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Rajitha takes five wickets as Sri Lanka crush Bangladesh



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FOOTBALL

Racism reducing my desire to play football, says Brazil's Vinicius

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FOOTBALL

Qatar on verge of advancing to third round of WC qualifiers

By Sports Reporter
Doha

A win for Qatar against Kuwait today will secure the Asian Champions' ticket to the third round of the FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers and also book their spot in the AFC Asian Cup 2027, which will be hosted by Saudi Arabia.

Qatar are on top of the Group A with a perfect record of three wins from three so far. Akram Afif was Qatar's star in their 3-0 win over Kuwait at home last Thursday and the two-time AFC Asian Cup champions will be hoping for more of the same in the reverse fixture at the Sabah Al Salem Stadium in Kuwait City. The first two finishers in each of the nine groups advance to the next stage of determining which nations will take Asia's eight guaranteed berths at the 48-team World Cup in Mexico, Canada and the United States.

Head coach Marquez Lopez, who has yet to taste a competitive defeat since taking charge of Qatar in December, admitted he had been impressed by his team's second half performance against Kuwait on Thursday. "Kuwait played with a good defensive strategy but we showed our best in the second half and converted our chances. However, Tuesday's match will be difficult as Kuwait will try to make up for this loss," Lopez had said after Thursday's tie.

The Spaniard added: "We are trying to introduce a new policy in the national team as part of our strategy towards forming a strong team that includes young tal-



Qatar's head coach Marquez Lopez (left) and his players arrive in Kuwait City yesterday, on the eve of their match against Kuwait.



ent and experienced players as we are facing a major challenge in the qualifiers."

Meanwhile, Qatar's midfielder Mohamed Waad said the team will have to work hard against the home side to earn a win.

"It is certainly not an easy match and we are expecting a tough challenge from Kuwait who will play in front of their home

fans," he said. "But we are determined to maintain our winning form and return with full points," Waad added.

Thursday's defeat left Kuwait on three points, one behind India, but head coach Rui Bento said his side still had a chance to secure progression. "We still have three matches and we still have chances to

qualify," said Costa.

In another Group A match, India, meanwhile, will hope for a better outcome when they host Afghanistan in Guwahati today. India, despite dominating, settled for a goalless draw with Afghanistan on Thursday with head coach Igor Stimac admitting he was disappointed with the result.

"We should have won with the chances we created, we tried different combinations and players but it just did not work. This is a problem that has been following us for years," said Stimac.

It won't be easy against an Afghanistan side who desperately need to win to keep their hopes alive.

SPOTLIGHT

Page banks on youth as Wales target Euro spot

Wales are without Bale, who retired shortly before the start of the qualifiers

AFP
London

Wales manager Rob Page says the team have come "a long way" since the retirement of Gareth Bale as they prepare to host Poland in a play-off final today with a place at Euro 2024 at stake.

Victory in Cardiff would take Wales to a third successive European Championship and a fourth major tournament out of five after they qualified for the 2022 World Cup. But this time they are without talismanic former captain Bale, their record caps holder and goalscorer, who retired shortly before the start of Euro 2024 qualifying, in January 2023.

"We had one of the world's best footballers and it shows how far we've come in a short space of time," said Page, whose team beat Finland 4-1 in their play-off semi-final last week. "We are only one tournament past Gareth's retirement and one win away from qualifying. We're a country where, if we can be there or thereabouts at the end of the campaign to qualify, while we're still in this transition of introducing young players without some of the world-class senior players we've had, then we're in a good place. That's where we are at this time and it's quite a significant move. It shows the strength in depth and quality we've got coming through."

A clutch of players remain from the squad that reached the semi-finals at Euro 2016 in Wales's first major tournament since the 1958 World Cup, including defender Ben Davies and midfielder Aaron Ramsey. But Page has focused on introducing younger players over the past year. Ethan Ampadu, 23, and 19-year-old Jordan James form the midfield axis while Brennan Johnson, Daniel James and Neco Williams also provide pace and energy.

"Having younger legs doesn't guarantee positive results, but it gives you the best opportunity," Page told reporters yesterday. "Athleticism was one of the biggest things we took from the World Cup. Seeing some of the teams - Canada, Morocco, the USA - their midfield three was athletic."

Poland, featuring star striker Robert



Wales' Jay Dasilva trains with teammates yesterday, ahead of the Euro 2024 play-off final against Poland. (Reuters)

Lewandowski, booked their play-off final spot with a 5-1 hammering of Estonia in Warsaw, where the unfancied visitors were hampered by an early red card. "We know they've got an abundance of quality," said Page. "They've got a new manager (Michal Probiez) and they've had some positive results since (their qualifying campaign). But they're in the play-offs for a reason. They would have been favourites to qualify and we'll take note of that."

