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**SPORT**



## Afif to Lee Kang-in: Five players who lit up Asian Cup group stage

AFP  
Doha

The Asian Cup last 16 begins tomorrow in Qatar when Australia face Indonesia and Tajikistan play the United Arab Emirates. Here are five players who lit up the group phase:

### Aymen Hussein (Iraq)

Iraq have been among the standout teams so far and largely have Hussein to thank. Five goals from three matches have put the 27-year-old two clear in the race to be top-scorer. He netted both in Iraq's 2-1 win over favourites Japan as the Lions of Mesopotamia strutted out of Group D with three wins.

The Air Force FC striker cuts an imposing figure at six feet and two inches (1.88m). With his side 1-0 down against Vietnam

at the interval, he came off the bench for an eventful second half: scoring, missing a penalty, then showing the nerve to step up for a second penalty in the 12th minute of stoppage time. He converted and Iraq won 3-2.

### Musab al-Battat (Palestine)

The Palestine skipper has proven an inspiration on and off the pitch. On it, the attacking right-back is at the top of the tournament statistics with his two assists and eight chances created. The 30-year-old led the charge as Palestine beat Hong Kong 3-0 to claim their first-ever win at the tournament, swinging in two inch-perfect crosses that ended in headed goals.

He has been a leader off the pitch too, the unofficial spokesman for a team who have advanced to the next round for the first time despite the war in Gaza. In achieving that historic feat he said that the players had made good on "a promise we made to the Palestinian people".

### Akram Afif (Qatar)

Livewire forward Afif was one of the stars of Qatar's 2019 Asian Cup win and is leading their charge again on home soil. The 27-year-old scored two goals to spearhead his team's 3-0 opening win over Lebanon and was again on target as the hosts and holders beat Tajikistan 1-0.

Afif had spells in Belgium and Spain earlier in his career and has said he would leave Qatar's Al Sadd to go back to Europe "tomorrow" if the opportunity was right. Watching clubs will have taken note of his pace, clinical finishing and all-round attacking threat over the past two weeks.

### Mehdi Ghayedi (Iran)

A former prodigy whose potential looked in danger of going unfulfilled, Ghayedi is back on track after playing a key role for Iran in the group stage. The 25-year-old winger's elusive running and laser-guided finishing helped the three-time champions top their group with three wins from three. Ghayedi has

scored twice at the Asian Cup and both goals were virtually the same, sliding the ball into the far corner after gliding in from the left. Iran look like being one of the main title contenders in Qatar and Ghayedi could help them win the Asian Cup again for the first time since 1976.

### Lee Kang-in (South Korea)

Jürgen Klinsmann has made Lee the linchpin of his side and the Paris Saint-Germain attacking midfielder has repaid his coach's faith at the Asian Cup. The 22-year-old outshone his captain Son Heung-min with two goals in South Korea's opening 3-1 win over Bahrain and forced an own goal against Malaysia with a brilliant free-kick.

South Korea have not fully convinced in Qatar and they face a crunch last-16 showdown with Roberto Mancini's Saudi Arabia next. But with Lee pulling the creative strings and providing a shooting threat from long range, they could finally claim the trophy for the first time since 1960.

### PREVIEW

# Klinsmann says 'no easy team in Asia' as Korea gear up for Saudi

Palestine face hosts as the Asian Cup kicks into high gear with knockout rounds

Agencies  
Doha

Jürgen Klinsmann's stuttering South Korea play Saudi Arabia while Palestine face hosts and holders Qatar as the Asian Cup kicks into high gear with the knockout rounds from tomorrow. The tournament has been whittled down from 24 teams to 16 but trying to predict who lifts the trophy on February 10 looks more difficult than ever. Japan came to Qatar as favourites and looking to win the title for a record-extending fifth time, but they reached the knockout phase as only runners-up in their group behind Iraq.

Iraq impressed in deservedly beating Japan 2-1 and along with Iran and Qatar were the only teams to win all three games in the first round. Iraq play Jordan and Iran meet Syria next.

South Korea would have faced Japan had they topped their group, but they were held 3-3 by Malaysia in their final game and play Roberto Mancini's Saudis on Tuesday. South Korea, who are trying to win the Asian Cup for the first time in 64 years, also drew with Jordan and coach Klinsmann is anticipating "a battle".

"You cannot underestimate any team - every team is tactically very smart, they can hurt you even if you have 85 percent possession," the German legend warned. "There is no easy team in Asia to play," he added.

Klinsmann was less pleased with the draw against Malaysia, pointing to the huge amount of ball possession his side had but said he knew the areas that needed improvement ahead of the bumper tie against Saudi Arabia. "You saw a very exciting game with six goals," said the German legend. "Obviously I'm very angry at how we conceded the goals. When you control a game as much as we did, things like this happen when you don't get a two-goal advantage.



We can do better in the defensive transition but overall, the group stage is done and now the tournament really starts."

Skipper and talisman Son has scored twice at the tournament, both penalties, and called their madcap stalemate with already eliminated Malaysia "a big wake-up call".

Opponents Saudi Arabia topped their group with two wins and a draw, but they have not really fired in attack and made hard work of defeating nine-man Kyrgyzstan 2-0.

"We know it will be a very difficult match, not only for us, but also for them," said Mancini of the looming South Korea clash, which is undoubtedly the game of the last 16.

Mancini has no concerns about the difficulty of the task against South Korea. "If you want to go through in this competition, you have to play against the best teams. Whether it is in the Round of 16,

quarter-finals or semi-finals, you have to face teams like Japan, Korea Republic, IR Iran or Australia. This is the way and if we want to win, we have to beat them. Now our concentration is about Korea, then we will see what happens."

