shows of higher classification.

This show not only showcases the beauty and grace of purebred Arabian horses but also celebrates the traditional and cultural significance of owning these magnificent creatures, reflecting the deep-seated

love for Arabian horses in the community.

Since its establishment in 1992, Al Shaqab's vision has been to build on Qatar's Arabian horse heritage and be a leading global centre for equine professionals. Al Shaqab's facilities, which are distinctively designed in the shape of a horse-shoe, cover 980,000 square meters, with a state-of-the-art Main Arena comprising both an indoor and outdoor venue capable of holding over 5,000 spectators.



Farida Mudhar owned by Sheikh Hamad bin Ali al-Thani won the first place in Yearling Fillies section A (Class 1A) category.



2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Argentina stunned by Uruguay; Diaz double sinks Brazil

'They're a physical team and on counter-attack they were dangerous'

AFP
Montevideo

Uruguay ended Argentina's 14-match unbeaten streak with a 2-0 victory over the world champions in World Cup qualifiers on Thursday as Luis Diaz scored twice to fire Colombia to an emotional 2-1 win over Brazil.

Defender Ronald Araujo fired Uruguay ahead on 41 minutes before Liverpool forward Darwin Nunez made the game safe with an 87th-minute goal on the counter-attack to settle a hard-fought clash at the Bombonera Stadium in Buenos Aires. It was Lionel Messi and Argentina's first defeat of the 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign, and their first loss since they were stunned 2-1 by Saudi Arabia at the 2022 finals in Qatar.

"We never felt comfortable," Messi said after the defeat. "They're a physical team that works well and on the counterattack they were very dangerous," added Messi, praising the work of Uruguay's revered Argentine coach Marcelo Bielsa. "You can see his hand in the team. In all the teams or clubs he's been involved in, including Argentina, you can see his hand," said Messi.

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni meanwhile backed his team to recover in time for next week's showdown with Brazil.

Argentina, who had won all four of their opening qualifiers, remain on top of the standings with 12 points from five matches. Uruguay's win leaves them in second place on 10 points.

In other South American qualifiers, Nunez's Liverpool team-mate Diaz scored two goals in five minutes as Colombia came from behind to stun Brazil 2-1 in Barranquilla. Diaz's dramatic double capped a roller-coaster month for the forward, whose father was taken hostage by Colombian guerrillas at the end of October before being released last week.

Diaz's father, Luis Manuel Diaz, was watching from the stands in tears as his son scored in the 75th and 79th minutes to fire Colombia to a crucial win. Diaz's second-half double cancelled out Brazil's opener, which came from Arsenal forward Gabriel Martinelli after only four minutes.

A disappointing result for Brazil was com-



Uruguay's forward Darwin Nunez (left) and Argentina's defender Nicolas Otamendi vie for the ball during the 2026 FIFA World Cup South American qualification match at La Bombonera stadium in Buenos Aires on Thursday night. (AFP)

pounded by an injury to Real Madrid star Vinicius Jr, who limped off clutching his left thigh after 27 minutes. Diaz meanwhile said he had experienced "hard moments" after learning of his father's kidnapping in late October.

"But life makes you strong and brave and I think that's football, and not just football but life," said Diaz, dedicating his performance to Colombian compatriots.

"I'm grateful to my teammates, to the coaching staff who were always there for me at every moment. And I dedicate the victory to the people, who deserved it."

Colombia moved up to third place after the win with nine points from five games. In other

games, Venezuela ground out a 0-0 draw with Ecuador while Bolivia moved off the bottom of the 10-team standings with their first points of the qualifiers after a 2-0 home win over Peru.

Chile and Paraguay remain outside the qualifying spots after a goalless draw in Santiago. Chile's Argentine coach Eduardo Berizzo resigned after a 0-0 draw that leaves 'La Roja' in eighth place, with five points from five games.

The top six teams of the round-robin home-and-away qualifying tournament will earn berths at the expanded 2026 World Cup taking place in the United States, Canada and Mexico, while the seventh-placed team goes into a play-off.

Everton docked 10 points after breaching Premier League financial rules

London: Everton have been docked 10 points after being found guilty of breaching Premier League financial rules, plunging one of England's most storied football clubs into the relegation zone.

The punishment, the biggest sporting sanction in the history of the competition, leaves Sean Dyche's side 19th in the table on a total of just four points after 12 matches - five points from safety.

Everton said they were "shocked and disappointed by the ruling", announcing their intention to appeal. The Premier League referred the club, who have posted losses for five consecutive years, to an independent commission in March for an alleged breach of its profitability and sustainability rules (PSRs).

