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QATAR PLAYERS GEAR UP FOR QUALIFIERS AGAINST KUWAIT



Qatar coach Marquez Lopez leads a training session at the Aspire Academy yesterday, ahead of their FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 joint qualifiers. The Asian Champions resume their campaign with a double header against Kuwait. The first match is tomorrow at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha, with Qatar travelling to Kuwait for reverse fixture, which is scheduled to be held on March 26.

PARIS OLYMPICS

Russian, Belarusian athletes not part of opening ceremony

‘THEY WILL NOT PARTICIPATE IN THE PARADE OF DELEGATIONS’



International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach speaks during an executive board meeting in Lausanne yesterday. (AFP)

Agencies
Lausanne

Russians and Belarusians will not take part in the parade of athletes at the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympics in July, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) said yesterday. The athletes from these countries who qualify for the Games will be competing as independents without their flags and anthems following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The opening ceremony in Paris will not be held in a stadium but will be staged on the river Seine with teams floating past an estimated 300,000 spectators. The Russians and Belarusians, who will be competing as individual neutral athletes (AINs) under a specially-created flag and with an anthem without lyrics produced by the IOC, will not be part of that parade. "They will not participate in the parade of delegations during the opening ceremony, since they are individual athletes," the Olympic body said following an executive board meeting. But it said they would be experiencing all other parts of the opening ceremony apart from the team parade.

"This decision is the logical consequence of the fact that the athletes with Russian and Belarusian passports are not selected as delegations but as individual athletes," Paris 2024 Games organisers said in a statement following the IOC decision. The IOC said those athletes who do qualify will then be vetted by a three-member IOC panel in order to meet the eligibility criteria that the Olympic body established for Russians and Belarusians. The panel is headed by IOC Vice-President Nicole Hoevertsz and includes ex-NBA basketball champion Pau Gasol and South Korean former Olympic table tennis champion Ryu Seung-min. Athletes who actively support the war, which Moscow calls a "special military operation", or are contracted to the military or security agencies will not be allowed to take part. The IOC suspended the Russian Olympic Committee in October for recognising regional Olympic councils for Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine - Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. Earlier yesterday the IOC criticised Russia's plans to host their own 'Friendship Games' later in 2024, saying it was politicising sport and violating the Olympic Charter. Announced several months ago, the first

edition of the Summer Friendship Games is "planned to be held in Moscow and Yekaterinburg" next September, the IOC said, with the first winter edition to take place in 2026 in Sochi, venue for the highly controversial 2014 Winter Olympics. These two initiatives are in addition to the recent Games of the Future in Kazan, which combined traditional disciplines and e-sport, and the BRICS Games which take place in the same city in June. Russian authorities claim that "athletes from more than 50 countries" will take part in the latter. The IOC is not criticising the Russians for creating multi-sport competitions outside its aegis since several already exist, including the Commonwealth Games and the Jeux de la Francophonie, but for doing so via a "very intensive diplomatic offensive" through direct contacts with governments around the world. "To make their purely political motivation even more obvious, they are deliberately circumventing the sports organisations in their target countries," said the IOC statement. "This is a blatant violation of the Olympic Charter and an infringement of the various UN resolutions at the same time. "It is a cynical attempt by the Russian Federation to politicise sport."

SPOTLIGHT

Electronic Qatar Stars League 2024 all set to start

The inaugural edition of Electronic Qatar Stars League (E-QSL) 2024 will be held from tomorrow until March 23 at the Virtuocity Hall in Doha Festival City mall, with the participation of 12 teams in the 2023-2024 season Expo Stars League. The E-QSL is a new initiative that aims to open new horizons for the QSL and club companies to enter the field of e-sports and keep pace with the tremendous development of this game, in addition to support the Qatari e-sports team, expand the base of participation in society, and refine and develop talent in this sport, which is of interest to a large section of fans, especially youngsters. The competitions will be electronic through the famous game (FC 24), developed by EA Sports and the game format will be one x one. The teams were divided into two groups by draw of lots, with each group having six teams. The top-four teams from each group will qualify for the quarter-finals, which will be followed by semi-finals and final. The draw of lots resulted in Group A - Al Shamal, Al Duhail, Muaither, Al Gharafa, Qatar SC, Al Sadd - and Group B - Al Wakrah, Al Rayyan, Al Ahli, Al Markhiya, Al Arabi, Umm Salal. The winner will represent Qatar in the qualifiers for 2024 Electronic Sports World Cup for clubs. As part of arrangements for the tournament's success at all levels, QSL and Visit Qatar had announced the signing of a sponsorship agreement in addition to a similar agreement with Al Kass sports channels to cover its events and activities. The logo and details of the tournament were also unveiled at a Press conference held at the QSL Headquarters on March 13, 2024. It may be noted that Group A and Group B matches will be