In other matches, Japan play Bahrain, but like the Koreans, they have not lived up to big expectations so far. Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma is yet to play a single minute and coach Hajime Moriyasu has refused to put a timeframe on his return from injury.

"I don't want to use him until he's ready," said Moriyasu, admitting he had taken "a risk" in bringing him to the tournament. The coach looks set to stick with inexperienced goalkeeper Zion Suzuki despite the 21-year-old being culpable for at least two of the five goals Japan conceded in the group stage.

Reigning champions Qatar impressed in tearing through Group A and face Palestine, who defeated Hong Kong 3-0 - their first

victory in the history of the competition. That landmark achievement, against the backdrop of the war in Gaza, also put the Palestinians into the Asian Cup knockout rounds for the first time.

The hosts will be strong favourites to reach the last eight and with home advantage look a good bet to go deep in the competition. But no matter what happens on Monday, the inspirational Palestinian captain Musab al-Battat said his team had fulfilled "a promise to the Palestinian people".

"We managed to put a smile on the faces of those who follow us...inside or outside Palestine," he said.

The knockout phase begins tomorrow when Australia play Indonesia, followed the same day by the United Arab Emirates against tournament debutants Tajikistan. At 146 in the world, Indonesia are the lowest-ranked team left in the tournament and squeezed through with one win and two defeats from their three group games.

### Bahrain's Pizzi looking forward to Japan showdown

**Doha:** Bahrain head coach Juan Antonio Pizzi is relishing the prospect of a personal rematch with four-time champions Japan in the last 16 of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar after leading his side through to the knockout rounds with a 1-0 win over Jordan on Thursday.

Abdulla Yusuf scored the only goal of the game at Khalifa International Stadium to take the Bahrainis into the Round of 16 as Group E winners and that means Pizzi will lock horns once again with Japan boss Hajime Moriyasu.

The pair met at the 2019 edition of the continental championship when Moriyasu led his Japan team to a 1-0 victory over Pizzi's Saudi Arabia and the Argentinian knows his current side face a significant challenge to move into the quarter-finals.

"The game was very positive and we deserved a better result," Pizzi said of the last 16 meeting in Sharjah in 2019. "The Japanese level is very high. They have high individual skills and potential but we have high confidence in our players, their focus and their effort and hopefully we will be able to qualify."

"For us all the games are difficult. The group stage was very difficult for us but we were able to compete, win and qualify. Of course the Japan team is excellent and has experienced players who play in European leagues but we're optimistic about our group. We have high morale in our team, we have solidarity amongst us. We have great respect for all the teams."

The Bahrainis advanced with their second win of the group stage after earlier claiming a narrow win over Malaysia and Pizzi was delighted with the outcome in front of a 36,950 crowd.

Jordan also advanced to the next phase with the result leaving Lhoussanine Ammouta's team in third place in the standings with their points total enough to take one of the consolation berths in the last 16, where they will face Iraq. Ammouta defended his decision to make five changes to his starting line-up from the team that drew 2-2 with South Republic.



CRICKET

# Rahul, Jadeja put India on top against England

Jadeja remains unbeaten on 81 as hosts lead by 175 at stumps on the second day

AFP  
Hyderabad

**K**L Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja hit half-centuries to put India in command of the opening Test against England yesterday with a lead of 175 at stumps on the second day in Hyderabad. Jadeja remained unbeaten on 81 and took charge after Rahul's 86 to steer the hosts to 421-7. He and fellow left-hander Axar Patel, on 35, were batting in a partnership of 63 at the close of play.

"It was a tough day," England assistant coach Jeetan Patel told reporters. "I think the effort the guys put in were immense. I think the way we created chances today, if they'd gone...it would be different."

Jadeja's fifth-wicket stand of 65 with Rahul, who looked assured in his knock laced with eight fours and two sixes, stood out in a dominant day for India, who resumed on 119-1. The world's top-ranked Test all-rounder then kept up the charge with wicketkeeper-batsman K S Bharat, who made 41 before being dismissed by Joe Root.

Root and debutant Tom Hartley have taken two wickets each on a grinding day for the tourists, who bowled 87 overs after an extended final session.

England's Jack Leach bowled just 16 overs in the day without long spells and Patel said the senior spinner struggled with his knee after getting injured while fielding on day one and two. "I believe he'll be back in the fourth innings. He just landed on his knee funny," Jeetan said.

Jadeja reached his fifty after tea and waved the bat in his trademark sword celebration in front of a cheering crowd of more than 25,000, boosted by the Republic Day holiday.

India lost two wickets in the final session of play including Ravichandran Ashwin run out for one after a mix-up which saw the two batsmen at one end.

Rahul anchored the innings in the first two sessions but was denied a ton when his big heave on a long-hop from Hartley landed in the palms of Rehan Ahmed at deep mid-wicket. England kept rotating their



India's K L Rahul (right) and Ravindra Jadeja run between the wickets during the first Test against England in Hyderabad. (AFP)

bowling options and struck in the third over after lunch when Shreyas Iyer holed out to deep mid-wicket for 35 off leg-spinner Ahmed.

India lost overnight batting duo Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill inside the first hour of play. Left-hander Jaiswal added four to his overnight 76 with a boundary but was dismissed after lobbing the fourth ball of the day back to spinner Root, who jumped high to take the catch.

"I was prepared for him," Jaiswal, 22, said on Root starting the day. "Sometimes I can make a mistake," he added. "Still I am learning and it's important I learn from the mistakes."

Rahul and Gill, who started the day on 14, attempted to rebuild in a partnership of

36 but Hartley broke through with his left-arm spin. Hartley had a bruising introduction to Test cricket when Jaiswal greeted him with a six on the first ball. He leaked 63 runs in nine overs on day one.

A loose shot from Gill got him caught at mid-wicket on 23.