Clubs are allowed to lose a maximum £105mn (£130mn) over a three-year period or face sanctions. "The club admitted it was in breach of the PSRs for the period ending season 2021/22 but the extent of the breach remained in dispute," the Premier League said in a statement yesterday.

"Following a five-day hearing last month, the commission determined that Everton FC's PSR calculation for the relevant period resulted in a loss of £124.5mn, as contended by the Premier League, which exceeded the threshold of £105 million permitted under the PSRs. The commission concluded that a sporting sanction in the form of a 10-point deduction should be imposed. That sanction has immediate effect."

The commission was blunt about the situation in its full written reasons. "The position that Everton finds itself in is of its own making," it said. "It is Everton's responsibility to ensure that it complies with the PSR regime. The excess over the threshold is significant. The consequence is that Everton's culpability is great."

But Everton said the punishment was "wholly disproportionate and unjust". "Everton maintains that it has been open and transparent in the information it has provided to the Premier League and that it has always respected the integrity of the process," the club said in a statement.

"The club does not recognise

the finding that it failed to act with the utmost good faith and it does not understand this to have been an allegation made by the Premier League during the course of proceedings.

"Both the harshness and severity of the sanction imposed by the commission are neither a fair nor a reasonable reflection of the evidence submitted."

Everton great Neville Southall said the team, who have won three of their past five league games, have the quality to survive. "All we've got to do is galvanise the players, the manager and the fans into one, which will be a good thing for them," he said. "The Premier League isn't a great league from the bottom half down so they've got half a chance of winning that half of the league."

The punishment comes at a time of upheaval at the club. In September, owner Farhad Moshiri agreed a deal with US investment firm 777 Partners for his 94 percent shareholding. Prior to points deduction, the takeover was reportedly on course to be completed by next month.

Everton are currently building a new 53,000-capacity stadium, preparing to leave their Goodison Park ground. They said they would monitor "with great interest" the decisions made in other cases concerning financial rules.

Premier League champions Manchester City were charged earlier this year with 115 alleged breaches of financial fair play regulations in a case that is ongoing. Only two other clubs have received points deductions in Premier League history.

Middlesbrough were deducted three points for failing to fulfil a fixture against Blackburn during the 1996/97 season, while in 2010 Portsmouth were deducted nine points after going into administration. Both clubs were unable to avoid relegation.

Nine-time English champions Everton have been a continuous presence in the top flight since 1954 and have never been relegated from the Premier League. But they only avoided the drop by two points last season and have spent years in the shadow of city rivals Liverpool, last winning a trophy in 1995.

ALBANIA DRAW IN MOLDOVA TO QUALIFY FOR 2024 EUROS

Paris: Albania clinched a place at Euro 2024 yesterday despite conceding a late equaliser as they drew 1-1 in Moldova. In other early games, Kazakhstan won to keep their automatic qualifying dreams alive.

Sokol Cikalleshi put the visitors ahead with a first-half penalty and although Vladyslav Babohlo levelled with three minutes left, the point ensured Albania will finish in the top two in Group E. It will be Albania's second appearance at a major tournament after their debut at Euro 2016.

In Group H, Kazakhstan closed to one

point behind the two automatic qualifying places in Group H with a 3-1 home win over San Marino. Islam Chesnokov struck in the 19th and 51st minutes but minnows of San Marino replied with only their second goal of the campaign when Simone Franciosi struck on the hour.

Abat Aimbetov's penalty two minutes into added time killed off San Marino's hopes of a rare point. In the same group, Finland kept themselves within a win of third place by beating Northern Ireland 4-0 in Helsinki.

A Joel Pohjanpalo penalty three min-

utes before the break, a Daniel Hakans goal three minutes after half-time, a superb Teemu Pukki strike and a Robin Lod goal secured the points for the hosts.

On Thursday night, Hungary and Slovakia booked their tickets for Euro 2024 while 16-year-old sensation Lamine Yamal scored again for already-qualified Spain. The Hungarians guaranteed their place at the finals in Germany when an own goal from Bulgaria's Alex Petkov deep in stoppage time gave them a 2-2 draw in Sofia.

The visitors only needed a point to qualify but were 2-1 down before Petkov

allowed a cross to skid off the top of his head and into his own net in the 97th minute in the most dramatic of finishes.

The Hungarian players exploded in joy at the end of a match played in an empty stadium because of fears of protests against the head of the Bulgarian football federation. Instead, Bulgarian fans mounted protests outside the ground. Ten supporters and five police officers were injured in clashes and police also used water cannon to disperse crowds of fans angry at the lack of their national team's progress. The draw gave Hungary

15 points from seven games in Group G of Europe qualifying, two ahead of Serbia.