played on Thursday and Friday respectively. Knockout rounds (Quarter-finals, Semi-finals and Final) are scheduled for the final day (Saturday, March 23, 2024). **SPONSORSHIP AGREEMENT** The Qatar Stars League (QSL) and Al Kass sports channels announced the signing of a sponsorship agreement to cover the events and activities of the first edition of Electronic Qatar Stars League 2024. The agreement was signed on Monday at the QSL Headquarters in Al Bidda Tower, in the presence of Hassan Rabiah al-Kuwari, Executive Director of Sales, Marketing and Communication at QSL, and Ibrahim al-Emadi, Director of Creative Department at Al Kass sports channels. On the occasion, al-Kuwari said, "We have a strong and solid partnership with Al Kass sports channels, which provide transmission and coverage services at a professional and great level for all events and tournaments. We're proud of their role and participation with us over the past years, and today we're pleased to announce the signing of this agreement for the first edition of Electronic Qatar Stars League 2024, with the aim of highlighting and covering the event in a distinctive way, and I wish everyone success." On his part, al-Emadi said, "As an extension of our partnership with QSL and as the Host Broadcaster of Expo Stars League and all tournaments, and in an effort to strengthen our distinguished cooperation, we're pleased to sign this agreement for the the inaugural edition of E-QSL 2024. We expect that this event will attract a great fan following, especially since electronic games have become of high interest and distinctiveness among various sections of the society and youngsters." (qsl.qa)



CRICKET

Bangladesh's Mushfiqur injured, out of Sri Lanka Tests

AFP
Dhaka

Veteran Bangladesh batsman **Mushfiqur Rahim** has been ruled out of the upcoming Test series against Sri Lanka due to a thumb injury, the cricket board said yesterday.

The two-Test series, which is part of the 2023-25 ICC World Test Championship cycle, begins on Friday in Sylhet.

Mushfiqur, Bangladesh's highest run-getter in Tests with 5,676 runs in 88 matches, was injured during Monday's four-wicket win, in the third one-day international against the visitors in Chittagong.

Bangladesh team physio Bayezedul Islam Khan said Mush-

fiqur was hit by a ball on his right thumb early in the innings while keeping.

"After the match, Mushfiqur underwent an X-ray examination in Dhaka," he said, adding that it revealed his right thumb was fractured.

"He is currently undergoing conservative management for his injury and is expected to be sidelined for around three to four weeks."

It rules him out of the Test series against Sri Lanka, he added.

Mushfiqur played a vital part in Monday's win with an unbeaten 37 runs that handed Bangladesh a 2-1 victory in the three-match series.

Sri Lanka won the preceding three-match Twenty20 series 2-1. The second Test will begin in Chittagong on March 30.



Hasaranga suspended for Bangladesh Tests

Sri Lanka all-rounder Wanindu Hasaranga has been suspended from the two-Test series against Bangladesh for dissent, a day after announcing he was coming out of Test retirement, the International Cricket Council said yesterday.

The ICC handed down the punishment after Hasaranga was found guilty of "showing dissent at an umpire's decision", during Monday's third one-day international against Bangladesh. In the 37th over of the game - that Bangladesh won by four wickets to take the three-match series 2-1 - Hasaranga snatched his cap from one of the umpires and ridiculed the umpire in the match. He received a 50 percent match fine and accumulated three demerit points for his offence, the ICC said in a statement. This brought his total demerit points to eight in a 24-month period, resulting in his suspension. This was his second suspension in less than a month, after he was suspended for two Twenty20 internationals for showing dissent at an umpire during the third T20 against Afghanistan in February. Hasaranga served out the ban in the three-match T20 series against Bangladesh, which Sri Lanka won 2-1, with the player leading the visitors in the final match. Sri Lanka ODI skipper Kusal Mendis was also handed a 50 percent fine after he "abused the umpires while shaking hands with them" at the end of the third match. Sri Lanka on Monday included Hasaranga in their 17-man squad for the two-match series against Bangladesh, after the all-rounder decided to come out of his Test retirement. The opening Test begins on March 22 in Sylhet, while Chittagong will host the second Test from March 30.

PAKISTAN SUPER LEAGUE

Islamabad beat Multan off the final ball to win 3rd title

'We peaked at the right time in the league and that mattered in the end'



Islamabad United's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the PSL at the National Stadium in Karachi. (AFP)

AFP
Karachi

Resilient Islamabad United snatched a last-ball thriller to beat Multan Sultans by two wickets in the final in Karachi on Monday, winning the Pakistan Super League (PSL) title for a third time.

