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FOOTBALL

Asian champions Qatar shift focus to World Cup qualifiers

Lopez's men will advance to the next phase of the preliminaries with victories over Kuwait



Qatar players train at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday, on the eve of their joint FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 qualification match against Kuwait. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar will hope to seal qualification into the next round when they take on Kuwait twice over the next week in the preliminary joint qualification - Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia. Fresh from successfully defending their AFC Asian Cup title on home soil last month, Marquez Lopez's side will start as favourites against Kuwait. The first match of the double header will be held today at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha, before Qatar travel for the reverse fixture on March 26.

Already three points ahead at the top, Qatar will be expected to easily advance and wins over Kuwait could well see them booking their spot early. A win for Kuwait will take them level with Qatar, setting the stage for a thrilling battle on Thursday.

Qatar had begun their quest for a first-ever World qualification under Carlos Queiroz in November as they comfortably beat India and Afghanistan.

Queiroz, however, was sacked with Lopez taking charge as Qatar went on to defend their AFC Asian Cup title. Lopez was subsequently rewarded with a contract that takes him through to 2026 but the Spaniard knows there is no room for error in Qatar's qualification campaign.



Kuwait players at a training session in Doha yesterday.

"The team has a winning mentality, and we will give our best to win against Kuwait," said Lopez yesterday. "After winning the Asian Cup title, the team is highly motivated and all the players want to continue the successful journey. It will be a difficult match against Kuwait but we are aiming to qualify for the World Cup as well as the Asian Cup. Like all of our opponents, we will respect Kuwait and will be completely focused," the former Al Wakrah coach added.

Lopez felt the qualifiers will pose a 'different challenge and motivation' to his team than the Asian Cup, where Qatar

emerged unbeaten en route to retaining the title. "It is difficult for a champion side to maintain the same level but will give our best to maintain our form. These qualifiers have brought us a different challenge and motivation, and the prize of success will also be different. All our focus is on qualifying for these two major tournaments," Lopez said.

Today, there will be a new man wearing the armband after Hassan al-Haydos announced his retirement from the international scene last Saturday. The 33-year-old appeared in a record 183 matches for Al Annabi and captained the team to their



Minister of Sports and Youth HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani with former Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos, who retired from national duty recently, at Qatar team's training yesterday.



Qatar's coach Marquez Lopez (left) and midfielder Jassem Gaber at the press conference.

Asian Cup successes in 2019 and last month, as well as in their disappointing showing as 2022 World Cup hosts, and leaves a creative void at the heart of the team.

Lopez hailed al-Haydos as the 'role model' for the young players in his squad, thanking him for his 14-year long service to the national team. "We are grateful for everything Hassan al-Haydos has done for Qatar football. He was a very important player on and off the field, and a role model for youngsters. We wish him success in what comes next in his career," he said.

Lopes has inherited a squad that sits on six points at the top of Group A after wins in their opening matches against Afghanistan and India, with the top two finishers in each group advancing to the next phase of the preliminaries.

Eight Asian nations are guaranteed to qualify for the finals with a ninth progressing to an intercontinental playoff.

Qatar hosted the 2022 World Cup but have never qualified for the finals, with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Iran and Saudi Arabia claiming the Asian berths at

the most recent edition.

Meanwhile, India will also be aiming for three points to keep pace at the top, with Igor Stimac's side having kicked off their campaign with a 1-0 win over Kuwait. That was followed by a 3-0 defeat against Qatar and India know they need maximum points from their double header against Afghanistan if they are to stay in the race for a top two finish which will earn them a spot in the third round of FIFA World Cup qualifying.

"Our target is to advance to the third round of the World Cup Qualifiers, and we are confident of making history. The players are extremely motivated as we have never made it to the third round ever," said Stimac.

"We will be playing our away match against Afghanistan at an altitude of 2270 metres in Abha, Saudi Arabia. Playing at such a height requires great endurance. The players are in decent form, and need to overcome the conditions, all sorts of difficulties and find a way to manage the game in a positive manner. Defensively we need to be stable."

FOCUS

QFA reviews strategy to further develop football in Qatar

QNA
Doha

The Qatar Football Association (QFA) reviewed a strategy to be implemented during the upcoming period, along with the objectives and programmes that it intends to carry out in its efforts devoted to promoting the Qatari football.

A meeting was held to discuss the strategy by QFA President Jassim bin Rashid al-Bueinain with members of the executive committee, representatives of the Qatar Stars League (QSL), alongside club officials. Al-Bueinain noted the incredible efforts made by QFA members, the club representatives and partners during the period that preceded the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, which Qatar for the second with second successive time.

The strategy of QFA in the coming period includes many programmes and objectives that will be achieved on the ground, al-Bueinain added, pointing out that those objectives will not be accomplished unless all efforts are made to complete the previous successes and move forward to an ambitious vision of Qatari football.



Qatar Football Association President Jassim bin Rashid al-Bueinain with members of the executive committee.

CRICKET

Kohli and Pant in spotlight as IPL mega-show returns

'He has been in form for a long time. He will make runs in this IPL as well'

AFP
New Delhi

Virat Kohli and Rishabh Pant will be under scrutiny on their return to action as the Indian Premier League begins tomorrow, with the T20 World Cup hot on its heels.