In Bratislava, Slovakia cruised past Iceland 4-2, with two goals from Lukas Haraslin helping them qualify for the finals for the third time in a row. Hungary and Slovakia join host nation Germany, Austria, Belgium, England, France, Portugal, Scotland, Spain and Turkey as the teams qualified so far.

In other games, Spain, who have also already secured their qualification, comfortably beat Cyprus 3-1 with starlet Yamal opening the scoring in the fifth minute.



REVIEW

South Africa look forward to future success after exit

'If you look at the stats overall, South Africa will walk away and say they ticked all the boxes'

Reuters
Kolkata

South Africa may have suffered more Cricket World Cup semi-final heartache but coach Rob Walter believes they have laid a platform for the future with a core group of players after exceeding expectations at the most recent tournament in India.

Poor starts with the bat and ball cost the side in their tense three wicket defeat to old foes Australia on Thursday - the fifth time they have exited a World Cup in the semi-finals.

South Africa will co-host the next 50-over finals with Namibia and Zimbabwe in 2027 and Walter believes there is much room for optimism they can improve further having arrived in India under the radar and with little expectation of success.

"I'm excited," he told reporters. "There's huge scope for us to grow as a team and to play even better than we have. The majority of the people that are going to be on the journey (to the next World Cup) are still in the changing room."

"We've seen young guys at the end of the tournament with less than 15 games to their name stand up and really dominate in cer-



South Africa's cricket players react after losing the ICC World Cup semi-final against Australia at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata on Thursday. Australia won by three wickets. (AFP)

tain phases for the team. Different people putting their hands up throughout the competition."

Wicketkeeper-batter Quinton de Kock announced he would retire from the 50-over format before the tournament started, while 2027 may be too far off for 34-year-old batters David Miller and Rassie van der Dussen, the core of the group should remain.

"We've seen guys play unbelievable cricket that probably surprised a lot of people in this (me-

dia) room and around the world. I think that is what fuels them to come back and be better," Walter said.

Former South Africa fast bowler Dale Steyn, who lost in the semi-finals in 2015, also believes there is cause for optimism.

"If you look at the stats overall, South Africa will walk away and say they ticked all the boxes they wanted to, but they just didn't get over the line," he told *CricInfo*. "There will be some question-



New Zealand's Daryl Mitchell plays a pull shot during the ICC World Cup semi-final against India at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Wednesday. India won by 90 runs. (AFP)

marks, but overall they were fantastic. I didn't think they would make the semi-finals when (fast bowler) Anrich Nortje was injured."

Too nice? That's the New Zealand way, says Mitchell

New Zealand batsman Daryl Mitchell has rejected criticism of the Black Caps for coming to the aid of India's Virat Kohli during Wednesday's World Cup semi-final loss, saying the team took great

pride in the way they went about the game. Several New Zealanders checked on Kohli and helped him stretch his hamstrings when he went down with cramps while scoring a century to help India romp to a 70-run victory at the Wankhede Stadium and a place in tomorrow's final.

Former Australia all-rounder Simon O'Donnell slammed the Black Caps for their lack of competitive instinct but Mitchell, who scored a 119-ball 134 in New Zea-

land's response, said the approach would not change.

"I think that's something we really pride ourselves on as Black Caps and as New Zealanders. We want to play cricket in a way that suits us as a country and how we want to see our kids grow up and play the game themselves," he told reporters before the team left Mumbai.

"We'll keep playing cricket the way we do as Kiwis and hopefully the rest of the world can respect us and how we go about our day-to-day life, not only on the field but off it as well. It's something that we're really proud of, so we'll just keep being Black Caps and doing what we're doing."

New Zealand next travel to Bangladesh for a two-Test series starting on Nov. 28 and Mitchell said the disappointment of their semi-final exit at the World Cup would not have any impact on their performance.

"That's the nature of international sport these days," he said. "(After) the T20 World Cup final we played a couple of years ago, we had a T20 in India about 48 hours after that so we're used to it."

"We'll show up, we love Test cricket, it means a hell of a lot to this group. We'll be ready to go come the first day of that Test and wear that black cap again."

HIT PAKISTANI CRICKET SHOW WINS HEARTS IN INDIA

New Delhi: Long-simmering rivalries on and off the pitch divided India and Pakistan once more at the World Cup, but a cricket show run by Pakistani greats of the game has won fans across the border.

The Pavilion, featuring cricketing heroes turned broadcasters including World Cup winner Wasim Akram, Shoaib Malik, Misbah-ul-Haq and Moin Khan, has been a hit in India for what fans say is its unbiased and engaging commentary.