England played their attacking "Bazball" brand of cricket electing to bat at the start of a five-match series and managed 246 courtesy of skipper Ben Stokes' 70.

**SCOREBOARD**  
**England I innings 246 (B. Stokes 70, J. Bairstow 37, B. Duckett 35; R. Ashwin 3-68, R. Jadeja 3-88)**  
**India I innings (overnight 119-1; Y. Jaiswal 76, S. Gill 14)**

Y. Jaiswal c and b Root 80  
R. Sharma c Stokes b Leach 24  
S. Gill c Duckett b Hartley 23  
K.L. Rahul c Ahmed b Hartley 86  
S. Iyer c Hartley b Ahmed 35  
R. Jadeja not out 81  
K.S. Bharat lbw b Root 41  
R. Ashwin run out (Hartley/Foakes) 1  
A. Patel not out 35  
**Extras (b5, lb6, w2, nb2) 15**  
**Total (7 wickets, 110 overs) 421**  
**Still to bat:** J. Bumrah, M. Siraj  
**Fall of wickets:** 1-80 (Rohit), 2-123 (Jaiswal), 3-159 (Gill), 4-223 (Iyer), 5-288 (Rahul), 6-356 (Bharat), 7-358 (Ashwin)  
**Bowling:** Wood 13-0-43-0 (w2), Hartley 25-0-131-2 (nb2), Leach 25-6-54-1, Ahmed 23-3-105-1, Root 24-2-77-2

## New Zealand name Williamson, Ravindra for Proteas Tests

**Wellington:** Star batters Kane Williamson and Rachin Ravindra were named yesterday in the New Zealand squad for the two-match home Test series, starting next week, against an inexperienced South Africa side.

Williamson returns to the Black Caps after a hamstring strain sidelined him during the recent home Twenty20 series win over Pakistan, which New Zealand took 4-1. Fresh from being named emerging player of the year by the International Cricket Council, rising star Ravindra will take the place of veteran Henry Nicholls, 32, in the middle order.

"It was a very tough decision. Henry has been part of the squad for 56 Tests. Whenever you leave a player out, it weighs heavy, but we felt it's time for Rachin," said New Zealand head coach Gary Stead. "We know the talent he is and feel he will make a really good fist of it at this stage in his career."

Ravindra, 24, will be making only his fourth Test appearance since his debut against India in 2021. Pace bowler Kyle Jamieson also returns after a back injury. Uncapped seamer Will O'Rourke will be added to the squad for the second Test in Hamilton, starting February 13, when he could make his debut.

The first game begins February 4 at Mount Maunganui with hosts New Zealand chasing a first-ever Test series win over the Proteas. South Africa have named an inexperienced squad, with the bulk of their first-choice players committed to their domestic Twenty20 competition. Eight of the 15-man Proteas squad have yet to play Test cricket, including captain Neil Brand. Fast bowler Duanne Olivier has the most Test experience with 15 appearances.

**NEW ZEALAND TEST SQUAD**  
Tim Southee (capt), Tom Blundell, Devon Conway, Matt Henry, Kyle Jamieson, Tom Latham, Daryl Mitchell, Will O'Rourke, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra, Mitchell Santner, Neil Wagner, Kane Williamson, Will Young.

SPOTLIGHT

# Australia strike late to claim slight advantage over West Indies

AFP  
Brisbane, Australia

**A**ustralia took the late wicket of Tegenarine Chanderpaul to even the contest after a fascinating second day's play in the second Test against the West Indies in Brisbane yesterday. At stumps, the West Indies were 13-1, a lead of 35 runs, after Chanderpaul was given out on review for the faintest of edges off Josh Hazlewood in the last over of the night.

After bowling the West Indies out for 311 in their first innings midway through the opening session of the day-night Test, Australia staged a lower innings recovery, allowing captain Pat Cummins to declare at 289-9 late in the night session. That decision paid off with the late dismissal of Chanderpaul.

The Australians had got away to a disastrous start to their first innings and were reduced to 24-4 and 54-5. Kemar Roach, who took three of the first four wickets to fall, said the inexperienced West Indies side wanted to show they belong in Test cricket. After their poor start, the Australians were rescued by a counterattacking innings from wicketkeeper Alex Carey, who smashed 65 from just 49 balls.

When Carey was dismissed with the score on 150, the Australians were still 161 runs behind and the West Indies looked certain to take a big lead into the second innings. But Cummins had other ideas and he and Usman Khawaja (75) took Australia to 242 before the opener edged to first slip to become off-spinner Kevin Sinclair's first Test wicket.

The dismissal sparked a spectacular celebration from Sinclair that included a sprint to cover followed by a round-off and back somersault. Khawaja's wicket was the signal for Cummins to go even further on the attack and he raced to his highest Test score of 64 in an innings that combined regulation cricket shots with agricultural swipes.

When Nathan Lyon edged Alzarri Joseph to wicketkeeper Joshua Da Silva to become the ninth wicket down, Cummins had had enough and declared to allow his bowlers 35 minutes under lights at the West Indians.

Earlier, Roach rocked the Australians with three quick wickets as the West Indies dismissed Steve Smith, Marnus Labuschagne, Cameron Green and Travis Head before dinner, leaving the Australian reply in tatters. After hitting a beautiful straight drive off Roach to the boundary in the opening over, Smith was hit on the pad next ball, drawing a huge appeal from the West Indians.