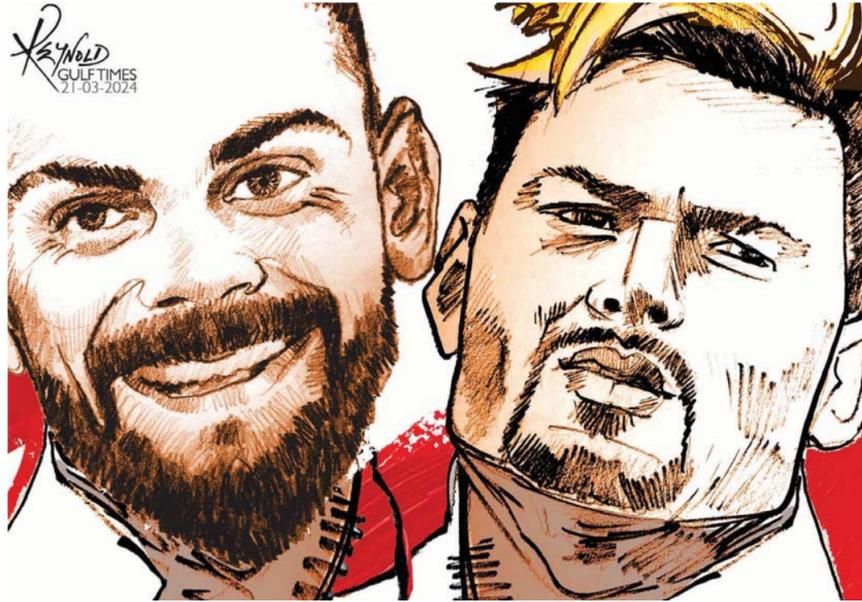
The 17th edition of the world's richest cricket league is expected to end close to the June 1 start of the World Cup in the West Indies and United States. Organisers have released only the first two weeks of the IPL schedule so far because it clashes with India's six-week-long general election. Last season the 10-team IPL lasted eight weeks. "This is a world stage for cricket," IPL chairman Arun Dhimal told AFP yesterday, boasting the "quality is above any T20 league in the world".

"Not only the Indian players but also the overseas players will be looking to give their best performance in the run-up to the World Cup," Dhimal said.

Master batsman Kohli, who missed India's 4-1 Test series victory over England because of the birth of his second child, is back with Royal Challengers Bengaluru, previously the Royal Challengers Bangalore. They take on defending champions Chennai Super Kings, led by MS Dhoni, in the opening match in Chennai tomorrow.

"Kohli is crucial for India in the T20 World Cup," former chief selector MSK Prasad told the IPL's official broadcaster. "He has been in form for a long time. He will make runs in this IPL as well."

Kohli has still never won the IPL but Bengaluru broke their title jinx when the women's team lifted the WPL under Smriti Mandhana on Sunday. Pant is back as captain of the Delhi Capitals, returning to cricket for the first time since be-



ing seriously hurt in a car crash in 2022. They face the Punjab Kings on Saturday.

The wicketkeeper-batsman has been on an intensive rehabilitation programme since surviving the crash with a damaged ligament in his right knee, a hurt wrist and ankle, and abrasions to his back.

If he proves his form and fitness, Pant is another in line to play for India at the World Cup.

Another with something to prove is Hardik Pandya, the new captain of five-time IPL winners the Mumbai Indians. Pandya has been out of action since October after an ankle injury and replaces Rohit Sharma as skipper. Rohit, who led Mumbai to their five title wins, remains with the team.

The move to replace Rohit, who

captains India in all formats, has not gone down well with pundits and fans, but Pandya brushed off any problems with the national skipper. "I don't think it will be awkward," Pandya, who led Gujarat Titans to the 2022 IPL title in their debut season, told reporters.

"I've played my whole career under him and I know he's going to have a hand on my shoulder always." The season could be Chennai veteran Dhoni's swansong, after the warhorse led the team to its fifth title in 2023. He said then that another year was a "gift" to his fans.

The 42-year-old wicketkeeper-batsman, who led India to two World Cup triumphs, in 2007 and 2011, remains a huge star in cricket-crazy India.

He underwent knee surgery last year and has hit the training nets in Chennai. "He's preparing really well," CSK batting coach Mike Hussey said. "His knee seems good at this stage and he's batting extremely well at the moment."

Australia's Pat Cummins will be one of two overseas captains in the IPL this year, after being named skipper of Sunrisers Hyderabad.

The fast bowler briefly broke an IPL auction record when Hyderabad paid 205 million rupees (\$2.5mn) at auction last year.

Fellow Australian quick Mitchell Starc soon smashed the record when Kolkata Knight Riders paid 247.5mn rupees.

Starc, 34, returns to the IPL after a nine-year absence, having previously played for Bengaluru.

FOCUS

Afghanistan call for 'politics-free cricket'

AFP
Kabul

Afghanistan cricket bosses yesterday expressed disappointment that Australia had scrapped a men's T20 series because of deteriorating women's rights in the Taliban-ruled country and called for "politics-free cricket".

Cricket Australia said it had received advice "that conditions for women and girls in Afghanistan are getting worse" and postponed the three-match series scheduled in August, likely to have been hosted by the UAE.

"The Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) expresses disappointment over Cricket Australia's decision to postpone yet another bilateral series against Afghanistan and reiterates its stance on neutral and politics-free cricket across the globe," said a statement.