Young Hunain Shah pushed the final delivery of the last over for a boundary towards backward point as United overhauled a modest 160-run target at the National Stadium. United needed eight runs off the 20th over bowled by Mohamed Ali and Hunain's elder brother Naseem Shah hit a boundary off the second delivery but with a single needed off the last two deliveries he fell caught behind.

However, Hunain kept his cool to give Sultans defeat in their third successive finals.

United skipper Shadab Khan praised a total team effort.

"It was a total team effort," said Shadab. "We peaked at the right time in the league and that mattered in the end."

United also won the inaugural PSL title in 2016 and doubled it two years later.

Earlier, Sultans managed 159-9 in their 20 overs after winning the toss and electing to bat.

They were guided by a 40-ball 57 by Usman Khan and 26 by skipper Mohamed Rizwan.

Khan hit seven boundaries and a six but once he fell in the 16th over, Sultans lost five wickets for just 13 runs, slumping to 127-9.



Islamabad United's players celebrate their victory over Multan Sultans in the PSL final yesterday. (AFP)

Left-arm spinner Imad Wasim was the chief destroyer with 5-23 while Naseem grabbed 3-32.

It was Iftikhar Ahmed who revived the innings with a whirlwind 20-ball 32 not out with three sixes and as many boundaries, scoring 31 in the last two overs.

United were also derailed from 121-4 to 129-7 but Wasim guided late order batters with a calm 17-

ball 19 to help them cross the finish line.

For the winners, former New Zealand opener Martin Gup-till top-scored with a 32-ball 50 with three sixes and four boundaries.

Azam Khan hit a 22-ball 30 with a six and four boundaries.

United, Sultans, Peshawar Zalmi and Quetta Gladiators qualified for the play-offs while

Karachi Kings and defending champions Lahore Qalandars were knocked out in the first round of the ninth edition of the League.

BRIEF SCORES
Multan Sultans 159-9 in 20 overs (Usman 57, Imad 5-23, Shadab 3-32) **lost to Islamabad United 163-8 in 20 overs** (Gup-till 50, Azam 30) **by two wickets.**

SPOTLIGHT

Australia call off T20s against Afghanistan over women's rights

AFP
Sydney

Australia yesterday scrapped a T20 men's cricket series against Afghanistan later this year, saying the situation for women in the Taliban-ruled country was deteriorating.

Cricket Australia said it had received advice "that conditions for women and girls in Afghanistan are getting worse" and so had postponed the three-match series scheduled in August at a neutral venue.

Cricket has surged in popularity inside Afghanistan in recent years, fuelled by triumphs over bigger nations on the international stage.

But under the Taliban's brand of Islamic rule, women are effectively barred from the game.

Australia's cricket governing body said its stance continued a "strong commitment to supporting participation by women and girls in cricket around the world".

It is the third time since 2021 that Australia has refused to play Afghanistan outside of international tournaments.

Cricket Australia cancelled a one-off Test in 2021, months after the Taliban swept back into power.

"If recent media reports that women's cricket will not be supported in Afghanistan are substantiated, Cricket Australia would have no alternative but to

not host Afghanistan," officials said at the time.

In 2023, Australia pulled out of a three-match one-day international series in the UAE, with the Afghanistan Cricket Board in Kabul describing the decision as "pathetic".

Afghanistan's best known cricketer, leg-spinner Rashid Khan, threatened to boycott Australia's Big Bash League as a result.

Before the return of the Taliban, Afghanistan's cricket board was slowly making progress growing the game among women - even contracting a small number of semi-professional players in 2020.

Most of those players would eventually flee to Australia.

The Taliban took control of the country in August 2021, renaming it the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and installing an interim government they said would rule according to sharia.

Teenage girls have been banned from attending most secondary schools and women from universities. In November 2022 women were prohibited from entering parks, funfairs, gyms and public baths. Women are also barred from travelling without a male relative and have been told they must cover up, with a veil or burqa, when outside.

The two countries last played at the 50-over World Cup in India last year when Australia won by three wickets en route to lifting the trophy.

beIN SPORTS to stream UEFA Women's Champions League on free-to-air as part of its beINSPIRED initiative

beIN SPORTS, the leading sports broadcaster in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has announced that it will be broadcasting all remaining matches of this season's ongoing UEFA Women's Champions League 2024 (UWCL) on its free-to-air beIN SPORTS channel, as well as its official YouTube channel across MENA, as part of its beINSPIRED initiative.

beINSPIRED is a global beIN initiative launched in 2019 that gives a bigger platform to under-represented sports and talent, with a particular focus on women in sport, and is the driving force behind the broadcaster's vast and well-rounded bouquet of women's sports rights across its 24 MENA markets and beyond. The announcement marks a fourth successive year that beIN is providing free-to-air coverage of the UWCL.