Umpire Nitin Menon said not out but the West Indies reviewed immediately and replays showed the ball would have crashed into mid-



Australia's captain Pat Cummins evades a bouncer during the day two of the second Test against the West Indies at the Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)

dle stump, leaving Australia 6-1. It was 11-2 in the next over when Labuschagne got a thick edge to fourth slip off Joseph, where Kevin Sinclair took a brilliant diving catch. Green drove Roach on the up to give a simple catch to Kraigg Brathwaite at mid-off, before Head, who smashed a brilliant 119 in the first Test, was out first ball, tickling a delivery down the leg side. Mitchell Marsh smashed his way to 21 off just 19 balls but miscued a pull shot and got a leading edge to mid-off, giving Joseph his second wicket and leaving Australia 54-5. But like the West Indian first innings, the lower half of the table were able to recover and put the Australians back in the game.

**SCOREBOARD**  
**West Indies 1st innings (overnight 266-8)**  
K. Hodge c Smith b Starc 71  
K. Roach run out 8  
S. Joseph not out 3  
Extras (b4, w2, nb2) 8  
**Total (108 overs) 311**  
**Fall of wicket:** 1-9 (Brathwaite), 2-42 (McKenzie), 3-54 (Chanderpaul), 4-57 (Athanaze), 5-64 (Greaves), 6-213 (Da Silva), 7-225 (Hodge), 8-266 (A. Joseph), 9-297 (Roach), 10-311 (Sinclair)  
**Bowling:** Starc 24-3-82-4, Hazlewood 20-6-38-2 (1nb), Cummins 23-1-76-1 (1w), Lyon 28-3-81-2, Marsh 2-0-3-0 (1nb), Green 7-2-12-0 (1w),

Labuschagne 1-0-1-0, Head 3-0-14-0

**Australia I innings**  
S. Smith lbw Roach 6  
U. Khawaja c Athanaze b Sinclair 75  
M. Labuschagne c Sinclair b A. Joseph 3  
C. Green c Brathwaite b Roach 8  
T. Head c Da Silva b Roach 0  
M. Marsh c Roach b A. Joseph 21  
A. Carey c Chanderpaul b S. Joseph 65  
M. Starc c Da Silva b A. Joseph 2  
P. Cummins not out 64  
N. Lyon c Da Silva b A. Joseph 19  
**Extras (b9, lb9, w2, nb6) 26**  
**Total (9 wickets, 53 overs) 289**  
**Fall of wickets:** 1-6 (Smith), 2-11, (Labuschagne) 3-24 (Green), 4-24 (Head), 5-54 (Marsh), 6-150 (Carey), 7-161 (Starc), 8-242 (Khawaja), 9-289 (Lyon)  
**Bowling:** Roach 11-0-47-3 (1w), A. Joseph 14-0-84-4 (5nb, 1w), S. Joseph 11-1-56-1, Greaves 9-3-31-0, Sinclair 8-1-53-1 (1nb)  
**West Indies II innings**  
K. Brathwaite not out 3  
T. Chanderpaul c Carey b Hazlewood 4  
**Extras (b4, lb1, nb1) 6**  
**Total (1 wicket, 7.3 overs) 13**  
**Fall of wicket:** 1-13 (Chanderpaul)  
**Bowling:** Starc 4-1-6-0 (1nb), Hazlewood 3.3-2-2-1

FOCUS

# LeBron sets record with 20th career NBA All-Star Game spot

AFP  
New York

**L**os Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James was voted into the NBA All-Star Game for a record 20th time on Thursday, named among 10 starters for next month's 73rd All-Star contest. James, a four-time NBA Most Valuable Player, was named an All-Star starter for the 20th consecutive year, a streak that began in 2005, his second NBA campaign.

The 39-year-old US playmaker, a four-time NBA champion, broke the record for All-Star appearances that he had shared with another Lakers legend, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The NBA All-Star Game will be played on February 18 at Indianapolis between elite squads from the Eastern and Western Conference.

As the top West point-getter, James will serve as captain and join a starting lineup that also includes Phoenix's Kevin Durant and Serbian centre Nikola Jokic, a two-time MVP from the defending champion Denver Nuggets.

West guards included Slovenian Luka Doncic of Dallas and Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander of Canada. Greek star Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks was named captain for the East, whose frontcourt starters also include Cameroon's reigning NBA MVP and this season's top scorer Joel Embiid of the Philadelphia 76ers and Boston's Jayson Tatum.

East guards included Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton, the NBA assists leader, and Milwaukee's Damian Lillard, making his eighth All-Star appearance after being traded from Portland to the Bucks before this season. Fan balloting to determine starters ended last Saturday. Fan votes counted 50% with a media panel and NBA players each counting 25%.

The All-Star Game reverts to an East versus West format after several years where two top vote getters were named captains and drafted lineups from among other top vote-getters.

Reserves for both teams will be announced next Thursday, with all 30 NBA coaches selecting two guards, three frontcourt players and two others at any position from their respective conference. NBA commissioner Adam Silver will select the replacement for any player unable to play in the All-Star Game, selecting a substitute from the same conference.



Los Angeles Lakers' LeBron James (right) moves the ball against Chicago Bulls' Patrick Williams during the NBA game. (USA TODAY Sports)



AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Super Sinner ends Djokovic's Grand Slam history bid

Italian snaps Serb's astonishing 33-match winning run in Melbourne

AFP  
Melbourne

Jannik Sinner ended Novak Djokovic's bid for a record 25th Grand Slam title yesterday, snapping the Serb's astonishing 33-match winning run at Melbourne Park to set up a final against Daniil Medvedev.

The Italian fourth seed was unfazed by dropping his first set of the tournament against the king of Rod Laver Arena, winning the semi-final 6-1, 6-2, 6-7 (6/8), 6-3. Russian third seed Medvedev rallied from two sets down for the second time in the tournament to beat Alexander Zverev and make title match.