UKRAINE EYE SPOT AT FIRST MAJOR TOURNAMENT SINCE RUSSIAN INVASION

Meanwhile, Ukraine will bid to qualify for a first major tournament since Russia's invasion of the country when they take on Iceland in a Euro 2024 play-off final today, while Georgia target history against Greece.

Serhiy Rebrov's Ukraine missed out on the 2022 World Cup, losing in the play-offs to Wales, but will be favourites against

Iceland in Wroclaw, Poland. They appeared set to miss out when trailing Bosnia and Herzegovina late on in Thursday's semi-final, but kept their hopes of reaching the tournament in Germany alive with goals from Roman Yaremchuk and Artem Dovbyk.

"I told the players before the game that I hoped they would bring a bit of happiness to the people in Ukraine right now," Rebrov told reporters.

Rebrov, a former Tottenham and West Ham striker who made 75 international appearances, took over in June last year but could not lead Ukraine to automatic qualification as they were edged out for second place in Group C by reigning champions Italy on head-to-head record.

Iceland have not reached a major tournament since the 2018 World Cup but have continued to punch above their weight, beating Israel 4-1 last week to move within one win of returning to the championship in which they famously reached the quarter-finals in 2016.

Ukraine made the last eight three years ago, their best performance at a Euro, before losing 4-0 to eventual runners-up England. A spot in Group E at the Euros, with matches against Belgium, Slovakia and Romania, is up for grabs.

Georgia could qualify for a major finals for the first time as an independent nation when they host former winners Greece. Willy Sagnol's side set up the clash with Greece by seeing off Luxembourg 2-0 and will be boosted by the return of star forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia from suspension.

Frenchman Sagnol has said he will likely leave either following the Greece match or after the Euro if Georgia qualify. The winners will be placed in Group F for the tournament proper, alongside Portugal, the Czech Republic and Turkey.

The only other time Georgia have even come close to qualifying for a major tournament was when they suffered a 1-0 loss to North Macedonia in the play-off final in 2020.

Greece have only reached the Euro four times, most recently in 2012, but will be desperate to qualify to mark 20 years since their remarkable title triumph against the odds in Portugal.

Japan to progress in World Cup qualifying after North Korea game cancelled

Tokyo: Japan look poised to reach the final stage of qualifying for the 2026 World Cup without kicking a ball after FIFA said their match at North Korea will not be rescheduled.

North Korea were supposed to stage the qualifier today in the capital Pyongyang but five days before the game officials abruptly said the isolated country could not play host without giving a reason.

On Friday the Asian Football Confederation said the match was off and at the weekend FIFA said it "shall neither be played nor rescheduled", citing lack of space in the international football calendar. "The matter and match outcome will be referred to the FIFA disciplinary committee," football's world governing body added.

North Korea could suffer a 3-0 forfeit as a result, which would send Japan into the third stage of qualifying for the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Japan beat North Korea 1-0 in Tokyo on Thursday to make it three wins from three in Asian qualifying Group B.

Coach Hajime Moriyasu, who took Japan to the last 16 of the Qatar World Cup after wins over Spain and Germany, had been eyeing the North Korea game as an opportunity to make improvements following an unconvincing display in the home leg. Japan were dumped out of the Asian Cup quarter-finals 2-1 by Iran last month after entering the tournament as favourites.