With nearly two million viewers tuning in to watch Barcelona win last year's UWCL final, the increase in interest and popularity of the women's game across the region is clear.

The quarter-finals are scheduled to get underway on 19 March when Ajax host Chelsea and Benfica welcome Lyon, before reigning champions Barcelona travel to Brann and PSG go to Hacken 24 hours later.

beIN holds one of the largest portfolios of women's sports rights in global broadcasting, with Formula 1 ACADEMY, the female-only single-seater racing championship founded by Formula 1, being the latest top tier women's sports acquisition. beIN also holds the rights to UEFA Women's EURO and FIFA Women's World Cup. Additionally, over the coming months, beIN will also champion women's sports and its top talents competing at this summer's long-awaited Paris 2024 Olympic Games, AFC Women's Under-20 Asian Cup Uzbekistan 2024, FIFA U20 Women's World Cup Colombia 2024, FIFA U17 Women's World Cup Dominican Republic, three remaining Grand Slam tennis tournaments as well as the Billie Jean King Cup, on top of year-round live coverage of the Premier Padel Tour.



CYCLING

Pogacar takes control of Tour of Catalonia

'I WAS REALLY FEELING COMFORTABLE ON THE DOWNHILL'

AFP
Barcelona

Dominant two-time Tour de France winner Tadej Pogacar earned his second win of the season yesterday by comfortably taking the second stage of the Tour of Catalonia.

UAE Team Emirates rider Pogacar, who said he "messed up" at the end of Monday's first stage as he reacted too late to catch Nick Schultz's sprint to the line, made no such mistake on day two and became the new race leader.

The Slovenian was favourite to triumph in the mountains and after attacking with 6.5 kilometres remaining, could not be caught in a rainy finish.

Pogacar completed the 186.5km trail from Mataro to Vallter nearly a minute and a half ahead of his closest contenders Mikel Landa and Aleksandr Vlasov, taking control of the general classification.

The 25-year-old made the 11km climb to the finish with an average gradient of nearly eight percent look easy and only seven riders finished within two minutes of him.

"We started with nice weather, like summer, and then we saw these clouds, and we were thinking that maybe we could survive until the final climb without rain, but unfortunately, it started to rain on the second-to-last climb," said Pogacar.

"The conditions were tough – it was a hard climb, and you could



Two-time Tour de France winner Tadej Pogacar takes a selfie after winning the second stage of the Tour of Catalonia yesterday. (@VoltaCatalunya)

feel the altitude, but I'm happy to win.

"At the start, that was a pretty fun moment with Domen but then in the final on the downhill, I was really feeling comfortable on the downhill and I just went on my own pace, nothing special," Pogacar said after the finish.

He leads the race by one minute and 35 seconds from Soudal-QuickStep's Spanish rider Landa.

In his post-stage interview with *Cycling Pro Net*, Pogacar's chief rival Landa said yesterday: "I am very satisfied, especially because I had not raced for a while. I actually wanted to take it day by day, but I'm better than expected."

"It was really cold today. I had problems with my hands in the final. It is clear that Pogacar is the strongest," Landa said. "Of course I would like to win a stage

and finish on the podium. But it is important to take it one day at a time," he added.

Today's stage three offers another chance for Pogacar, aiming for an ambitious Giro-Tour double in 2024, to shine.

It is another mountainous stage, stretching 176.7km from Sant Joan de les Abadesses to Port Aine, with an 18km climb to the finish.

PGA Tour commissioner confirms PIF meeting, doesn't offer details



Bahamas: PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan confirmed that he and the player directors from the tour's policy board met with the head of the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia on Monday in the Bahamas but offered little news about their discussion. According to media reports yesterday, Monahan notified PGA Tour players via a memo on Monday night that the meeting with the player directors – Patrick Cantlay, Peter Malnati, Webb Simpson, Jordan Spieth, Adam Scott and Tiger Woods – took place with Yasir al-Rumayyan, the PIF's governor and also the chairman of the LIV Golf League. The PGA Tour and the PIF have been in discussions since June about an alliance with the DP World Tour and PIF that would bring along billions in cash from Saudi Arabia. The PIF is the funding arm of LIV Golf.

"The conversation throughout was constructive and represents an important part of our due diligence process in selecting potential investors for PGA Tour Enterprises," Monahan wrote in the letter, per ESPN. "This mirrors the approach we employed earlier this year as we evaluated an investment offer from the Strategic Sports Group. During the session, Yasir had a chance to introduce himself to our player directors and talk through his vision, priorities and motivations for investing in professional golf. As we continue these discussions with the PIF, we will keep you updated as much as possible, but please understand that we need to maintain our position of not conducting

negotiations in public.

"To that end, we will provide no further comments to the media at this time."