Ten-time champion Djokovic fought off a match point in the third-set tie-break but racked up 54 unforced errors and failed to create a single break point in an sub-par display by his stellar standards. "It was a very tough match," said Sinner. "I started off really well. He missed in the first two sets. I felt like he was not feeling that great on court so I just tried to keep pushing. "Then in the third set I had match point and I missed the forehand but this is tennis. I just tried to be ready for the next set, which I started off really well."

Sinner, 22, said he felt he had learned from defeat to Djokovic in last year's Wimbledon semi-finals - the furthest he had previously gone at a Grand Slam - and had been looking forward to the match. "I think we play really similar - you have to return as many balls as possible, he's such an incredible server," he said. "So I was just trying to push him around a little bit. I'm not going to tell you the tactics."

Djokovic admitted he was "outplayed" by a man 14 years his junior. "I was, in a way, shocked with my level, you know, in a bad way," he said. "There was not much I was doing right in the first two sets. I guess this is one of the worst Grand Slam matches I've ever played, at least that I remember."

But the 36-year-old insisted it was not the "beginning of the end" and vowed to return for another shot at the title next year. Djokovic, who had not tasted defeat at the Australian Open since 2018, lacked his usual metronomic consistency as the super-cool Sinner raced into a 3-0 lead.

The Italian broke again in the sixth game and seized the first set when Djokovic went long with a forehand. The decibel count on centre court rose at the start of the second set and the top seed settled himself with a convincing hold. But his error count continued to mount and Sinner, who had beaten Djokovic in two of their



Jannik Sinner celebrates his victory against Novak Djokovic in the semi-finals of the Australian Open in Melbourne. (AFP)



Russia's Daniil Medvedev reacts after his win over Germany's Alexander Zverev. (AFP)

previous three encounters, broke in the third game to establish a vice-like grip.

The defending champion urged the crowd to come to his aid and cries of "Nole" rang around

the packed stadium but he was broken again and slipped two sets down. He saved a match point in a tie-break following a third set that went with serve before clinching it at his first opportunity and raising a clenched fist. But the Serbian's serve came under renewed pressure again in the fourth set and he cracked to give Sinner a 3-1 lead, with the Italian keeping his nerve to earn victory and end an era at Melbourne Park.

In the later match, sixth seed Zverev appeared to be on his way to a second Grand Slam final when he won the first two sets. Medvedev, 27, was two points away from defeat in the fourth set tie-break but toughed it out to pull level.

He engineered two crucial breaks in the decider to win 5-7, 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 in four hours 18 minutes, moving through to his third final in Melbourne. "Physically and mentally, five sets is tough and many times I was not strong enough, so I'm happy," said the Russian, who has played three five-setters so far. A month ago I wanted to change to be stronger mentally and think less about one guy in the crowd who screams something or when I think the referee has done something wrong. I'm still far from perfect, but I'm trying."

FOCUS

## 'One of my worst': Djokovic shocked by display in Sinner loss

Reuters  
Melbourne

Astunned Novak Djokovic said his performance in the loss to Jannik Sinner in yesterday's Australian Open semi-final was one of the worst he had produced in more than 400 Grand Slam matches. The 24-times Grand Slam champion said he still had high hopes of more success over the rest of the season and warned off pundits who might be tempted to call time on his glorious career.

"He outplayed me completely today," the Serbian said of the 6-1 6-2 6-7 (6) 6-3 loss to Sinner, a 22-year-old Italian.

"I was shocked at my level in a bad way. There was not much I was doing right in the first two sets. I guess this is one of the worst Grand Slam matches I've ever played. At least that I remember. To be honest, the whole tournament I haven't really played close to my best. I didn't feel really myself on the court during this tournament. One can say semi-finals is a great result, of course, but I always expect the highest of myself."

Those expectations came of the results he has achieved on Melbourne's blue hardcourts, where he has won 10 titles and 94 of the 103 matches he has played over his 19 campaigns. Sinner's victory snapped Djokovic's winning streak of 33 matches at the Australian Open going back to 2018 and was the world number one's first loss in 11 Melbourne semi-finals.

"I definitely have a lot to be very proud of in terms of what I have achieved here," said Djokovic. "The streak was going to end

one day. It was going to happen, and at least I gave everything I possibly can under circumstances where I didn't play well. I just hope that I'll get a chance to come back to play at least another time and go through the emotions once more."

Tomorrow's Australian Open final will be the first since 2005 not involving Djokovic, Roger Federer or Rafa Nadal - the greatest players in a golden era of men's tennis.

With Federer retired and Nadal looking close to joining him, Djokovic was asked whether he was starting to feel his 36 years.

"Let's see what happens in the rest of the season," he added. "I still have high hopes for other slams, Olympics, and whatever tournaments that I'll play. This tournament hasn't been up to my standard but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's beginning of the end."

### HSIEH AND ZIELINSKI WIN MIXED DOUBLES TITLE

Taiwan veteran Hsieh Su-wei and Polish partner Jan Zielinski were crowned Australian Open mixed doubles champions Friday, outlasting American Desirae Krawczyk and Britain's Neal Skupski 6-7 (5/7), 6-4, 11-9.

The pair saved a championship point in the match tie-break to claim their first major title as a team. "It means a lot," said Zielinski. "Since yesterday I was getting a lot of messages, a lot of statistics that there were four Polish players who had lost in the (mixed) finals before."

"But Su-Wei said before the match when we were walking onto the warm-up that she's a curse-breaker. She is. Thanks to her for breaking the Polish curse in the mixed doubles finals!"



Jannik Sinner and Novak Djokovic embrace after their match. (AFP)

## Osimhen will quit Napoli in summer, says owner

**Rome:** Nigeria striker Victor Osimhen will leave Napoli this summer and join "either Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain or an English club", the Italian club's president and owner Aurelio De Laurentiis said yesterday. De Laurentiis was responding to an interview that Osimhen, who is with Nigeria at the Africa Cup of Nations, in which the 25-year-old striker said he had already "made up" his mind about his next move.