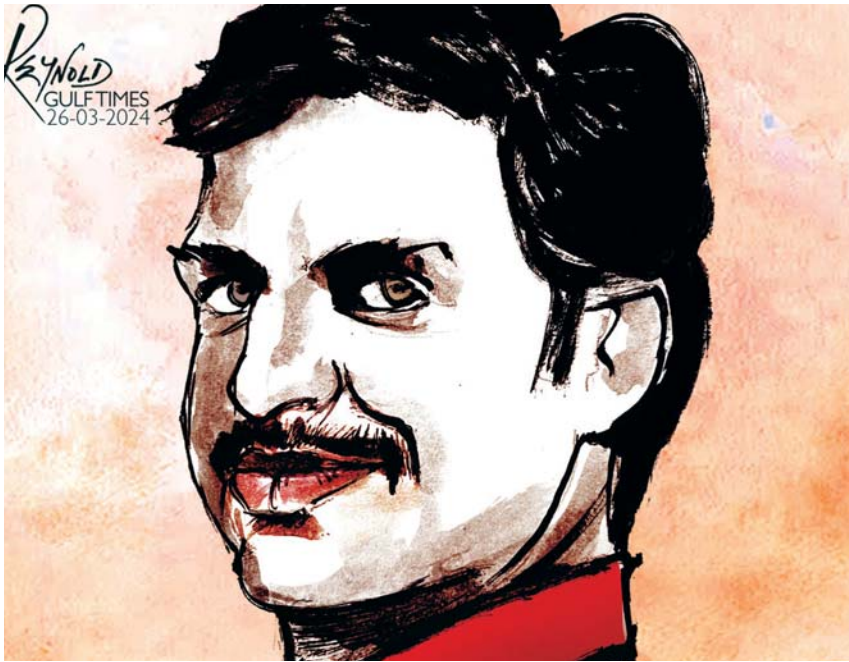
CHINA SKIPPER MAKES RETIREMENT U-TURN

China captain Zhang Linpeng is in line to play in a crucial World Cup qualifier today, days after quitting international football over the "disgrace" of a draw with Singapore.

Known as China's answer to Sergio Ramos because he also plays centre-back and also has numerous tattoos, Zhang said he'd had enough after his team surrendered a 2-0 lead at Singapore on Thursday. China host Singapore today in Tianjin and are third in their World Cup qualifying group.

SPOTLIGHT

Sainz savours modern recovery process



Reuters
Melbourne

Spaniard **Carlos Sainz** has shed light on how he went from hospital to hero, winning an Australian Grand Prix the Ferrari driver had feared he might miss after emergency appendix surgery two weeks earlier.

The 29-year-old won in Melbourne on Sunday after Red Bull's triple world champion Max Verstappen suffered a first mechanical retirement in two years.

The victory meant Sainz, also a winner in Singapore last September, remains the only driver outside Red Bull to triumph since 2022 – some feat for a man still without a seat for 2025.

The Spaniard, who hands over to seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton at the end of the year, missed the Saudi Grand Prix in Jeddah on March 9 after surgery a day earlier.

"As soon as I got my appendix removed, I went on the Internet and started talking with professionals and said, 'OK, what

helps to speed up recovery?'" he told reporters.

"I started doing all the sort of things that you can do to speed up recovery, the wounds, the scar tissue, what you can help to be faster on that, talking to other athletes, talking to other doctors in Spain, internationally.

"And then I put together a plan with my team. The reason why athletes recover faster is because you can dedicate 24 hours per day for seven days to recovery. And that's exactly what I did."

Sainz watched British teenager Oliver Bearman step into his car in Jeddah and drive it to seventh place on an extraordinary F1 debut, and then he got to work.

He had twice daily hour-long sessions in the hyperbaric chamber, breathing pure oxygen at higher pressure, and used an electromagnetic INDIBA machine for tissue repair.

Sainz programmed his time spent in bed, walking and eating "the kind of food that you have to recover."

If he felt stiff and tired by the end of the race at Albert Park, the result exceeded all

expectations. "Nine days ago, when I was about to catch the flight to come to Australia, I was still in bed. I could barely use my abdominal (muscles) to move. And I was like, this is not going to happen," he said.

"But I took the flight, and suddenly when I landed in Australia, the feeling was a lot better.

"And every 24 hours, I was making a lot more progress than the first seven days, which is actually what all the doctors and professional people told me. Don't worry, because the second week, every day is going to improve a lot more than the first week."

The Spaniard was the first driver since Austrian Gerhard Berger in 1997 to win his first race back from a medical absence.

McLaren's Lando Norris, third on Sunday and Sainz's former teammate, said it was typical of the man.

"I'm sure you have plenty of drivers who probably wouldn't have tried as hard and dedicated so much of their time and effort to trying to recover and get back in the race car," he added.

CRICKET

Rajitha sparkles as Sri Lanka take 1-0 lead in Sylhet

THE VISITORS WRAP UP FIRST TEST BY 328 RUNS ON DAY FOUR

AFP
Sylhet

Kasun Rajitha claimed his second five-wicket haul in Test cricket as Sri Lanka crushed Bangladesh by 328 runs yesterday in Sylhet to go 1-0 up in the two-match series.

The visitors bowled out Bangladesh for 182 in their second innings after lunch on the fourth day, with Rajitha returning with 5-56.

Overnight batsman Mominul Haque scored 87 not out for Bangladesh to delay the inevitable, before Lahiru Kumara (2-39) took the final wicket.

Fast bowler Rajitha claimed the wicket of Taijul Islam in the third over of the morning, trapping the left-hander in front for six.

Mominul, who hit 12 fours and a six, put on a dogged 66-run partnership with Mehidy Hasan Miraz for the seventh wicket before Rajitha struck again.

Mehidy, on 33, edged Rajitha to Dhananjaya de Silva at second slip.

Rajitha took the wickets of Shoriful Islam (12) and Khaled Ahmed (zero) off consecutive deliveries after the break to complete his five-wicket haul.