The deadline to finalise the deal passed on December 31 but the sides agreed to an extension amid ongoing talks.

In January, Strategic Sports Group, which is made up of owners of US pro sports teams and others, announced an investment in the newly created PGA Tour Enterprises that could be worth as much as \$3bn.

Men's professional golf has been in an upheaval since LIV Golf launched in June 2022.

With significant financial resources, LIV Golf successfully recruited many of the PGA Tour's biggest names and others with guaranteed money far surpassing their annual earning power on the long-established tour. Reigning Masters champion Jon Rahm, a superstar in the sport, defected to LIV Golf in December for a contract worth more than \$300mn.

Rory McIlroy, who reportedly has spurred advances from LIV Golf, said Sunday in advance of the meeting that he welcomed having the sides sit down.

"I think it should have happened months ago, so I am glad that it's happening," McIlroy said after his final round at The Players. "Hopefully, that progresses conversations and gets us closer to a solution."

Late last year, LIV announced its global 2024 regular season schedule. Competition teed off in February and features 12 regular season events in eight different countries, including new and returning markets across the world.

TENNIS / MIAMI OPEN

Medvedev, Sinner in same half of draw

www.atptour.com
Miami

Could Daniil Medvedev and Jannik Sinner be set for a rematch of their Australian Open final thriller at the Miami Open?

The pair could face off in the semi-finals at the ATP Masters 1000 event, where Medvedev edged Sinner to claim the title a year ago, after both were placed in the bottom half of the draw.

Neither player will take reaching the last four for granted at Hard Rock Stadium, however, as the world's top stars chase success in the second leg of March's 'Sunshine Double'.

The 20-time tour-level titlist Medvedev, who is remarkably bidding to win the same event twice for the first time, begins his campaign against Max Purcell or Marlon Fucsovics. Medvedev, who lost

the Indian Wells final on Sunday, said: "I'm really, really happy with two weeks. Today, the first thing I asked myself in the locker room was I don't feel I have any regrets. 'Do you have any regrets?' My coach said. Yeah, we can talk about one shot here and there, but in general the match was not bad. He's playing good."

"He managed in the first set at one moment to raise his level. I kind of managed to be there and to try to catch his level, but I was just a little bit down. In the end, this down was going down, down, down, and he was going up, up, up. So the result is not expected but is a fair result for the match that it was. But I'm happy."

Two of the ATP Tour's in-form players – Ugo Humbert and Sebastian Baez – are potential fourth-round opponents for Medvedev, while 2022 Miami finalist Casper Ruud could await in the quarter-finals.

Sinner's path in Miami begins against Pedro Cachin or a qualifier. The Italian is looking to bounce back quickly after Carlos Alcaraz snapped his 16-match winning start to the 2024 season in the Indian Wells semi-finals.

The Italian could face the other losing semi-finalist in California, Tommy Paul, in the fourth round. Eighth seed Hubert Hurkacz, who beat Sinner in the Miami final in 2021, is seeded to be his quarter-final opponent.

In the top half of the draw, top seed Alcaraz is aiming to become the first man to complete the coveted 'Sunshine Double' since Roger Federer in 2017.

The Indian Wells champion meets Aleksandar Vukic or Roberto Carballes Baena in his opening match.

The 16th-seeded home favourite Ben Shelton is a possible fourth-round opponent for Alcaraz, who won the pair's sole previous Lexus



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain speaks with the media on day two of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (USA TODAY Sports)

ATP Head2Head meeting in Toronto last year. Shelton is currently the American No. 2 behind Taylor Fritz. The 12th-seeded Fritz faces a

tough start to his Miami campaign against Los Cabos champion Jordan Thompson or Nuno Borges, who successfully defended his title at the ATP Challenger Tour 175 event in Phoenix last week.

Fourth seed Alexander Zverev could face a big-serving battle with Felix Auger-Aliassime in his opener. Zverev, a finalist in Miami in 2018, will play the winner of the first-round clash between Auger-Aliassime and a qualifier.

Kei Nishikori's first ATP Tour opponent for seven months will be Sebastian Ofner.

The Japanese former World No. 4 Nishikori, who reached the final in Miami in 2016, has not played since last July at the Atlanta Open due to injury.

Matteo Berrettini, who reached the final of last week's Phoenix Challenger, will take a 3-2 Lexus ATP Head2Head lead over Andy Murray in an intriguing first-round showdown.

KOLTSOV, FORMER NHL PLAYER AND BOYFRIEND OF SABALENKA, DIES AT 42

New York: Konstantin Koltsov, a former member of the Pittsburgh Penguins and the boyfriend of tennis star Aryna Sabalenka, has died at age 42.