Questioned by Italian media after a meeting of the Italian Football League, De Laurentiis said he was not surprised, even though Osimhen signed a contract extension with the Italian champions in December. Italian media have reported that the contract contains a release clause of between 120 and 130mn euros. Osimhen was the top scorer in Serie A last season, hitting 26 goals to propel Napoli to their first league title since 1990. De Laurentiis said he had been preparing for Osimhen to leave ever since.

Osimhen, voted African Player of the Year last year, joined Napoli from Lille in 2020 and has scored 67 goals in 119 appearances in all competitions. Napoli are experiencing a nightmare season. They are ninth in the league and out of the Italian Cup.

### WEST HAM SIGN MAN CITY'S PHILLIPS ON LOAN

Manchester City midfielder Kalvin Phillips joined West Ham on loan yesterday for the rest of the season as the England international aims to boost his chances of featuring at Euro 2024. Phillips has rarely featured for the English champions since joining from Leeds in a £45mn (\$57mn) move in July 2022.

However, England boss Gareth Southgate has continued to select the 28-year-old at international level and regular first-team foot-

ball gives Phillips the chance to push his case for a starting spot in Germany later this year. West Ham will reportedly have an option to make the move permanent at the end of the season.

The Hammers have their sights set on qualifying for the Champions League for the first time, either through the Premier League or winning the Europa League. David Moyes' team sit sixth in the table with fifth potentially good enough to qualify for the Champions League this season if English sides perform strongly in European competitions.

Last season's Europa Conference League winners have also progressed to the last 16 of the Europa League.

### RUBIALES THREE-YEAR BAN CONFIRMED BY FIFA

Disgraced former Spanish football chief Luis Rubiales will be banned from the game for three years, world football governing body FIFA confirmed after rejecting his appeal. Rubiales kissed Spain midfielder Jenni Hermoso on the lips against her will after the Women's World Cup final in Sydney in August, for which he is set to face trial in Spain. Rubiales denies the kiss was forced and could still appeal his worldwide ban from "football-related activities" by FIFA at the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

FIFA initially provisionally suspended the chief before banning him from the sport for three years in October, which he eventually appealed. Spain beat England to win the Women's World Cup for the first time in their history but the triumph was tarnished by Rubiales' behaviour and the subsequent fall-out.

The 46-year-old refused to resign from his post for three weeks in which worldwide pressure mounted against him.

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

## Song's Cameroon aim to get better of Nigeria

AFP  
Abidjan

There can be few more evocative fixtures at an Africa Cup of Nations than a meeting between Nigeria and Cameroon, and today's last-16 encounter in Ivory Coast will surely bring back plenty of memories for Indomitable Lions coach **Rigobert Song** in particular.

Cameroon's tally of five AFCON titles is bettered only by Egypt's seven, and their first three victories at the tournament were all secured by defeating the Super Eagles in the final. Roger Milla's Cameroon came from behind to beat Nigeria 3-1 in the 1984 final, and a side coached by Claude Le Roy then came out on top when the teams met again in 1988 in Casablanca.

Most recently, and most infamously, they clashed in the 2000 showpiece in Lagos, a match that went to penalties after ending 2-2 at the end of extra time, with a young Samuel Eto'o among Cameroon's scorers. Song, the Cameroon captain, converted the decisive penalty in a shoot-out that Nigerians will always remember for Victor Ikpeba's kick that appeared to cross the line after hitting the underside of the bar, but was not given by the referee.

"I have not set foot in Lagos since then, and I don't really have any intention of doing so," Patrick M'Boma, who scored for Cameroon in normal time in that game and in the shoot-out, told Jeune Afrique magazine recently as



he recalled that day. Now aged 47 and on the bench, Song leads his country into the latest meeting with their neighbours at Abidjan's Stade Felix Houphouet Boigny, which was the venue for the 1984 final between the teams.

While Nigeria eased through the group phase unbeaten with seven points and just one goal conceded, Cameroon lost to Senegal and only made it this far thanks to a remarkable 3-2 victory over Gambia in Bouake, after they had been 2-1 down with five minutes left. Song, though, is no stranger to dramatic comebacks, whether on the pitch or off.

He was just 40 when he suffered a stroke in October 2016 and went into a coma, before making a full recovery. "I have already been declared dead and yet here I am, still alive," he said earlier this week as he prepared for Cam-

eroon's vital final group game. While their last-16 opponents are led by the African footballer of the year in Victor Osimhen, Song's Cameroon side lacks obvious star names. The most recognisable is Andre Onana, but the goalkeeper who is enduring a difficult season at club level with Manchester United was dropped by Song for the decisive match against Gambia.

Most of the attention around the Indomitable Lions focuses on Song himself, at least when it is not on Eto'o, now his boss as president of the Cameroonian Football Federation. Song was under pressure after his team's poor start at this AFCON, but he insisted that was not a concern.

"I don't panic, I don't get stressed. I listen to and understand the criticism, I know what I have to do and I stay calm," said the former Liverpool, West Ham United, Lens and Galatasaray player. "I have lived with pressure since I was young. It is part of the game."

Song was appointed coach after Cameroon lost in the semi-finals as hosts of the last Cup of Nations in 2022, and oversaw a famous win against Brazil at the World Cup later that year. It was the first ever victory for an African team against Brazil at a World Cup.

Now the hero of that 2000 final must mas-termind another victory over Nigeria, who notably came out on top the last time the sides clashed at the AFCON, winning 3-2 at the same last-16 stage in 2019. Whoever emerges victorious will advance to a quarter-final against either Angola or Namibia.