Vishwa Fernando was the other pivotal bowler for Sri Lanka with 3-36 as pacemen took all 20 wickets for the visitors in the game.

"The wicket had something for the fast bowlers," said Sri Lanka captain and player of the match de Silva.

"We were talking about playing late, and what shots to play on this wicket. It paid off at the end of the day."

Taijul and Mominul resumed Bangladesh's innings at 47-5 after the top order collapsed in little over an hour before the close of play on Sunday.

"The wicket was good, there was movement early on," said Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto.

"We have to improve our new-ball batting. A lot of work has to be done before the next Test, and we are going to have a plan to come back strongly."

When asked about Mominul's fighting knock of 87 not out, Shanto said yesterday: "He played an outstanding innings, he showed his experience.

"We were expecting a knock like this from him, hopefully he can continue."

Sri Lanka, who have never lost a Test series in Bangladesh, made 280 in their first innings and Bangladesh replied with 188.

The visitors then made 418 with first-innings century-makers de Silva and Kamindu Mendis both reaching three figures for the second time in the match.

They were only the third pair from the same country to score centuries in each innings of a Test after Australia's Chappell brothers, Greg and Ian, and Pakistan's Misbah-ul-Haq and Azhar Ali.

The second and final match of the series will be played in Chittagong from March 30.

SCOREBOARD	
Sri Lanka 1st innings	280
Bangladesh 1st innings	188
Sri Lanka 2nd innings	418
Bangladesh 2nd innings	(47-5)
M. Hasan lbw b Fernando	0
Z. Hasan c Mendis b Kumara	19
N. Shanto c Karunaratne b Rajitha	6
M. Haque not out	87
S. Hossain c Mendis b Fernando	0
L. Das c Mathews b Fernando	0
T. Islam lbw b Rajitha	6
M. Miraz c de Silva b Rajitha	33



Sri Lankan fast bowler Kasun Rajitha celebrates after taking the wicket of Bangladesh's Mehidy Hasan Miraz during the fourth day of the first Test at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium in Sylhet yesterday. (AFP)



Sri Lanka's captain Dhananjaya de Silva (right) is seen receiving the Man of the Match award at the end of the first Test against Bangladesh at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium in Sylhet yesterday. (AFP)

S. Islam c & b Rajitha	12	(Taijul), 7-117 (Mehidy), 8-164 (Shoriful), 9-164
K. Ahmed c Mendis b Rajitha	0	(Khaled), 10-182 (Rana)
N. Rana c de Silva b Kumar	0	Bowling: Fernando 15-5-36-3 (w1), Rajitha 14-1-56-5 (nb2), Kumara 11.2-1-39-2 (nb1), Prabath Jayasuriya 9-1-37-0
Extras (b11, lb3, nb3, w2)	182	Result: Sri Lanka win by 328 runs
Fall of wickets: 1-0 (Mahmudul), 2-9 (Najmul), 3-36 (Zakir), 4-37 (Shahadat), 5-37 (Liton), 6-51		Series: Sri Lanka lead 1-0.

FOCUS

Kohli smashes 77 as Bengaluru beat Punjab by four wickets in IPL



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli watches the ball after playing a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Punjab Kings in Bengaluru yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Bengaluru, India

Virat Kohli's 77 and a finishing act by Dinesh Karthik helped Royal Challengers Bengaluru beat Punjab Kings by four wickets for their opening IPL win of the season yesterday.

Master batsman Kohli smashed 11 fours and two sixes in his 49-ball blitz as hosts Bengaluru chased down their victory target of 177 with four balls to spare to bounce back from their loss in the opener of the lucrative T20 tournament.

Kohli fell to fast bowler Harshal Patel in the 16th over and soon Bengaluru lost another wicket before Karthik (28) and impact substitute Mahipal Lomror (17) steered the team home in an unbeaten stand of 48 off 18 balls.

Karthik hit two sixes and three fours including the winning boundary in his 10-ball knock.

Bowlers set up victory with pace spearhead Mohamed Siraj and spinner Glenn Maxwell taking two wickets each to keep Punjab down to 176-6 despite skipper Shikhar Dhawan's 45.

Kohli, who missed India's 4-1 Test series victory over England because of the birth of his second child, then took charge after he was dropped on the second ball of the chase by Jonny Bairstow at first slip off Sam Curran.

He capitalised on the spill on nought and hit the left-handed Curran for four boundaries including three successive hits to set up the chase in the first over.

His flowing cover drives, flicks on the on side and behind-the-wicket hits raised the noise at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium as chants of "Kohli, Kohli" filled the air.

He raised his 51st IPL fifty in 31 balls and became the third batsman after Chris Gayle and David Warner to score his 100th 50-plus knock in T20 cricket.