A native of Belarus, Koltsov went on to play and serve as an assistant coach for Salavat Yulayev of Russia's Kontinental Hockey League. The team confirmed his death in a statement yesterday.

"He was a strong and cheerful person, he was loved and respected by players, colleagues, and fans," read the team statement, translated from Russian. "Konstantin Evgenievich forever wrote himself into the history of our club. Koltsov won the Russian Championship and the Gagarin Cup as part of Salavat Yulayev, and did a great job on the team's coaching staff. "The hockey club 'Salavat Yulayev' expresses its condolences to the family and friends of Konstantin Evgenievich Koltsov. Bright memory..."

No cause of death was released. The *Daily Express* of Great Britain reported Koltsov died in Miami, where Sabalenka was scheduled to open play in the Miami Open this week as the No. 2 seed. The report said her name

has been taken off all practice schedules, but tournament officials had not commented on her participation as of yesterday morning. Media reports said Koltsov and Sabalenka, also from Belarus, had been together since 2021. Last April, she posted a touching birthday message to Koltsov on Instagram that

included a series of photos of them together. "Happy birthday my love," she wrote in a note translated from Russian and sprinkled with heart emojis. "You are my dearest person, my best friend and my strongest support. Peace be with you, strength, patience and health. I hope we will have everything we planned. I love you."

Koltsov, a forward, played 144 games with the Penguins over three seasons from 2002-06. He had 38 points (12 goals, 26

assists) in his NHL career. The Penguins selected him with the 18th overall pick in the 1999 NHL Draft.

He played with both Mario Lemieux and Sidney Crosby in his final season in Pittsburgh. He also represented Belarus in the 2002 and 2010 Winter Olympics and in nine world championships.



FOCUS

Raducanu withdraws from Miami Open

Reuters
Miami

Britain's Emma Raducanu has withdrawn from the Miami Open on the eve of her first-round match due to a lower back injury, tournament organisers said.

The former US Open champion, who was scheduled to face China's Wang Xiyu in the first round on the opening day of play yesterday, missed most of last season after having surgeries on her ankle and both wrists.

"I have been experiencing lower back pain and at this stage of my return to competition I don't want to risk anything happening," Raducanu said in a statement issued late on Monday by tournament organisers.

"I really tried my best to be ready and I'm sad to be pulling out of Miami as it's a cool tournament but wish the event all the best."

The 21-year-old received a wildcard into the main draw at the Miami Open and was looking to build on her per-



formance at Indian Wells, where she played well but lost in the third round to world number two Aryna Sabalenka last week. Raducanu, who in 2021 became the first qualifier to win the US Open, is scheduled to play in Britain's Billie Jean King Cup tie against France next month. Wang will now face qualifier Anna Karolina Schmiedlova of Slovakia.

Shnaider defeats Venus in opener Diana Shnaider yesterday ended Venus Williams's record 22nd Miami Open appearance in the first round, defeat-

ing the three-time champion 6-3, 6-3 in 1 hour and 19 minutes.

The contest was one of many contrasts. Williams, 43, is the oldest player in the 2024 main draw; Shnaider, 19, is one of six teenagers contesting it this year.

Williams was playing her 85th main-draw match in Miami, another tournament record (this time, joint with sister Serena); Shnaider was playing her first, having fallen in the first round of qualifying to Laura Siegemund on her debut last year. But although Williams had the upper hand in terms of the gulf in experience, No.62-ranked Shnaider had the edge in form.

She claimed her first Hologic WTA Tour title last month in Hua Hin, and reached the Charleston WTA 125 final last week. By contrast, Williams was playing just her second tournament of the year following a seven-month injury layoff, and is ranked No.457.

She fell in the first round of Indian Wells to Nao Hibino a fortnight ago, and has not won a match since defeating Veronika Kudermetova in the first round of Cincinnati last August.

PREVIEW

Son back on road to World Cup after turbulent Asian Cup

'I think issues like this can end up making the team even tighter'

AFP

Hong Kong

Son Heung-min and South Korea must move on from their turbulent Asian Cup when they return to World Cup qualifying tomorrow, while Japan face North Korea in a double-header that sees them travel to Pyongyang.

Asian football is back on the road to the 2026 FIFA World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico, a month after Qatar retained the continental crown on home soil with a 3-1 victory over Jordan.

Much has happened since South Korea were dumped out 2-0 by unfancied Jordan in the semi-finals of the Asian Cup, including the sacking of coach Jurgen Klinsmann.

It emerged that skipper Son and Paris Saint-Germain attacking midfielder Lee Kang-in had been involved in a fracas on the eve of the match, leaving the Tottenham attacker with a dislocated finger.

Legendary German striker Klinsmann was dismissed after having promised to take South Korea to their first Asian title in 64 years. He was replaced on an interim basis by Hwang Sun-hong.