The decision, announced Tuesday, was the third time since 2021, when the Taliban returned to power, that Australia has refused to play Afghanistan

outside of international tournaments.

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

But under the Taliban government's brand of Islamic rule, women are effectively barred from the game, as part of a raft of restrictions on women in Afghanistan the United Nations has labelled "gender apartheid".

The ACB urged the Australian government "not to impose its policies on cricket boards" and "focus on supporting the development of cricket".

"ACB advocates for keeping cricket distinct from political influence, considering the game's significance in Afghanistan and its connection to the happiness and joy of the Afghan nation," the board said.

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 eventually fled to Australia.

Gayle wants pace sensation Joseph in WI squad for home World Cup

Fast bowling sensation Shamar Joseph should be fast-tracked into the West Indies squad for the home T20 World Cup in June, said former captain Chris Gayle.

Joseph burst onto the scene in his debut series in Australia earlier this year, grabbing a five-wicket haul in his maiden Test in Adelaide.

He followed that up with a magical display in Brisbane where, bowling with a broken toe, the pacer claimed 7-68 to help West Indies record their first Test win in Australia in 27 years.

The 24-year-old has played only two domestic T20 matches but Gayle says West Indies need Joseph's firepower at the World Cup.

"He's strong, he should be in the squad," Gayle, who launched the T20 World Cup trophy tour in New York on Tuesday, told Reuters in a telephone interview.

"We already have Alzarri Joseph, so to have the two

Josephs there (will be great). Both might not play at the same time, but we would need him in this squad just in case anybody picks up an injury.

"It's a good headache to have for the selectors."

West Indies failed to make the Super 12 stage of the 2022 World Cup in Australia but have registered series victories against South Africa, India and England over the past year.

In Daren Sammy, they have a coach who knows what it takes to win a global trophy having captained West Indies to T20 World Cup titles in 2012 and 2016.

Gayle was happy with the "all-round" look of the group under captain Rovman Powell.

"Andre Russell back in the squad, there's some more experience in the squad in Jason Holder and Nicholas Pooran," Gayle said.

"Those guys will have a big part to play for West Indies to lift the trophy."

TOUR OF CATALONIA

Pogacar eases to second stage win

AFP
Barcelona

Tadej Pogacar breezed to a second consecutive victory to take the third stage of the Tour of Catalonia yesterday and widen his advantage as race leader.

The two-time Tour de France winner followed Spaniard Mikel Landa's attack with under eight kilometres to go and then flew past him in another show of strength after his dominant performance to claim stage two. It was another mountainous Pyrenees route from Sant Joan de les Abadesses to Port Aine over 176.7 kilometres and the Slovenian UAE Emirates rider capitalised by putting nearly a minute into Landa.

The Soudal Quick-Step rider came in second and is also second overall, with Italian Antonio Tiberi third over the line.

"It definitely wasn't easy, it's a really hard climb," Pogacar told Teledeporte.

"(There was) not enough oxygen, it was super hard. Once again,

a super good stage from us, from the team, and I'm happy to take the win."

Despite his strong performance, Pogacar said he was tired in the final kilometres.

"It was Mikel who attacked first, I went over him, I saw he already made the gap and I was thinking maybe it's too early but I found a good rhythm and until the last two kilometres I could still push good," he added.

"The last two was a bit tough but I still managed to finish well."

Pogacar extended his lead at the top of the general classification to two minutes and 27 seconds, and is firm favourite to win the race ahead of an ambitious tilt at a 2024 Giro-Tour double.

Bora-Hansgrohe rider Aleksandr Vlasov, third, trails Landa by 28 seconds, while Frenchman Lenny Martinez of Groupama-FDJ is fourth.

"I am happy, the objective was to eke out more lead on third place," Landa told Teledeporte.

"There's a long way to go to defend this second place, I want to finish on the podium."

MOTORSPORT

Qatar Drift Championship 3rd round from today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

After a long hiatus of nearly four months, the wheel of the Qatar Drift Championship returns to spin anew with the start of the third round, sponsored by HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, Chairman of Qatar Racing Club, and with broad participation from drift champions in Qatar and neighbouring countries.

Technical inspection for participants is scheduled to start at half past seven in the evening, followed by a briefing meeting for the racers with the championship's organising committee and judging panel at half past eight, before the qualifying trials commence at nine in the evening.

Competitors will have two runs on the track, and each will be evaluated based on their performance in each run, with the best score for each racer determining their placement in the dual matchups of the tandem competitions.

Tomorrow, the events will begin with a briefing meeting for the racers at half past eight in the evening, at the same time when the elimination matchups start



at nine in the evening, leading up to the final races. The club had opened the track to racers yesterday from half past eight until half past eleven to test their cars and the course for this round's competitions.

With the conclusion of the second round of competitions, Omani racer Ahmed al-Amri has moved to the top of the championship standings after securing second place in the previous round, now holding 38 points, leading by a margin of 5 points over the second-placed winner of the previous round, Qatari

Abdullah Abdullah. Meanwhile, racers Ali al-Jabsha and Salem al-Sarraf are tied for third place with 30 points each. The former leader and winner of the opening round, Haitham al-Hadidi, has slipped to fifth place due to his absence from the previous round's competitions.