Punjab fast bowler Kagiso Rabada struck early with the key wickets of skipper Faf du Plessis and Cameron Green – both the batsmen out on three.

Kohli stood firm but Punjab bowlers got down a few disciplined overs to put the pressure back on Bengaluru, but the star batsman, and later Karthik, ensured victory.

Bengaluru invited Punjab to bat first and struck regular blows after Siraj send Bairstow trudging back to the pavilion for eight.

Batsmen failed to convert starts with Prabhsimran Singh and Curran out for 25 and 23 respectively.

BRIEF SCORES
Royal Challengers Bengaluru 178 for 6 (Kohli 77, Karthik 28*, Brar 2-13, Rabada 2-23) **beat Punjab Kings 176 for 6** (Dhawan 45, Jitesh 27, Siraj 2-26, Maxwell 2-29) **by 4 wickets**

Chennai to host IPL final on May 26

New Delhi: The Indian Premier League final will be played on May 26 in Chennai, the cricket board said yesterday, releasing the full schedule of the hugely lucrative T20 tournament.

The IPL, which began on March 22 in Chennai, will end five days ahead of the T20 World Cup in the West Indies and United States, starting June 1.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) had initially released only the first two weeks of the IPL schedule, because it clashes with India's six-week-long general election.

Ahmedabad's Narendra Modi stadium will host Qualifier 1 and the Eliminator on May 21 and May 22, followed by Qualifier 2 on May 24. The final on May 26 will be held in the southern Indian city of Chennai.

Voting in India's marathon elections begin on April 19, with

results expected on June 4.

Defending champions Chennai Super Kings began their campaign with a win at their home MA Chidambaram Stadium against Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the opener.

Owing to the tournament clashing with elections, a few teams will have their home bases shifted to different venues.

Punjab Kings, who started their season at the new stadium in Mullanpur, will culminate their home campaign in the Himalayan hill town of Dharamsala, according to BCCI.

Rajasthan Royals opted for a second venue in Guwahati, and will play their final two home matches in the northeastern state of Assam. Delhi Capitals will play all their remaining five home matches in front of their home crowd at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi.

Swiatek keeps nerve to fight past Noskova



Iga Swiatek of Poland hits a shot against Linda Noskova of the Czech Republic during their match at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

Miami: World number one Iga Swiatek kept her nerve to beat 26th-ranked Linda Noskova of the Czech Republic 6-7 (7-9), 6-4, 6-4 at the WTA Miami Open on Sunday.

A day after Swiatek's closest challenger, Aryna Sabalenka, was knocked out of the tournament, the Pole faced a real test from Noskova.

The Czech had upset Swiatek in the third round of the Australian Open before the four-time Grand Slam winner gained revenge at Indian Wells.

The third meeting this year between the pair was, not surprisingly, a tight affair.

Having worked hard to recover from her opening set tie-break loss and taken the match into a deciding frame, Swiatek found herself facing three break points when serving for the match up 5-4.

But she stepped up her game to win the next five points and celebrated with a fist-pumping gesture to her box.

"It wasn't easy. There were just many ups and downs," Swiatek said. "I'm happy that after first set I had better idea on what to do, and I just tried to do that in important moments. Sometimes we have matches like that and we need to figure out how to close them anyway."

Swiatek, who is looking to become just the second woman to win the "Sunshine Double" of Indian Wells

and Miami, will face 14th seed Ekaterina Alexandrova in the round of 16. Alexandrova went through with a 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 win over fellow Russian Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova.

France's Caroline Garcia progressed to a fourth-round match against world number three Coco Gauff with a 7-6 (7/4), 7-5 win Sunday over Naomi Osaka.

It was a hard-hitting match with the pair sharing 28 aces and Osaka had to fight to take the first set to a tie-break, saving three set points.

Garcia secured the tie-break with forehand winner, but found herself trailing Osaka 4-2 in the second before breaking back.

With Osaka serving at 5-all, Garcia forced two break points, converting the second.

Reigning US Open champion Gauff was down 4-2 in the first set to France's Oceane Dodin before winning 10 straight games and running out a 6-4, 6-0 winner.

Gauff said she expected a difficult game against Garcia. "She's tough. We all know how she plays. Takes the ball super early, plays very aggressive," she said.

Fifth-seeded American Jessica Pegula beat Canada's Leylah Fernandez 7-5, 6-4 to set up a fourth round clash with in-form compatriot Emma Navarro.

Fernandez broke to take a 5-3 lead in the first set but Pegula responded perfectly, winning four straight games to take the set.

Both players struggled to hold serve in the second set, with the first seven games going against serve, but Pegula finally held to go 5-3 up and she held the final game to love to secure the win.