"They give cutting-edge, sharp analysis," said Shubhanan Nair, a 32-year-old in India's southern city of Bangalore, who said watching the programme online had become part of his "daily ritual".

"They will talk about what went wrong with every team, including their own...they also appreciate whichever team did well."

Neighbours India and Pakistan share deep cultural and linguistic links but their history has been mired in violence and bloodshed.

The two nuclear-armed nations have fought three wars since the subcontinent's partition in 1947. "If it's black, we say black, and if it's white, we say white," presenter and Pakistan legend Wasim Akram told AFP.



Retired Pakistan cricketers Misbah-ul-Haq (left), Shoaib Malik (second left), Wasim Akram (centre), and Moin Khan (right) join host Fakhr-e-Alam for a group photograph.

"Speak your own mind but nothing personal, everything has to be professional and positive." Launched for the 2021 T20 World Cup in the UAE, the show enjoyed viewing figures on all platforms

of about 130 million - until the one-day World Cup opened last month in India. Akram said numbers were now "almost double". "It's just four to five of us talking, no science...it's a lot of hard work," he said.

"But sitting together, enjoying each other's company, it's a lot of fun - and I suppose that's what people see."

'Love from India'

Akram said he was happy the show was reaching a wider audience and admitted its popularity across borders had surprised him.

"We have respect for each other, we crack jokes, we enjoy each other's company...if our show is able to tell people that at the end of the day it's only a game, that's so nice."

"If you're Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan - everybody is patriotic about their country," he added. "Let's leave it at that and just talk about good in this day and age, to be nice to each other, respect each other."

"If our show is making that impact, then we're over the moon." Hosts India, who will contest tomorrow's final against

Australia, beat Pakistan in the only match they played against each other at this World Cup.

The clash took place in front of a partisan home crowd after Pakistani fans were unable to secure visas from Indian authorities.

Any meeting between the rivals has millions watching around the globe and is a bonanza for broadcasters and sponsors.

But Pakistan crashed out of the World Cup on Saturday, failing to reach the semi-finals with five defeats and four wins.

"At this World Cup, Pakistan will be remembered the most for *The Pavilion on A Sports*," fan Abhishek Mukherjee wrote on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter.

On its YouTube channel, comments below the programme show how a sport can bring otherwise rivals together.

"Wish we had a show like this in India...love from India," one said.

From Pakistan, another watcher reciprocated, wishing India good luck in the final. "I really hope India wins this World Cup...love from Lahore," wrote a user named izkiki.

FORMULA ONE

Ferrari emerge fastest in Las Vegas after drama

Reuters
Las Vegas

Charles Leclerc led Ferrari teammate Carlos Sainz in a practice one-two yesterday to cap an extraordinary first night at the Las Vegas Grand Prix with the delayed track action ending at 4am and in front of empty grandstands after earlier drama.

Sainz's performance was all the more impressive considering the Spaniard's car had been wrecked by a loose drain cover that forced the cancellation of first practice after just eight minutes' action.

White smoke and sparks erupted from the Ferrari as the cover punched a hole through the floor, leaving a trail of destruction that triggered an automatic 10 place grid penalty for tonight's race.

The survival cell, engine, battery and control electronics were all damaged beyond repair during an incident that Ferrari team principal Frederic Vasseur called "unacceptable."

"I think it's tough for a team to arrive in Vegas and to have this kind of incident," he said as mechanics rebuilt Sainz's car.

Action resumed more than five-and-a-half hours later at 2:30am following repairs to the 3.8-mile course which runs down the famed Strip and against a backdrop of neon-lit hotels and casinos, but with fans cleared from the grandstands.

Despite the governing FIA rec-



Ferrari's Spanish driver Carlos Sainz Jr. races during the second practice session for the Las Vegas Grand Prix in Nevada. (AFP)

ognising "highly unusual external circumstances," Formula One stewards said Sainz would still incur a 10 place grid penalty for today's race.

Alpine driver Esteban Ocon's chassis also needed to be replaced due to damage but he too returned for second practice.

Leclerc's fastest lap of one minute 35.265 seconds was 0.517 faster than Sainz.

Fernando Alonso was third quickest for Aston Martin with Red Bull's Sergio Perez fourth and Valtteri Bottas fifth for Alfa Romeo.

Red Bull's triple world champion Max Verstappen was sixth on the timesheets ahead of a race with little at stake for the Dutch driver, who wrapped up the championship in Qatar last

month. "We managed to do the whole programme which I think was the most important for today," said Verstappen, who has been no fan of all the hype surrounding the event and extended that to the track as well.