Son and Lee have since made up, and Hwang included the duo in his squad for the home game with Thailand tomorrow and the return fixture five days later.

"Lee Kang-in wanted an opportunity to apologise to fans and his teammates from the bottom of his heart, and Son Heung-min said we should all embrace Kang-in and move forward," Hwang, South Korea's under-23 coach, said.

"Based on my experience as a national team player, I think issues like this can end up making the team even tighter," he added.

Before Klinsmann's departure, South Korea thrashed Singapore 5-0 and won 3-0 in China to top Group C and will be fully expected to collect six more points against Thailand.

Japan are also eager to move on



South Korea's midfielder Son Heung-min celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the AFC Asian Cup quarter-final against Australia at Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakra. (AFP)

from the Asian Cup, where they went out 2-1 to Iran in the quarter-finals and never justified their tag as pre-tournament favourites.

Hajime Moriyasu remained coach despite the disappointment and Japan face two matches against North Korea, travelling into the unknown on March 26 when they play at Kim Il-sung Stadium in Pyongyang.

Moriyasu will have to make do without Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma, who looks set to miss the rest of the Premier League season with a back injury.

Winger Junya Ito has been left out of the squad after an allegation of sexual assault. He denies the

claim and is suing for 200 million yen (\$1.3mn) in damages. Japan have a perfect six points from two games with 10 goals scored and none conceded.

China's Asian Cup was also a letdown, bundled out in the group stage with two points and no goals.

The Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic took over from Aleksandar Jankovic and China travel to Singapore for his first game in charge.

Of the Asian Cup finalists, Qatar will be expected to make it four wins from four in Group A when they play Kuwait home and away.

They will do it without Hassan

al-Haydos, who captained them to a second Asian Cup crown in a row last month but retired at the weekend from international duty aged 33.

He made a record 183 appearances for his country, scoring 41 goals.

While Qatar are on course for the next round of World Cup qualifying, Asian Cup runners-up Jordan sit third behind Roberto Mancini's Saudi Arabia and Tajikistan in Group G on one point from two matches.

With only the top two progressing, Jordan need to pick up six points in back-to-back games against basement side Pakistan.

FOCUS

Real goalkeeper Courtois suffers new knee injury

Reuters
Madrid

Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois will be out of action for several weeks after incurring a meniscus tear in his right knee during training yesterday, the La Liga club said.

The 31-year-old Belgium international had been expected to return to Real's squad after spending several months on the sidelines following an ACL tear in his left knee last August. He underwent an MRI scan later on Tuesday that confirmed the damage to his right knee.

"Following tests carried out today, our player Thibaut Courtois has been diagnosed with a ruptured internal meniscus in his right knee," the club said in a statement.

The injury is a major blow for Real who will have to make do without the services of one of their key players for their highly anticipated Champions League quarter-final tie against Manchester City in early April.

Real manager Carlo Ancelotti said on Friday that he was optimistic about soon being able to count on both Courtois and Brazil defender Eder Militao, who also suffered a torn ACL in August.

Ancelotti had said the plan was for them to play two friendlies against Real's youth team during the international break before returning to the first team for the final stretch of the season. "They (Courtois and Militao) have started to work with the group, completing normal training sessions," Ancelotti told a press conference on Friday.

"I think they will be able to make it (to the first leg against City). In fact, the idea is that they will be available on March 31st, for the La Liga match against Athletic Bilbao, but we won't risk anything, that's more than clear."

Courtois joined Real from Chelsea in 2018 after winning two Premier League titles, the FA Cup and the League Cup during his time at Stamford Bridge.

He was named Player-of-the-Match in the 2022 Champions League final, making nine saves against Liverpool in Paris, as Real secured a record extending 14th European title with a 1-0 win.

Real, who had only one other goalkeeper, Ukraine's Andriy Lunin, in their first team squad when Courtois sustained his injury, recruited former Chelsea keeper Kepa Arrizabalaga on a season-long loan deal, although the Ukrainian eventually won the battle to be first-choice.



Messi fans to get 50% refund for HK fiasco

Fans who snapped up tickets to watch Lionel Messi in Hong Kong, only for him to sit out the friendly, will get a 50-percent refund - as long as they don't launch legal action.

A sell-out crowd paid from 880 Hong Kong dollars (\$110) to see the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner in action on February 4 in an Inter Miami tour match against a Hong Kong select XI.

But the 36-year-old Argentine remained glued to the bench with an injury, drawing boos from the crowd - and then a furore in China, which saw his absence as a political snub.

Organiser Tatler Asia on Monday offered a 50-percent refund for "those who purchased tickets through official channels for the match".

Those who want some of their money back will have to agree to terms and conditions that include not pursuing "proceedings before any court of law, tribunal (or) regulatory authority".