Pegula gets set to play Navarro

Pegula, the highest-ranked American woman, will play against the rising star of USA women's tennis in Navarro, who upset 12th-seeded Italian Jasmine Paolini 6-2, 3-6, 6-0. Paolini, who won the WTA 1000 Series event in Dubai earlier this year, faded after fighting back in the second set while Navarro confirmed her status as one of the most improved players on the tour.

With her 20th match win of the season, a record bettered only by Swiatek, Navarro is enjoying the most successful campaign of her career, having won her first WTA title in Hobart in January.

Sakkari gets walkover into quarter-finals

Eighth seed Maria Sakkari reached the Miami Open quarter-finals without hitting a ball yesterday as Russia's Anna Kalinskaya withdrew ahead of their fourth-round match due to health issues.

Kalinskaya, the 22nd seed, arrived in Miami following a third round defeat at Indian Wells where a stomach ailment forced her to miss a few days of practice.

The 25-year-old Kalinskaya reached the round of 16 in Miami without dropping a set in wins over China's Wang Xiyi and Latvian ninth seed Jelena Ostapenko.

Sakkari, who lost to world number one Iga Swiatek in the Indian Wells final, will next face the winner of clash between fourth seed Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan and American 17th seed Madison Keys.

TENNIS

Sinner survives big scare to advance at Miami Open

‘MENTALLY I TRIED TO STAY STRONG, WHICH I DID, AND I WAS IN A TOUGH SITUATION TODAY’

AFP
Miami

World number three Jannik Sinner survived a scare from Dutchman Tallon Griekspoor as he moved into the fourth round of the Miami Open with a 5-7, 7-5, 6-1 victory on Sunday.

The second-seed Italian, a two-time finalist in Miami, struggled against Griekspoor's power play in the first set but turned the contest around after a rain break at 3-3 in the second set.

Sinner came out fighting and took the second before utterly dominating the third to book his place in the last 16.

"I think even the first set was really close, but it (got) away," said Sinner.

"Mentally I tried to stay strong, which I did, and I was in a tough situation today. After the rain came, I tried to come back a bit more aggressive, which I did, and obviously I'm really happy. It has been a tough day for me, but very happy about the result."

Sinner will face Australian Christopher O'Connell, who emerged with a tight win over the USA's Martin Damm 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5).

Reigning champion Daniil Medvedev beat Britain's Cameron Norrie 7-5, 6-1 and while he was happy with his performance he said that rapidly deteriorat-



Jannik Sinner of Italy returns a shot against Tallon Griekspoor of the Netherlands during their match on Day 9 of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (AFP)

ing balls were creating unusual games.

"It's a bit strange. The court is pretty fast but the balls get old very fast. So at one moment in the rally, you feel like there isn't much you can do. So you can't go for the winner because the risk reward isn't there. It's the same for the opponent, so we just hit, hit," he told reporters.

There was an atmosphere akin to a South American World Cup football match for the clash between Chile's 22nd-seeded Nicolas Jarry and Brazilian quali-

fier Thiago Seyboth Wild. After upsetting American Taylor Fritz on Saturday, Seyboth Wild was hoping for another scalp and he pushed the more experienced Jarry hard in front of a packed mostly South American crowd on the third court.

Jarry's staying power proved decisive as he ran out 6-7 (1/7), 7-5, 6-3 winner.

Hungarian Fabian Marozsan upset world number seven Holger Rune with a 6-1, 6-1 triumph in the second round.

The convincing victory, in

just 59 minutes, was a third win against a top-10 opponent in a Masters event for the 57th-ranked 24-year-old.

Marozsan dominated his Danish opponent from the outset, striking 23 winners and saving all three break points that he faced.

The Hungarian's two previous wins against top-10 opponents at this level came when he beat Carlos Alcaraz in Rome and Casper Ruud in Shanghai last year.

"I enjoy playing at the highest level. I had a great day and enjoyed every moment on the center

court against a very talented player," said Marozsan.

"I tried to put more pressure on him and I played very high intensity tennis and maybe he didn't find the way to come back or do something different."

Marozsan will face Alexei Popyrin in the third round after the Australian beat Czech Jiri Lehecka 6-4, 6-4.

After three of the four top-ranked Americans exited the tournament on Saturday, Ben Shelton kept the Star Spangled flag flying in Florida with a 6-3,

6-4 win over Spanish teenager Martin Landaluce.

Shelton did not face a break point in the contest and won both sets with unstoppable aces down the middle.

"I thought I was pretty complete today," said Shelton. "I thought I did a great job backing up my serve and usually when I have a lot of confidence and holding easily, the rest of my game continues to flow, and my confidence just grows."

"I think that helps me a lot and puts a lot of pressure on the other guy."

In the third round, Shelton will be against 23rd seed Italian Lorenzo Musetti, who defeated Russian Roman Safiullin 7-5, 6-1.