In the local category competitions, newly introduced this season under the generous directives of Sheikh Jabor bin Khalid al-Thani, Director of Qatar Racing Club, to encourage Qatari racers and residents, Ali al-Jabsha from the "Brothers" team leads with

45 points, seven points ahead of his closest competitor, Abdullah Abdullah. Al-Jabsha's teammate in the same team, Abdullah al-Muhtasib, holds third place with 33 points, just one point ahead of racer Saud al-Attiyah. In fifth place are tied Mubarak al-Dosari and Yazan al-Jabsha, each with 20 points.

Al-Dosari will aim for a good result in this round, especially after his recent victory in the qualifying rounds for the Red Bull Car Park Drift Championship, representing Qatar in the finals to be held in Oman later this year.

BOTTOMLINE

Philipsen adds Brugge-De Panne honours after San Remo win

AFP
De Panne, Belgium

Jasper Philipsen won the Classic Brugge-De-Panne in a sprint finish yesterday, following up on his Milan-San Remo success at the weekend.

The Belgian cyclist edged out compatriot Tim Merlier to snatch victory for the second year in a row, while Dutchman Danny van Poppel came third in the 198.9km

race which marks the start of a fortnight of Flanders races. Philipsen became entangled with Merlier alongside the barriers as he made his way to the front after emerging from the wheel Australian Sam Welsford, drawing the ire of his rival after the finish line.

"I had a lot of positions to make up in the last corner and I got on Tim Merlier's wheel," said Philipsen.

"I tried to go past on the left and

the gap was really small. "I went shoulder to shoulder with Tim - a bit of a shame - but in the end it was a good sprint and I'm happy to win."

An early breakaway encountered minimal resistance before the pack worked to reel them in, two of the escapees eventually caught with 21km remaining.

Frenchman Thomas Gachignard, the last of the day's three-man lead group, was allowed to soldier on alone a bit longer until

he too was swept up by the peloton. With riders jostling for position as the line approached, Philipsen left his burst until late and overcame an unfavourable position to underline his status right now as the best sprinter in the world.

Philipsen also won a stage of the Tirreno-Adriatico in Italy earlier this month.

He took the green sprint points jersey at last year's Tour de France after winning four stages.



Alpecin-Deceuninck's Belgian rider Jasper Philipsen reacts as he crosses the finish line to win the 'Classic Brugge-De Panne' men's elite one-day cycling race, 198.9km from Brugge to De Panne yesterday. (AFP)

WOZNIACKI NOT FEELING THE LOVE AS HALEP EXITS MIAMI IN FIRST ROUND



Caroline Wozniacki of Denmark

Miami: Fans gave Simona Halep a warm welcome back to tennis at the Miami Open on Tuesday in her first match back from a doping suspension but the Romanian received a frostier reception from former world number one Caroline Wozniacki. There were plenty of cheers and chants of "Si-Mon-ah. Si-Mon-Ah" from excited flag-waving fans during the wildcard's 1-6 6-4 6-3 loss to Spain's Paula Badosa, who also complimented the twice Grand Slam champion after the match. But Halep's return on a wildcard did not sit well with Wozniacki. "I've been very outspoken in the past how I feel about doping and all of that," said Wozniacki, adding that she likes Halep. "I have always

wanted a clean sport, fair for everybody. I think it's definitely still my opinion. "This is not directly at Simona, but if someone purposely cheats, if someone has tested positive for doping it's my personal belief that I don't think people should be awarded wildcards afterwards. If you want to come back, and it's been a mistake, I understand, you should work your way up from the bottom." Halep accepted a wildcard into the Miami Open after her four-year ban was cut to nine months by the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Former Wimbledon and French Open champion Halep was suspended in October 2022 after testing positive for roxadustat - a banned drug that stimulates the production of red blood cells - at

that year's US Open. Halep vigorously denied the charges against her and was again defending herself on Tuesday against Wozniacki's comments. "I didn't do anything wrong," said Halep. "I didn't cheat. I didn't dope. So it's better if we read the decision from CAS that it was a contaminated supplement, it wasn't doping. "I never had something to do with doping. I never doped, so I'm not a cheater. "Thank you to the tournament for giving me the wildcard and have the possibility to play in such a big tournament. It was great to be back. "Only one person being negative about me is not that important because I have hundreds of people that giving me love, so I will take that."



Simona Halep of Romania

TENNIS/MIAMI OPEN

Halep loses to Badosa on return from doping ban

'I would say this day is going to stay very special for me'

Reuters
Miami

Paula Badosa spoiled Simona Halep's return from a doping ban, fighting back to claim a gritty 1-6 6-4 6-3 win to move into the second round of the Miami Open and set up what is sure to be an emotion-packed match with Aryna Sabalenka.

Halep had been the player in the spotlight coming into Miami accepting a wild card when her four-year suspension was cut to nine months by the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

But the focus quickly shifted to Sabalenka after the world number two's long-time boyfriend, Belarusian former pro ice hockey player Konstantin Koltsov, died in what police said on Tuesday was an "apparent suicide".

If Badosa was having a tough time dealing with Halep it will be nothing compared to the mental challenge she will confront in her next match today or tomorrow when she faces Sabalenka, someone she calls her best friend.

Badosa said she has talked several times with Sabalenka during the last horrific 24 hours and just hopes her friend can find the strength from somewhere when she steps on court.

"It's not an easy challenge, it's a mental one," said Badosa. "She's one of my best friends. Of course, I know what she's going through. "Yesterday I spoke with her a lot of time, this morning the same, so I know what she's going through. I know the entire situation, what is happening.