"I've had better tracks in my life...there's nothing new that I discovered," he said.

Mercedes seven times world champion Lewis Hamilton was more enthusiastic, however.

"It's incredibly fast and a lot of fun...I'm so glad we got to run again. Not a good FPI (first practice) but they did a good job to fix it," said the Briton.

MEGA EVENT

Team principals were quick to defend the brand new course and the massive investment that has

gone into staging the event for the first time in the heart of bustling Las Vegas, a move that has drawn criticism from local residents.

"I'm still convinced that the event is mega for the F1," Vasseur said, noting that issues with manhole covers had impacted races in Monaco and Baku in the past.

"This is probably going to be one of the most watched Grand Prix in the history of the sport," said McLaren CEO Zak Brown.

"We have a tremendous amount of corporate partners out here, lots of fans, lots of attention on this sport as a whole and I think it's (F1 owner) Liberty taking the sport to yet another level," Brown added.

Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff lashed out at a reporter who asked how the cancelled practice was not a "black eye" for F1.

"That's completely ridiculous," Wolff said.

"How can you even dare to talk bad about an event that sets the new standard, and you're speaking about a...drain cover that's been undone."

"It's happened before, it's nothing."

Leclerc was also fastest in the first session, with a time of 1:40.909, followed by the Haas duo of Nico Hulkenberg and Kevin Magnussen. Verstappen was fourth.

The sessions along the transformed Strip marked F1's return to Las Vegas for the first time in nearly 40 years.

GOLF

Hojgaard has DP World Tour halfway lead

AFP
Dubai

On a day when his identical twin brother made two eagles, Denmark's Nicolai Hojgaard made just one.

He may have lost the bragging rights at home, but that eagle proved critical in determining the halfway leader in the \$10.5mn DP World Tour Championship.

On the Earth course of Jumeirah Golf Estates, Nicolai Hojgaard's 66 broke through a logjam on top of the leaderboard at 9-under par with a stunning second shot from 217 yards that left him with a six-foot eagle putt and edged him ahead by two shots over a group of five players.

Among those chasing Europe's rising star at 9-under par are world number four Norwegian Viktor Hovland (66) and England's world No15 Tommy Fleetwood (66).

Also in tied second place are South Africa's Thriston Lawrence (64), Frenchman Antoine Rozner (67) and Sweden's Jens Dantorp (67).

Early morning rain and thunderstorm had forced the organisers to delay the tee times. With lift, clean and place in play and the greens soft, it was a day to make birdies.

Defending champion Jon Rahm of Spain made a move up to tied

13th place with a 66, but world number two Rory McIlroy continued to show his rust and could only add an even-par 72 to be 10 shots off the pace.

Nicolai may not have won any title so far in the season, but he was a Ryder Cup rookie for Europe and has also managed to secure his PGA Tour card in the limited opportunities that he got.

And just like in Thursday's opening round, the world No 70 Dane lit up the back nine of the golf course after playing even-par for the front nine. He birdied the 10th, 13th, 15th and 17th before the eagle on his final hole for a blistering 30.

"It's a little bit like last week as well. Had a slow start in every round. And then I just know that in every round, there's going to be a run of birdies at some point with where my game is at. So, it's about staying patient," said Nicolai, whose brother Rasmus shot 66 with eagles on the par-4 15th and the 18th.