Meanwhile German fourth seed Alexander Zverev showed his quality to escape a tight first set en route to a 7-6(4) 6-3 win over Christopher Eubanks at the Miami Open yesterday to set up a fourth-round clash with Russia's Karen Khachanov.

Zverev limited his unforced errors, converted his two break point opportunities and saved four of the five break points he faced before closing out the one hour and 44-minute contest with a forehand volley into the open court.

"It was a difficult match. I thought he was in control of it throughout the first set," said former Miami Open finalist Zverev. "I was just hanging on and sometimes that is just what you need to do."

GOLF

Malnati wins Valspar Championship for first title since 2015, qualifies for maiden Masters show

Reuters
Palm Harbor, Florida

Peter Malnati rolled in five birdies, charged up the leaderboard and captured the Valspar Championship title on Sunday in Palm Harbor, Florida, for his second career PGA Tour event and his first since November 2015.

The victory qualified Malnati, 36, for his first career Masters in three weeks, which he called "the realisation of another childhood dream."

"That will be amazing," said Malnati, who entered the week ranked No. 184 in the world. "But I think more of what has sunk in to me is, this guarantees me that - this is my 10th season on the PGA Tour - it guarantees me that I'm going to have 12 (years), at least."

Malnati began the day two off the pace before shooting a 4-under 67 in his final round at Innisbrook Resort's Copperhead Course. He finished the week 12-under 272, beating Cameron Young by two strokes.

On the tee at the 198-yard,



Peter Malnati tosses his son Hatcher into the air after winning the Valspar Championship golf tournament. (USA TODAY Sports)

par-3 17th hole, Malnati stuck a 5-iron shot 6 feet from the cup. He walked in the ensuing putt for birdie.

Up ahead, Young hit a bad drive at the par-4 18th, but somehow found the green from between the trees. But from 42 feet away, Young could only three-putt bogey to finish with a 68 and drop to 10 under.

That sequence gave Malnati all the separation he needed at the end of the day.

"I obviously didn't have it in real time knowing what Cameron Young was making on all the holes, but I knew I was - when I stood over the 6-footer on 17, I was tied for the lead," Malnati said. "I knew before I hit my second shot on 18 that I had a two-shot lead."

For Young, the 26-year-old who won the tour's Rookie of the Year award in 2021-22, this marked his seventh career runner-up finish without a title to his

name yet. "I think I kept myself in it mentally really well," Young said. "I hit a couple shots I was really proud of late. Those two pars on the back, both kind of can bite you. ... But I think I handled my own thoughts really well and, for me, that's a big win regardless of the outcome."

Chandler Phillips (69) and Canada's Mackenzie Hughes (70) tied for third at 9 under.

Xander Schauffele tied the low round of the day with a 6-under 65 that featured an eagle and four birdies over his final eight holes; Schauffele tied for fifth at 8 under with Ryan Moore (68), China's Carl Yuan (68) and Canada's Adam Hadwin (69).

Yuan had a remarkable day that saw him hole out no fewer than three shots from off the green - an eagle from the fairway at the par-5 fifth; a 56-foot chip at the par-3 eighth that bounced off the stick and curled in; and another chip-in birdie at the par-4 12th that had him briefly tied for the lead.

"(To) kind of just look back on the weeks I do well, I play aggressive, enjoy hitting shots," Yuan said.

Title wins for Harrington, Norda



Padraig Harrington of Ireland rides in a miniature Aston Martin after winning the Hoag Classic title at Newport Beach Country Club in Newport Beach, California. (AFP)



Nelly Korda of the United States celebrates after winning the Fir Hills Seri Pak Championship at Palos Verdes Golf Club in Palos Verdes Estates, California. (AFP)

FOOTBALL

Racism reducing my desire to play football: Vinicius

'I am sure that Spain is not a racist country but there are many racists here'

AFP
Madrid

Brazil winger Vinicius Junior said his desire to play football was reducing as incidents of racial abuse aimed at him piled up in Spain, during a tearful media appearance yesterday.

The Real Madrid forward has suffered abuse from opposition fans on many occasions in recent years, with one incident in Valencia in May provoking worldwide outrage.

Spain will face Vinicius' Brazil at the Santiago Bernabeu today under the slogan "One Skin" to help combat racism. "I've been seeing this (racism) for a long time, and every time I feel sadder, and every time I have less desire to play," Vinicius told reporters.

The 23-year-old broke down in tears at one point after answering questions about the racist abuse he has suffered in different stadiums across Spain.

However later, Vinicius said he would not leave Spain and try playing in a different country to escape the abuse.

"I would be giving the racists what they want," he said. "I will stay at the best club in the world, scoring as many goals as I can so they keep watching me."