"That for me is a little bit shocking also to go through that because at the end she's my best friend and I don't want her to suffer."

Playing her first match since a first round loss at the 2022 US Open, Halep displayed few signs of rust against the 80th ranked Spaniard in a rampaging opening set that saw her break a misfiring



Paula Badosa of Spain reacts during her match against Simona Halep of Romania at the Miami Open. (AFP)

Badosa three times as a small but excited crowd chanted "Si-Mon-ah. Si-Mon-Ah".

While Halep has won many tournaments, including two grand slams she insisted Tuesday's return will stand out as a special moment in her career.

"It feel really good," said Halep. "I had emotions, positive emotions to see the crowd supporting me was so nice and gave me a lot of energy and the level of tennis was pretty good, unexpected I think, for most of the people.

"It is a special day. "I would say this day is going to stay very special for me.

"Of course, I have many results in the past, big results but here is something more than tennis, it is something personal."

The 32-year-old Romanian

spark plug showed she can still make all the shots and had lost none of her trademark terrier-like determination running down ball after ball.

But 18 months away from competition was always going to exact a toll.

In the second set it was Badosa taking the initiative as Halep began to show the first signs of fatigue and needed her shoulder massaged at a changeover while the Spaniard held steady to level the match.

The third set turned into a dog fight with Badosa again getting the early break to go ahead 2-1 only to have a battling Halep immediately break back.

Badosa would continue to apply pressure and break the Wimbledon and French Open winner

a second time, the effort leaving the exhausted Romanian slumped over her racket at the baseline.

With little in reserve, Halep's resistance crumbled and Badosa moved in for the kill finishing off her opponent with another break.

"I didn't like it at all," said Badosa about getting Halep in the first round. "I'm going to be honest. Even if Simona is 10 years without competing, she's still Simona. She's a big player. She's won so many titles.

"I think she's going to be back on the top very soon."

The spotlight now shifts back to Sabalenka following her boyfriend's death.

Sabalenka, who has a first round bye, so far has given no indication she plans to withdraw with posts on social media on Tuesday showing her at work under a hot sun on a Hard Rock Stadium practice court.

The Miami-Dade police department confirmed on Tuesday that they had responded to a call at a Miami resort about reports of a man jumping off a balcony.

"At approximately 12:39 a.m., Bal Harbour Police and Fire Rescue were dispatched to the St Regis Bal Harbour Resort in reference to a male that jumped from a balcony," the police said.

"The Miami-Dade Police Department, Homicide Bureau, responded and has taken over the investigation of the apparent suicide of Mr. Konstantin Koltsov. "No foul play is suspected."

The former forward, who was 42, played for the Belarus national team in the 2002 and 2010 Olympics and spent parts of three seasons with the National Hockey League's Pittsburgh Penguins between 2003 and 2006.

Sabalenka and Koltsov were first linked in June 2021, according to *People* magazine, and she has frequently posted photos of them together on her Instagram account. While Sabalenka has yet to speak, fellow players have rallied around her. "I'm here, we're here for her."

COMMENT

Australia's Boyle fears Brisbane 2032 will look like 'cheapskate' Games



A view of the Gabba cricket stadium in Brisbane. (@GabbaBrisbane)

Reuters
Sydney

Australian athletics great Raelene Boyle fears Brisbane 2032 will look like a "cheapskate" Olympics after the decision to stage the track and field at a 49-year-old stadium in the southern suburbs of the city.

Organisers originally planned to revamp the city's Gabba cricket stadium to host the opening and closing ceremonies as well as the athletics but the Queensland government blanched at the cost and ordered a review of plans last December.

The review, however, on Monday proposed a new purpose-built 55,000-seat Olympic stadium be constructed in an inner city park at a cost of A\$3.4bn (\$2.22bn).

Queensland Premier Steven Miles rejected that recommendation on the grounds of cost and decided rugby stadium Lang Park would host the ceremonies with the track and field shunted to the Queensland Sport and Athletics Centre (QSAC).

"I think it is a shame for the sport and the city," Boyle, who won three silver medals in sprints at the 1968 and 1972 Olympics, told News Corp.

"I don't think it will show the city off that well and Brisbane could look like cheapskates are running the Games. The only thing going for it is there is already a track there.

"I don't think it will be a great place to have track and field be-

cause it's old. It is a small stadium and it will have to be revamped dramatically.

"But I also see the other side in that this is a terrible time to be spending money on the Olympics when people are struggling with their mortgages and there are tent cities happening in some of the parks."

Miles promised that QSAC would be refurbished at a cost of A\$1.6 billion to create "the nation's best athletics facility".

Even that price tag was too high for Olympic powerbroker John Coates, one of the drivers of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)'s New Norm process under which Brisbane was awarded the 2032 Games in 2021.

The more targeted procedure aims to save hundreds of millions of dollars for host cities and increase long-term sustainability.

"I don't see it as a given that it's necessary to spend A\$1.6bn on QSAC," the IOC Vice-President told News Corp from Switzerland. "I am the IOC member in Australia and it's my duty to remind them the basis upon which they bid for the games," he added.

"If we don't honour those arrangements there's plenty of other countries that can say, why did you give it to Brisbane when they didn't have all the venues?"

Some 80% of the venues for the 2032 Games are already in place with the stadium refurbishments and a federal government-funded A\$2.5bn arena to host the swimming the only major construction projects planned.