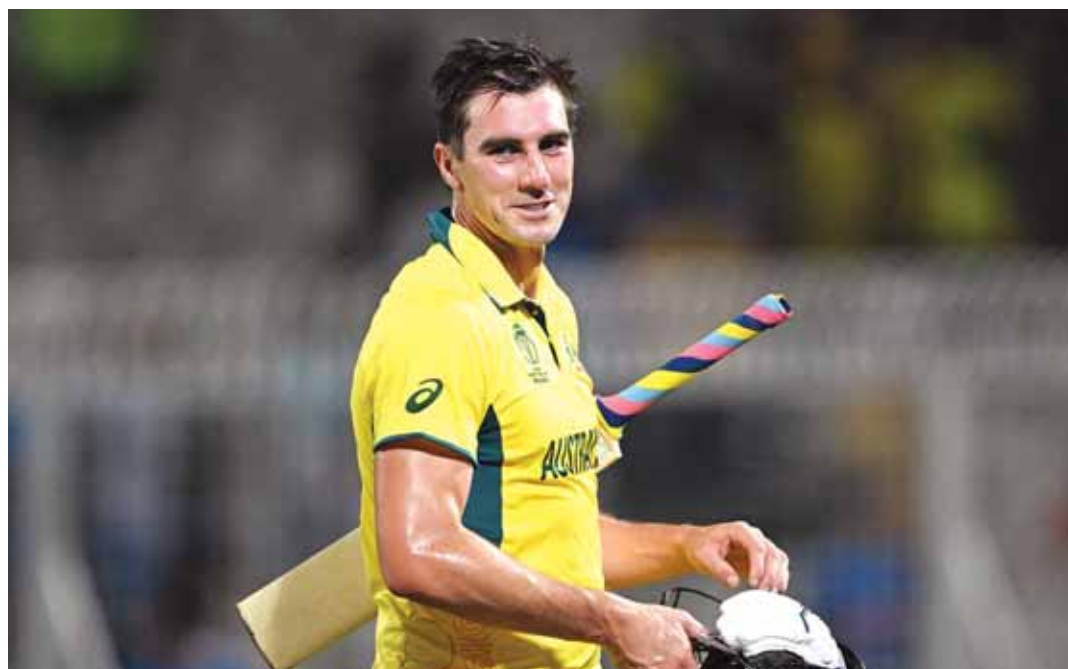
"I would like to play the front nine a little bit better on the weekend. But I'm very, very satisfied with how I played these two rounds. It would be pretty cool to win my first title of the year here. I feel like that's the only thing I missed this season. But there are two rounds to go. There are a lot of really good players in this field I know they are going to be in the hunt the next few days. I'm going to keep grinding as much as I can."



PREVIEW

India eye fairytale finish in WC final against Australia

130,000 fans expected to watch the title clash in Ahmedabad where unbeaten India face in-form Aussies



India's Rohit Sharma during practice in Ahmedabad ahead of the ICC World Cup final against Australia. **Right:** Australia's captain Pat Cummins celebrates his team's win at the end of the ICC World Cup semi-final against South Africa at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata on Thursday. (Reuters/AFP)

AFP
Ahmedabad, India

Rohit Sharma's undefeated India will look to end a 10-year global title drought in front of 130,000 fans in the World Cup final against five-time champions Australia tomorrow.

India have racked up 10 straight wins at the tournament as they seek a third World Cup triumph to add to their 1983 and 2011 victories, the last of which came on home soil.

Despite the country's cricket riches, India are without an international title since the 2013 Champions Trophy and expectations in the cricket-crazy nation of 1.4 billion people have reached fever pitch.

However, the hosts are up against an Australian side who have won eight matches in a row and will be playing in their eighth World Cup final.

"This is going to be an unbelievable game," former India captain Sunil Gavaskar, who was part

of the 1983 World Cup-winning team, told TV channel *India Today*.

"You are playing against the five-time champions, a team that knows how to come back from almost impossible situations, who know how to play finals, how to win finals."

"So I believe it will be a real, real challenge for the Indian team but I do believe that Rohit Sharma's men are up for it."

Apart from their five World Cup victories, Australia clinched their maiden T20 crown in 2021 and also beat India convincingly in the World Test Championship final earlier this year.

India handed Australia a six-wicket mauling in the group stage in Chennai four weeks ago where Pat Cummins' side were bowled out for 199.

Australia also slumped to a 134-run defeat to South Africa in Lucknow but they avenged that loss on Thursday with a three-wicket win over the Proteas in a tense semi-final at Kolkata.

India made the final by hammering New Zealand by 70 runs

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD

Last 10 meetings

DATE	VENUE	RESULT
27/11/2020	Sydney	Australia won by 66 runs
29/11/2020	Sydney	Australia won by 51 runs
02/12/2020	Canberra	India won by 13 runs
17/03/2023	Mumbai	India won by 5 wickets
19/03/2023	Visakhapatnam	Australia won by 10 wickets
22/03/2023	Kolkata	Australia won by 21 runs
22/09/2023	Mohali	India won by 5 wickets
24/09/2023	Indore	India won by 99 runs
27/09/2023	Rajkot	Australia won by 56 runs
08/10/2023	Chennai	India won by 6 wickets

Overall	Australia wins:	India wins:	Tied: 0	No result: 10
	83	57		

in Mumbai with a red-hot Virat Kohli hitting a record 50th ODI century.

Kohli, who surpassed compatriot Sachin Tendulkar's record of 49 tons, leads the tournament batting with 711 runs including three hundreds.

Rohit is the next best Indian

batsman with 550 runs and his leadership has been widely praised - former England captain Nasser Hussain called him a "real hero".

India also boast the tournament's leading bowler with Mohamed Shami taking 23 wickets in six matches, including 7-57 against the Kiwis on Wednesday.

Despite losing to India and South Africa in their first two matches of the tournament, Australia have bounced back.