## NORRIS SIGNS NEW 'MULTI-YEAR' MCLAREN CONTRACT

**London:** Lando Norris signed a "multi-year" contract extension with McLaren yesterday to end speculation over his Formula One future. Norris was already contracted to McLaren until the conclusion of the 2025 season, but the new deal puts to rest talk the British driver could be lured to rivals Red Bull.

The 24-year-old has been with McLaren since 2018, but there were reports he could leave the team after a slow start to the 2023 campaign. Norris eventually enjoyed his most successful season to date, finishing sixth in the world championship and recording six

second-placed finishes.

"Considering we were able to do what we did last year, considering it's a team that I've been with from the beginning, it's a team that I want to continue my story with, in terms of reaching my goal of winning races and winning championships," Norris said.

"McLaren is the team that I want to do it with. They're the ones who brought me into Formula One and gave me this opportunity. So, in some ways, I feel like I owe it to them and I'm just very much part of the family and very much enjoying where I am. I don't want

to join a different team and not enjoy it. I'm excited to be part of that family, especially on the trajectory that we're on."

Despite Red Bull currently being the dominant force in the sport thanks to star driver Max Verstappen, Norris insists that a change of team was not something he seriously considered. Having started 104 races and earned 13 podium finishes, his next challenge is to secure a maiden Grand Prix win. "Really nothing from any other side was convincing enough to ever want to make me even have a proper look at another team," he said.



## First-ever Qatar-UAE Super Cup set to kick off in April



The stage is set for the first Qatar-UAE Super Cup, a landmark football event underscoring the collaborative spirit between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The announcement was made in Doha, where officials from both countries gathered to sign and celebrate the creation of this new chapter in regional sports. The signing ceremony saw UAE Pro League chairman Abdulla Naser al-Jneibi and Vice-President of Qatar Football Association (QFA) Mohamed Khalifa al-Suwaidi solidify the commitment to this joint venture. The tournament will commence in Doha on April 12, with the first event, the Qatar-UAE Super Cup, showcasing a match between Qatar's Amir Cup champions Al Arabi and UAE's President's Cup winners Sharjah. The UAE-Qatar Super Cup Shield is scheduled for April 13 in Dubai, featuring a face-off between the 2022-2023 Adnoc Pro League champions Shabab Al Ahli and the 2022-2023 Qatar Stars League winners Al Duhail.

### FOOTBALL

# Klopp to leave as Liverpool boss at end of season

The 56-year-old plans to take at least a year's sabbatical

AFP

Liverpool

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp shocked the football world yesterday by announcing he will leave the club at the end of the season because he is "running out of energy". Klopp, who has restored Liverpool to one of European football's powerhouses since taking over at Anfield in 2015, said the decision was taken after realising his "resources are not endless".

The 56-year-old plans to take at least a year's sabbatical from management come May and promised to Liverpool fans that he will never coach another English club. "I can understand that it's a shock for a lot of people in this moment, when you hear it for the first time," Klopp told Liverpool's website.

"I love absolutely everything about this club, I love everything about the city, I love everything about our supporters, I love the team, I love the staff. I love everything. But that I still take this decision shows you that I am convinced it is the one I have to take. It is that I am, how can I say it, running out of energy?"

Klopp led Liverpool to their first league title for 30 years in 2020 and to Champions League glory in 2019 among seven trophies during his time at Anfield. And he could add a few more in the coming months as he aims to go out on a high. Liverpool are five points clear at the top of the Premier League, face Chelsea in the League Cup final next month and are still involved in the FA Cup and Europa League.

Klopp said he had taken the decision in November when discussions with the club about potential signings for next season began. After years of battling with Manchester City at the top of the Premier League and reaching the later stages of the Champions League, Liverpool struggled to match their usual standards under Klopp in the 2022/23 season.

They finished fifth in the Premier League and crashed out of the Champions League at the last 16 after being thrashed 5-2 by Real Madrid at Anfield. But Klopp said it was vital for him to not leave on that sour note and a rejuvenated squad is in contention for four trophies in what remains of his reign.

"For me it was super, super, super-important that I can help to bring this team back onto the rails. It was all I was thinking about," said Klopp on Liverpool's return to form this season. "When I realised pretty early that hap-



Jurgen Klopp was appointed as Liverpool manager in October 2015 and the German's contract was due to run until 2026.

pened, it's a really good team with massive potential and a super age group, super characters and all that, then I could start thinking about myself again and that was the outcome. It is not what I want to (do), it is just what I think is 100 percent right."

Klopp has spoken in the past of his desire to manage the German national team, but he hinted that those ambitions will be put on hold until he is refreshed. "Whatever will happen in the future I don't know now but no club, no country for the next year. No other English club ever, I can promise that," he added.

Klopp's backroom staff will also leave at the end of the season with assistant Pep Lijnders keen to pursue his own managerial career. The US-based Fenway Sports Group (FSG), who own Liverpool, paid tribute to Klopp and said work will begin immediately on looking for his successor.

Xabi Alonso, the Spanish former Liverpool player who has guided Bayer Leverkusen to

the top of the Bundesliga this season as coach, is the bookmakers' favourite. Brighton boss Roberto De Zerbi is also in the running after leading the Seagulls into Europe this season for the first time in the club's history with an attractive brand of football.

"I would like to state our profound appreciation for Jurgen," said FSG president Mike Gordon. "It goes without saying that we will be hugely saddened to lose not just a manager of such calibre, but a person and leader for whom we have enormous respect, gratitude and affection. At the same time, we fully respect his wishes and the reasons why he has decided the current season will be his last at Liverpool."

Former Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher said on X, formerly Twitter: "This news was always going to be a body blow to the club whenever it came. I just thought it would be another few years away. What a manager, what a man, let's go out with a bang Jurgen!"