GOLF

Schauffele sets aside gut-punch loss last week for final Masters tune-up

AFP
Miami

Xander Schauffele has set aside a gut-wrenching runner-up Players Championship finish ahead of his final tuneup for next month's Masters as he fights to defend Olympic gold in Paris.

The 30-year-old American faded in Sunday's final round and lost by a stroke to top-ranked Scottie Scheffler at the Players, but has bounced back for today's start of the PGA Tour Valspar Championship at Innisbrook in Palm Harbor, Florida.

"I'm always pretty tough on myself but you kind of put it to rest to a certain extent," Schauffele said, calling the loss a "gut punch."

"I played some really good golf. I was just there, again, in a good spot to win a golf tournament and didn't get it done.

"I wouldn't say I was too hard on myself. I accepted it. Was overall pretty pleased with how I was able

to play. Just another close call under my belt for now."

Fifth-ranked Schauffele hasn't won since the 2022 Scottish Open, but since then has five top-10 efforts this year, 11 top-10s last season with two runner-up finishes and two top-10s in the 2022 PGA playoffs.

"I feel like the best is in front of me," Schauffele said. "And the only way it's not going to be in front of me is if I let all these things get to my head and not play my game."

That means shrugging off missed putts and taking a run at the Valspar crown before taking two weeks off and then trying to capture his first major title at Augusta National.

"Feeling better than I did a couple days ago. Just excited to try and win again," Schauffele said.

Schauffele has 11 top-10 finishes in majors without a victory, but matched his best major finish by sharing second at the 2019 Masters. He wants the chance to defend his Tokyo Olympic title at Paris by staying in the top four among US

players in the world rankings, a group that now includes Scheffler, Schauffele, 2023 US Open champion Wyndham Clark and seventh-ranked Patrick Cantlay.

But seven compatriots are in the top 20 to keep the pressure on.

"The world rankings is a bit of a free for all right now for the American side," Schauffele said. "I'm in right now and I intend on playing at a very high level and qualifying for Paris and giving myself a run at it again."

Moore seeks Valspar repeat after landing first win on tour

As is the case with many golfers, one PGA Tour victory changed Taylor Moore's career trajectory.

For Moore, that breakthrough came at the 2023 Valspar Championship, a title he'll seek to defend this week in Tampa, Fla.

Moore was 29 years old and had played his way through PGA Tour Canada and the Korn Ferry Tour to reach the big time. "It just gave me some confidence, knowing that I knew I could compete out here and



Xander Schauffele of the US hits from the sixth tee prior to the Valspar Championship at Copperhead Course at Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club in Palm Harbor, Florida. (AFP)

be in contention on Sunday, but until you actually hoist that trophy and get it done, I guess you never really know," Moore said yesterday.

"So it gave me that affirmation that I could do it out here on Sun-

days on the back nine when I am in contention."

It gave him much more than that. Moore got into the majors, making the cut at the Masters and the PGA Championship. He picked up three

more top-five finishes, accruing the FedEx Cup points necessary to reach the Tour Championship.

"I think for me it was (that) I knew I was in the majors the rest of the year basically, but I knew I needed to finish well to get into everything this year," Moore said.

"Obviously with how our schedule is now, too, getting into those signature events and elevated stuff was definitely a priority. Obviously a win takes care of a lot of that.

"Yeah, getting to (the Tour Championship) for the first time as well as setting up my schedule for this year was massive.

"But I think once the win kind of wore off after that stretch you were talking about, I just wanted to keep getting better each and every week, and that's what me and my team talk about every week is - how can I keep getting better and how can I evaluate where I'm at and put one foot in front of the other and just take it week by week."

"Getting my first tour win here was awesome, and getting my second here would be even better."

FORMULA 1

Verstappen eyes perfect 10 amid Red Bull discord

'We are a team and no single individual is bigger than the team'

AFP
Melbourne

Max Verstappen will be heavy favourite to make it three wins from three this season as his Red Bull team attempt to put weeks of paddock intrigue behind them at the Australian Grand Prix.

Verstappen will bid to win back-to-back Australian Grands Prix on Sunday and match his record of 10 successive race victories.

The Dutch three-time world champion emphatically led home teammate Sergio Perez in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, but the celebrations were overshadowed by team disunity and allegations against Christian Horner.

The long-serving Red Bull boss was cleared of inappropriate conduct involving a woman colleague ahead of the season-opener in Saudi Arabia and tried to put a lid on the drama in Jeddah.

But the unnamed woman has appealed to Red Bull GmbH, the parent company of the all-conquering Formula One team.

She has also reportedly lodged an official complaint to Formula One's governing body the FIA, ensuring the saga will rumble on in Melbourne this weekend.

Horner has guided Red Bull to six constructors' and seven drivers' world championships since 2005, including the last three won by Verstappen.

But the star driver's father, the former racer Jos Verstappen, claimed earlier this month that Red Bull faced being "torn apart" if Horner remained in his position.

His son also issued a veiled threat to quit if team adviser Helmut Marko was sidelined in any power struggle.

Horner insisted "it is absolutely fine with Max", but added the caveat that "we are a team and no single individual is bigger than the team".

That piqued the interest of Mercedes boss Toto Wolff, who needs a replacement next season when Lewis Hamilton departs for Ferrari.