They won seven league games on the trot with a hobbling Glenn Maxwell authoring a performance for the ages with his undefeated 201 not out against Afghanistan, rescuing his team from 91-7 and carrying them to their victory target of 292.

Leg-spinner Adam Zampa is Australia's top bowler with 22 wickets with pacemen Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood, who both played in the 2015 World Cup winning side, peaking at the right time.

Starc and Hazlewood reduced South Africa to 24-4 inside 12 overs on Thursday after the Proteas and elected to bat first and their opponents only played catch up from that position.

Starc returned figures of 3-34 and Hazlewood grabbed 2-12 in the victory which set up their second World Cup final against India after 2003 when Australia raced to a 125-run win in Johannesburg.

Tomorrow's meeting will be the

eighth between the two teams in ODIs in 2023.

"We have played them a lot of times so we know them inside-out," Hazlewood told reporters.

"Same for them, with us. They have been a quality team, they have been on the march the whole tournament. No real weaknesses in their team, so looking forward to Sunday."

India rode on an explosive start from opener Rohit (47) and Shubman Gill (80) as they racked up 397-4 against New Zealand in the first semi-final.

But Hazlewood prefers to focus on the early stages of India's chase against his team in the league game four weeks ago when India were three down for two runs in pursuit of a modest 200 to win.

"Hopefully similar to last time we played them," Hazlewood said on tackling the Indian top-order. "We got them out cheaply. I think we made them 3-3 maybe so that would be ideal."

Tickets have been sold out for tomorrow with a packed house expected and Starc said it will be "loud and a spectacle of cricket".

FACTFILE - INDIA

- **WORLD RANKING** - 1
- **PATH TO THE FINAL - Group stage**
- Oct 08:** bt Australia by 6 wickets at Chennai
- Oct 11:** bt Afghanistan by 8 wickets at New Delhi
- Oct 14:** bt Pakistan by 7 wickets at Ahmedabad
- Oct 19:** bt Bangladesh by 7 wickets at Pune
- Oct 22:** bt New Zealand by 4 wickets at Dharamsala
- Oct 29:** bt England by 100 runs at Lucknow
- Nov 02:** bt Sri Lanka by 302 runs at Mumbai
- Nov 05:** bt South Africa by 243 runs at Kolkata
- Nov 12:** bt Netherlands by 160 runs at Bengaluru
- Semi-final**
- Nov 15:** bt N Zealand by 70 runs at Mumbai
- **SQUAD** - Rohit Sharma (captain), Hardik Pandya (replaced by Prasidh Krishna in squad after injury), Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (wkt), Ravindra Jadeja, Shardul Thakur, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohammed Shami, Ravichandran Ashwin, Ishan Kishan, Suryakumar Yadav
- **LEADING RUN-SCORER IN SQUAD** - Virat Kohli: 13,794 runs; highest score 183; average 58.69; Hundreds 50, Fifties 71
- **LEADING RUN-SCORER AT 2023 WORLD CUP** - Virat Kohli: 711 runs; highest score 117; average 101.57; Hundreds 3, Fifties 5
- **LEADING WICKET-TAKER IN SQUAD** - Ravindra Jadeja: 220 wickets; best bowling 5-33; average 35.87
- **LEADING WICKET-TAKER AT 2023 WORLD CUP** - Mohamed Shami: 23 wickets; best bowling 7-57; average 9.13
- **PREVIOUS WORLD CUP APPEARANCES**
- 1975:** Group stage
- 1979:** Group stage
- 1983: Champions**
- 1987:** Semi-finals
- 1992:** Round-robin stage
- 1996:** Semi-finals
- 1999:** Super Six
- 2003:** Runners-up
- 2007:** Group stage
- 2011: Champions**
- 2015:** Semi-finals
- 2019:** Semi-finals

Where the Cricket World Cup final will be won and lost

Ahmedabad, India: India face Australia in what promises to be a thrilling Cricket World Cup final in front of a capacity 130,000 crowd at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad tomorrow. Tournament hosts India have won all 10 games as they bid for a third World Cup title and second on home soil. But if any side can stop the India juggernaut then Australia - aiming for a record-extending sixth World Cup crown - could be that team. Below AFP Sport looks at where the showpiece match could be won and lost:

- **Opening exchanges** - India captain Rohit Sharma has instilled an aggressive attitude in his team, with the opener leading from the front. Virat Kohli and Shreyas Iyer took the batting plaudits with two fine hundreds in a 70-run semi-final win over New Zealand as India piled up a huge 397-4 in Mumbai. But it was Rohit who first demoralised New Zealand pacemen Trent Boult and Tim Southee with a rapid 29-ball 47 that ensured India were in command from the start. It has been a similar story in the field. Even if opposition opening batsmen can survive against India's new-ball duo of Jasprit Bumrah and Mohamed Siraj, they then have to face Mohamed Shami. The seamer is the tournament's leading bowler with 23 wickets from just six matches, with his devastating 7-57 against New Zealand the best bowling figures in any World Cup semi-final. Australia's opening bowlers and batsmen, however, appear to be coming into form at just the right time. Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc reduced a powerful South Africa top-order to 24-4 in Thursday's second semi-final. And in a tense, low-scoring, affair



Indian Air Force Surya Kiran aircraft perform an aerobatic display during a rehearsal ahead of the ICC World Cup final between India and Australia tomorrow. (AFP)

opener Travis Head made a valuable 62. David Warner didn't fully fire against the Proteas but the 37-year-old left-hander has dominated numerous attacks in his ODI career and with 528 runs he is the team's leading scorer at the tournament.

- **Field marshals** - Australia have long set the benchmark when it comes to fielding, not simply by holding their catches but with an athletic determination to save every run they can. Fielding used to be regarded as India's weakness, with players brought up on rough and uneven outfields reluctant to fling themselves around in a bid to stop ones becoming twos. But India now boast several fine fielders, including a world-class performer in Ravindra Jadeja, with the all-rounder having taken some superb catches at backward point as well as being reliable in the deep. Meanwhile, wicketkeeper K L Rahul, still best known as a batsman, has been an unsung hero behind the stumps during the World Cup. In the semi-final win over New Zealand, a brilliant diving catch low

to his left dismissed opener Devon Conway.

- **Pressure points** - It may be a cliché that no Australia team is truly beaten until victory is finally secured, but there is a reason why it exists. When they collapsed to 91-7, chasing 292, against Afghanistan in a pool match they were all but beaten. Yet Australia still won, albeit it needed Glenn Maxwell's spectacular 201 not out to see them home. Australia captain Pat Cummins - who earlier this year led his side to victory over India in the World Test Championship final at The Oval - held firm during remarkable unbroken stand of 202. And the fast bowler's enjoyment of batting in a tense situation was evident again when he could be seen smiling during the closing stages of a nervy run-chase against South Africa. India have coped well so far with the burden of expectation placed upon them by billions of followers in a cricket-crazy country and have already defeated Australia at the tournament by six wickets in Chennai back on October 8.

FACTFILE - AUSTRALIA

- **WORLD RANKING** - 2
- **PATH TO THE FINAL - Group stage**
- Oct 08:** lost to India by 6 wickets at Chennai
- Oct 12:** lost to South Africa by 134 runs at Lucknow
- Oct 16:** bt Sri Lanka by 5 wickets at Lucknow
- Oct 20:** bt Pakistan by 62 runs at Bengaluru
- Oct 25:** bt Netherlands by 309 runs at New Delhi
- Oct 28:** bt New Zealand by 5 runs at Dharamsala
- Nov 04:** bt England by 33 runs at Ahmedabad
- Nov 07:** bt Afghanistan by 3 wickets at Mumbai
- Nov 11:** bt Bangladesh by 8 wickets at Pune
- Semi-final**
- Nov 16:** bt South Africa by 3 wickets at Kolkata
- **SQUAD** - Pat Cummins (captain), Steve Smith, Alex Carey, Josh Inglis (wkt), Sean Abbott, Marnus Labuschagne, Cameron Green, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Mitch Marsh, Glenn Maxwell, Marcus Stoinis, David Warner, Adam Zampa, Mitchell Starc.
- **LEADING RUN-SCORER IN SQUAD** - David Warner: 6,925 runs; highest score 179; average 45.55; Hundreds 22; Fifties 33
- **LEADING RUN-SCORER AT 2023 WORLD CUP** - David Warner: 528 runs; highest score 163; average 52.80; Hundreds 2; Fifties 2
- **LEADING WICKET-TAKER IN SQUAD** - Mitchell Starc: 233 wickets; best bowling 6-28; average 23.02
- **LEADING WICKET-TAKER AT 2023 WORLD CUP** - Adam Zampa: 22 wickets; best bowling 4-8; average 21.40
- **PREVIOUS WORLD CUP APPEARANCES**
- 1975:** Runners-up
- 1979:** Group stage
- 1983:** Group stage
- 1987: Champions**
- 1992:** Round-robin stage
- 1996:** Runners-up
- 1999: Champions**
- 2003: Champions**
- 2007: Champions**
- 2011:** Quarter-finals
- 2015: Champions**
- 2019:** Semi-finals