### DOHA TOUR

## Tovek grabs 1.50m class victory after thrilling jump-off



Evelina Tovek celebrates with 12-year-old gelding Moebotetoe v/D Roshoeve after her victory at the Doha Tour yesterday.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Evelina Tovek won the CSI5\* 1.50m class after a thrilling jump-off during the Doha Tour International Equestrian Championship yesterday.

At the Al Shaqab arena, the Swedish rider piloted the 12-year-old BWP gelding Moebotetoe v/D Roshoeve to victory as the pair flawlessly completed the course in 38.46 seconds.

Abdullah Alsharbatly of Saudi Arabia followed closely in the saddle of Atome des Etisses, claiming the second spot with a time of 38.78 seconds. The duo proved to be evenly matched, as the third faultless combination, Rikke Belinda Barker of Denmark and her stallion Icloud finished in 42.79 seconds. The fastest time was recorded by Saudi's Khaled Almobbyt and his mare Diana du Plevau Z, but a rail down for the pair placed them fifth.

Meanwhile, Saudi riders dominated other CSI5\* classes. Hangzhou Asian Games gold medalist Alsharbatly won the 1.45m class with Dancing Wolf O.L. in

58.62 seconds. Frenchman Antoine Erman was second, while Austrian Gerfried Buck came third place.

In the 1.40m class, Saudi's Khaled Abdulaziz al-Eid emerged triumphant in 56.43 seconds, followed by Frenchwoman Cyrene Sharif and Jordan's Ibrahim Hani Bisharat. In 1.45 cm class of the two-star category, Emanuele Gaudiano came first with a time of 57.62 seconds, followed in second place by his compatriot Roberto Previtali, recording a time of 60.4 seconds, while Austrian Gerfried Buck came in third place in 62.89 seconds.

In the 120cm against the clock, Qataris Saad Ahmed al-Saad, Mohamed Dhafi al-Marri and Faris Saad al-Qahtani took the top three places.

In the Future Knights, Khaled Jassim al-Suwaidi came first in the 80 cm competition, followed by Abdullah Saleh al-Obaidli and Abdullah Ali Al Dabbagh. In the 100cm competition, Amer Hamad al-Mansouri took top spot ahead of Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Tamim Ibrahim al-Hur.

The third and final leg of the Doha Tour will conclude today.



The Future Knights podium winners were presented trophies by US ambassador to Qatar Timmy Davis and Chairman of the Doha Tour Organising Committee Sheikh Ahmed bin Nouh al-Thani.

## Inter are Scudetto favourites, says Juventus' Allegri

**Milan:** Inter Milan are still favourites to win Serie A, Juventus manager Massimiliano Allegri said with the two sides set to face each other in a top-of-the-table clash next week. Serie A leaders Juve play second-bottom Empoli at home today, before their attention will turn to their game against second-placed Inter on Feb 4. Allegri's side went top after triumphing over Lecce on Sunday, with Inter involved in the Italian Supercup and not in Serie A action. Juve have 52 points from 21 games and are one point ahead of Inter, who have played one game fewer.

"Inter are a strong team; they are the favourites, and they've earned many points, so we must be proud to be close to them," Al-

legri told reporters. "This doesn't mean we must be satisfied with what we've done until now. Inter are doing extraordinary things. They've just won the Italian Supercup and played a Champions League final last season. It's so nice for us to face them because we are following different trajectories."

He also warned that third-placed AC Milan are not out of the race, despite being seven points behind Juve. "Don't forget about Milan. At the moment, they have earned more points than last season and their bad moment is behind them," he said.

Allegri said his team are taking each match one at a time and not getting carried away despite being top.

## 'NOT THINKING ABOUT THE NEXT STEP', SAYS ALONSO AMID LIVERPOOL RUMOURS

**Berlin:** Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso yesterday played down speculation he could replace Jurgen Klopp at Liverpool in the summer, saying: "what comes next, I don't know".

Klopp made the surprise announcement yesterday that he would leave the club he joined in 2015 at the end of the season, saying he was "running out of energy."

Alonso, a former Liverpool player whose unbeaten Leverkusen side sit four points clear of Bayern Munich at the top of the

Bundesliga table, has been linked to a return to the club where he won the 2005 Champions League as a player. "I'm trying to give my best to help prepare my players to be ready. And that's my goal, what comes next, I don't know."

Saying the "speculation is normal", Alonso told reporters: "At the moment I am really happy here...I'm not thinking about May, I'm thinking about tomorrow's game. Each day is a challenge, each game is a challenge and were are on an intense and

beautiful journey here in Leverkusen."

German media have reported 42-year-old Alonso has a clause in his contract which allows him to leave for one of his former clubs - Liverpool, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich. "I am not thinking about the next step," he said.

"I am thinking about where I am right now. I am in a great place and I am enjoying myself. And I think it's the right place, so that's all I can say. What's going to happen in the future? I don't know and I don't

really care at the moment."

Alonso praised Klopp on Friday, saying he has "huge respect and great admiration for what Jurgen did for the last nine years in Liverpool - and how he did it."

In an interview and other media in November, Alonso described Klopp as "unbelievable" and said "I would have loved to be coached by Jurgen Klopp."

Leverkusen have dropped just six of a possible 54 points this season and have won every one of their Europa League and

German Cup fixtures. They face Borussia Moenchengladbach at home today.

Meanwhile, Brighton boss Roberto De Zerbi refused to be drawn on talk he could succeed Klopp at Liverpool. The widely admired Italian has earned plaudits for his impressive work at Brighton, who he led to a first European campaign this term.

But De Zerbi would not contemplate suggestions that he could be offered the chance to manage Liverpool, who sit top of the Premier League at present.