SPOTLIGHT

Google's new AI for corner kick tactics gets Liverpool approval

AFP

Paris

Liverpool football analysts have given their seal of approval to a new artificial intelligence tool from Google that suggests the best tactics for corner kicks, researchers said yesterday.

However no Liverpool players - or any humans - have tried out the AI assistant's suggestions, and an outside expert cautioned that the tool's value could be demonstrated only on the field.

Many wealthy clubs across the world already deploy experts to comb through video and data to carefully plan corner kick scenarios ahead of matches.

Google DeepMind, the AI arm of the US tech giant, also targeted corners for its new TacticAI system in research published in the journal *Nature Communications*. For the study, the researchers enlisted the help of five experts from Liverpool, who are currently second in the English Premier League.

TacticAI offers suggestion to coaches on exactly where the players should be positioned while attacking and defending corners, often involving very small adjustments in placement and speed. Across 50 different corner set-ups, the experts were asked to choose between an AI suggestion or tactics previously used during practice - without

knowing which was which. The Liverpool analysts picked TacticAI's suggestion in 45 cases, meaning they preferred its advice 90 percent of the time, according to the study. Google DeepMind research scientist and study co-author Petar Velickovic told AFP the tool is the first AI assistant "capable of providing both useful and practical suggestions" indistinguishable from human tactics in sports.

The model uses data on the position, speed, weight and height of players in the Premier League. Compared to the billions or trillions of data points AI models are usually trained on, only "fairly rudimentary" information is available for corners, Velickovic said.

There are an average of around 10 corners during a Premier League match.

Velickovic said the model's "secret sauce" was geometric deep learning, an AI technique that allowed the researchers to flip the field to increase the amount of data. While the study focused on corners, the researchers said the system could be expanded to other parts of football - and even other sports.

It is not the first collaboration between Liverpool and DeepMind, which started life as a British startup before being bought by Google. DeepMind CEO Demis Hassabis is a "big fan" of Liverpool, the study's lead author Zhe Wang said.

BOTTOMLINE

Man United won't sign marquee stars like Bellingham: Co-owner Ratcliffe

AFP

London

Manchester United co-owner Jim Ratcliffe has revealed he will not target marquee stars like Jude Bellingham as he bids to revive his club's fortunes.

Ratcliffe has taken control of football operations at United following his recent £1bn (\$1.2bn) purchase of a 25 percent stake in the Premier League side.

With United struggling in Erik ten Hag's second season as manager, British billionaire Ratcliffe had been expected to make big-money signings in the close-season. United have not won the Premier League since 2013 and currently sit in sixth place, although they are through to the FA Cup semi-finals after beating Liverpool on Sunday. Appearing as a guest on Geraint Thomas' Cycling Club podcast, the 71-year-old was asked whether he would try to sign England midfielder Bellingham from Real Madrid.

"He is a great footballer. It's not where our focus is, the solution isn't spending a lot of money on a couple of great players," Ratcliffe said. "They have done that, if you look at the last 10 years, they have spent a lot of money on a couple of great players."

"The first thing we need to do is get the right people in the right boxes who are managing and organising the club. And make sure we get recruitment right, it is such a vital part of football today."



'NOT CLEVER BUYING MBAPPE'

Later in the podcast, Ratcliffe was given a choice of signing France forward Kylian Mbappe for United or cyclist Tadej Pogacar for his INEOS team.

"I would rather sign the next Mbappe rather than spend a fortune buying success," he said. Mbappe has reportedly agreed to join Real Madrid from Paris Saint-Germain at the end of this season. But even if he was available, the superstar doesn't fit the bill for Ratcliffe.

"It's not that clever buying Mbappe. Anyone could figure that one out. More challenging is

to find the next Mbappe or next Bellingham or next Roy Keane," he said. As he conducts wide-ranging review of United's football operation, Ratcliffe is working with his long-term assistant Dave Brailsford, with Omar Berrada eventually coming in as chief executive from Manchester City.

Ratcliffe made it his goal to knock Manchester City and Liverpool from their position as the Premier League's preeminent forces, but he acknowledged achieving that target will be a long journey.

"The two people who are most focused on it would be Dave and myself, in terms of how we resolve

it all," Ratcliffe said. "We've now got Omar Berrada of course, our new CEO from Manchester City, who is still on gardening leave at the moment, he'll be a big part of it. It's Dave and myself really. You have to believe with Manchester Utd, if we get all the details right, all the right people in the right boxes, doing the right things in the right environment, that sporting elite environment that the results will drop out the bottom."

"Those things are not right at Manchester United today as we've said very clearly. "It's not a light switch, it's a much longer road to travel because there's so many aspects to it."