"There is no team up and down the grid who wouldn't do handstands to have him (Verstappen) in a car," Wolff told reporters ahead of arriving in Australia.

Intrigue aside, victory in Saudi Arabia was Verstappen's ninth in a row, with more of the same expected at Albert Park, barring any technical hiccups.

"It has been a great start to the year and we don't know the full potential of the car yet, so now we want to keep the momentum going," said the Red Bull ace.

Verstappen won a chaotic race from pole in Australia last year, holding off Hamilton after the grand prix was red-flagged three



times, with multiple crashes and just 12 drivers finishing.

It was his maiden win in Australia and Red Bull's first in the country since Sebastian Vettel in 2011.

Perez, in the other Red Bull, is the only driver to get close to Verstappen this year.

The Mexican is determined to keep pressing hard as Ferrari's Charles Leclerc snaps at his heels.

"Max is driving at a super-high level and I think he is the only driver who has maximised qualifying and the race so far this season," said Perez.

"It is great though because I have the best possible challenge in him. I must keep evolving weekend after weekend."

With Verstappen already 15 points clear of Perez and 23 ahead of Leclerc, the Ferrari number one is desperate to break the stranglehold in Australia and close the gap before it widens too far.

Whether his Ferrari partner

Carlos Sainz returns is up in the air after the Spaniard missed Saudi Arabia with appendicitis.

In his absence, reserve driver Oliver Bearman, just 18, scored a stunning seventh on his debut after just one free practice session, showcasing the Briton's huge potential.

Hamilton's Mercedes has now gone 47 races without a win, and judging by the car's performance so far, they won't be breaking the barren streak any time soon.

Instead, it looks set to be another week of battling for the minor places with Aston Martin and McLaren.

Seven-time world champion Hamilton, who came ninth in Jeddah, believes his car has potential but admitted it was struggling with grip at high-speed corners.

"These next few races will be tricky but we will be putting in a great deal of effort to improve as much as we can," he said.

STANDINGS DRIVERS

1. Max Verstappen (NED) 51 pts, 2. Sergio Perez (MEX) 36, 3. Charles Leclerc (MON) 28, 4. George Russell (GBR) 18, 5. Oscar Piastri (AUS) 16, 6. Carlos Sainz (ESP) 15, 7. Fernando Alonso (ESP) 12, 8. Lando Norris (GBR) 12, 9. Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 8, 10. Oliver Bearman (GBR) 6, 11. Nico Hulkenberg (GER) 1, 12. Lance Stroll (CAN) 1, 13. Alexander Albon (THA) 0, 14. Zhou Guanyu (CHN) 0, 15. Kevin Magnussen (DEN) 0, 16. Daniel Ricciardo (AUS) 0, 17. Esteban Ocon (FRA) 0, 18. Yuki Tsunoda (JPN) 0, 19. Logan Sargeant (USA) 0, 20. Valtteri Bottas (FIN) 0, 21. Pierre Gasly (FRA) 0

CONSTRUCTORS

1. Red Bull 87 pts, 2. Ferrari 49, 3. McLaren 28, 4. Mercedes 26, 5. Aston Martin 13, 6. Haas 1, 7. Williams 0, 8. Sauber 0, 9. RB 0, 10. Alpine 0

FOCUS

IOC says 'aggressive' Russia criticism a 'new low'

AFP
Lausanne

Moscow's criticism of Olympic restrictions on Russian athletes was beyond unacceptable and had reached a "new low", the International Olympic Committee (IOC) said yesterday.

"It goes beyond anything that is acceptable. To link the president (Germany's Thomas Bach), his nationality and the Holocaust in the context of this issue reaches a new low," IOC spokesman Mark Adams said.

The IOC on Tuesday both barred Russian athletes from taking part in the opening ceremony of the 2024 Paris Olympics on July 26 and criticised the Kremlin for planning to hold its own "Friendship Games" to rival those held in the French capital.

Those decisions invoked the ire of the Kremlin, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova saying that they "demonstrate how far the IOC has moved away from its stated principles and slipped into racism and neo-Nazism".

When Bach was asked about the comments, the German gave a curt reply before asking spokesman Adams to take over.

There are "more quotes coming from Russia that are extremely aggressive and since some of them are very personal also, if you allow I would like to ask Mark Adams to respond to this question", Bach said.

Adams added: "We've seen some very aggressive statements coming out of Russia today, but there's one comment even which is going beyond that, we've even seen one that links the president, his nationality

and the Holocaust, and this is completely unacceptable and reaches a new low."

When asked if security had been boosted around Bach, Adams said: "As regards security, I think it's as well that I remind you that we cannot speak of the details about security and understand that with the current geo-political situation and with the impact it's having on the IOC and its president, all appropriate measures have been taken."

The IOC suspended Russia from the 2024 Games last year, but gave the green light for its athletes to compete as neutrals as long as they did not actively support the Kremlin's assault on Ukraine.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Zakharova argued that this neutral status forces Russian athletes to "re-nounce any association with their homeland, with their citizenship, with their history, culture and people".

"The IOC's decisions are wrongful, unjust and unacceptable," she said. "We are outraged by the unprecedented discriminatory conditions imposed by the International Olympic Committee on Russian athletes."

Russia's fury comes a day after the IOC issued a strongly-worded statement accusing the Kremlin of "politicising sport" by planning to hold its own Friendship Games.

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, the venue for the highly controversial 2014 Winter Olympics.



FIA CHIEF CLEARED IN LAS VEGAS GP INTERFERENCE PROBE

FIA president Mohamed Ben Sulayem was yesterday cleared of accusations that he interfered with the organisation of last year's inaugural Las Vegas Grand Prix. The governing body's ethics committee said "a robust and wide-ranging independent review spanning 30 days, which included interviews with 11 witnesses" took place.

"Allegations against the FIA president were unsubstantiated," the body said in a statement.

Ben Sulayem was said to have asked officials "to find some concerns to prevent the FIA from certifying the circuit before the weekend of the race (in Las Vegas)", according to an internal FIA report quoted by the BBC. According to the whistleblower mentioned in the compliance report, "the purpose was to find fault with the track in order to withhold the licence".

"Issues on the circuit were meant to be artificially identified regardless of their actual existence." The reasons why the president of the FIA would have wanted to prevent the race from taking place have never been explained. However, there have been claims of tensions over influence in the sport between the FIA and American group Liberty Media, who own the commercial rights to F1 and who organise the Las Vegas Grand Prix.

SPOTLIGHT

Spain court bails Dani Alves for one million euros

AFP
Barcelona

Former Brazil international Dani Alves is to be released from jail pending an appeal against his rape conviction in a one-million-euro bail agreement denounced by the victim's lawyer as "justice for the rich".

Yesterday's ruling came a day after his lawyer requested the 40-year-old's release on the grounds that he had already served a quarter of his four-and-a-half-year sentence in pre-trial detention following his arrest in January 2023. In its ruling, the Barcelona court granted him "provisional release" in exchange for "the bail payment of 1,000,000 euros" (\$1.08mn), also requiring that he hand over his Spanish and Brazilian passports, remain in Spain and present himself to court "on a weekly basis".

But the decision drew a furious response from the lawyer of the young woman who was raped by Alves at a Barcelona nightclub in December 2022. "This sends the message that there is justice for the rich, and even if there is a conviction if you pay bail there are no criminal consequences," she told reporters, pledging to appeal on grounds it was "not in line with the law".

"This is a very dangerous message for society," she added, saying her client was "very outraged, very despondent and very frustrated".



One of the world's most decorated footballers who played for Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain, Alves was convicted last month of raping the young woman in the VIP bathroom of Sutton nightclub in the early hours of December 31, 2022. His lawyers swiftly appealed the conviction.

The court's decision on yesterday also bars him from "coming within 1,000m (yards) of the plaintiff, her home, her workplace and whatever other place that she is, as well as making any attempt to communicate with her".

The decision was also swiftly denounced by the radical left-wing Sumar alliance, which is part of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's leftist coalition. "Dani Alves can wait at home for his definitive sentencing for RAPE because he has

a million euros. The justice system is patriarchal and classist. Enough is enough," the party wrote on its X account. TV crews gathered outside of the Brians 2 prison northwest of Barcelona where Alves is being held to capture the moment of his release.

But Spanish media reported the player was not able to deposit the bail amount before the court's treasury closed for the day, so he will likely only be released today. Since his arrest 14 months ago, Alves' legal team has repeatedly asked for his release on bail but the request was always rejected by the court on grounds he was a flight risk. At Tuesday's hearing, Alves - who spoke by videoconference from prison - promised the judges he would not flee, with public prosecutors again opposing the request on grounds he posed a high flight risk.

Brazil does not extradite its citizens when they are sentenced in other countries. The victim, who testified behind a screen to protect her identity, said Alves had violently forced her to have sex in a private bathroom of the nightclub despite begging him to let her go, causing her "anguish and terror", prosecutors said.

Alves' lawyers had argued the victim had been "glued" to the player while dancing at the nightclub, saying there was "sexual tension" between them. But in its 61-page decision, the court said that did not mean "that she consented to anything that might have subsequently happened".

Asian Cup brawl brought South Korean team closer: Son

Son Heung-min said yesterday that the Asian Cup bust-up with Lee Kang-in had brought the South Korean team closer, on the eve of a World Cup qualifier against Thailand.

Tottenham and South Korea skipper Son dislocated a finger in a clash with Paris Saint-Germain's Lee on the eve of their defeat in the Asian Cup semi-finals last month.

Lee was widely blamed for the melee, which was triggered after Son objected to some of the younger squad members rushing off to play table tennis after a pre-game dinner.

Reports said that the 23-year-old Lee tried to punch Son, a claim the PSG attacking midfielder denies.

The incident sparked a media furore in South Korea, with reports sponsors briefly moved to drop Lee, before he travelled to London to apologise to Son in person.

Son said yesterday that Lee had now apologised to the South Korean squad. "Kang-in offered a sincere apology telling team members what he did and what was wrong about it," the Spurs attacker said. "Apologising requires courage and the team accepted the apology because Kang-in showed such courage."

Ahead of today's home qualifier against Thailand and the return fixture on Tuesday, Son said the apology had given the team "momentum to unite more tightly". "Everyone makes mistakes and learns a lot from them," said Son. "As he is young, I hope it will make him stronger, and realise what it means to be on the national team."

Jurgen Klinsmann was sacked as South Korea coach following the 2-0 defeat to Jordan in the Asian Cup last four. He was replaced on an interim basis by under-23 coach Hwang Sun-hong.

(AFP)