Vinicius said he wished he could only think about his playing career. "Playing football is very important but the fight against racism is hugely important," he said.

"I want people of colour to have a normal life and if that was the case, I would go to games with my club only focussed on playing."

Earlier, Spain defender and Vinicius' club teammate Dani Carvajal denied his country was not racist.

"I am sure that Spain is not a racist country but there are many racists here and many of them are in the stadiums," said Vinicius.

"From the first time I complained about racism in Spain it's been blowing up... they are insulting me over the colour of my skin so I play worse on the pitch. They can say many other things to me and I wouldn't say anything, I hope I can go to stadiums and not think about what could happen."

He recently condemned Atletico Madrid fans for racist chanting aimed at him before their Champions League clash against Inter Milan



Brazil's Vinicius Junior cries during a press conference yesterday on the eve of the friendly against Spain at the Ciudad Real Madrid training ground in Madrid. Spain arranged a friendly against Brazil at the Santiago Bernabeu under the slogan "One Skin" to help combat racism. (AFP)

earlier in March. "It's a sad reality that happens even during matches where I am not present," said Vinicius on social media platform X.

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said in November Vinicius has become "unfortunately used to" racism in Spain.

Carvajal said earlier he did not think his country was racist but also racist insults were the "ugliest" thing that exists in sport.

"Sadly there are people who go to football it seems to let loose all their rage, their anger," said Carvajal.

"When it seems that it hurts someone, they do it more and it's a pity. Those type of people should not be allowed into stadiums because it's the ugliest thing that exists in sport."

Spain lost 1-0 last Friday against Colombia in a friendly defeat as they continue preparations for Euro 2024. Brazil coach Dorival Junior

said 17-year-old starlet Endrick would not start against Spain but will likely get to make his bow at the home of his future club, Real Madrid.

Palmeiras striker Endrick, joining Vinicius at Madrid in the summer, scored the winner in a 1-0 victory over England in a friendly on Saturday.

"Endrick will not be a starter - without doubt he will bring a lot of joy to Real Madrid, he has a brilliant future," said Dorival. "I think that Endrick will have his moment."

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente said comparisons to legendary Brazil striker Pele were unfair on the teenager.

"He's 17, a very good player, like we have too, but you have to give him time and above all, be prudent," said De la Fuente. "Thinking he could be the next Pele would be putting a lot of pressure and stress on him."

FOCUS

France's Mbappe fires warning after Germany friendly defeat

AFP
Marseille

France captain Kylian Mbappe said his team's friendly loss to Germany at the weekend should serve as a warning going into Euro 2024, for which Les Bleus are one of the leading contenders.

"We need to be aware that if we play like that in the big matches that lie ahead of us, we are setting ourselves up for major disappointment," Mbappe said yesterday, following Saturday's 2-0 defeat against the European Championship hosts in Lyon.

Germany took the lead through a Florian Wirtz strike after just eight seconds, with Kai Havertz scoring their second goal shortly after half-time. It was just France's second defeat since they lost the 2022 World Cup final on penalties to Argentina in Qatar - the other was a 2-1 reverse in a friendly away to Germany last September.

"Now that game is over with and our objective is to show a reaction. We need to be aware that we didn't play well enough," added Mbappe, who was speaking in Marseille, where France will face Chile in another friendly today.

Les Bleus have reached three finals out of the last four major tournaments, European Championships and World Cups combined. They also won the UEFA Nations League in 2021, and are being tipped as the favourites for the Euro alongside a strong England side.

Paris Saint-Germain star Mbappe was keen to point out

that France won just once in their six games leading into the last World Cup, before going on to reach the final of that competition. In contrast they came into the last Euro in 2021 in excellent form, only to go out in the last 16 on penalties to Switzerland.

"There have been tournaments where in the matches we have played beforehand we have taken beatings but then have played well in the competitions themselves. There have also been competitions where we won the friendly games in the build-up but then ended up being knocked out and going home early," said Mbappe, who won his 76th cap against Germany aged just 25.

"The friendly matches give indications but not the whole truth. The proof of that is that we have lost twice to the Germans in friendly games but I have never lost to them in a competitive match."

France are in a group with the Netherlands and Austria at the upcoming Euro, which will take place in Germany from June 14 to July 14. They will also be alongside the winner of Tuesday's decisive qualifying play-off between Wales and Poland.

Mbappe also said he expected to be jeered by the crowd in Marseille, with France playing in the home stadium of PSG's bitter rivals.

"It doesn't matter what kind of welcome I get. I will still give my best," he said. "To be honest, I would understand if I were whistled."

He will return to Marseille with PSG for a league game this coming weekend.



France's forward Kylian Mbappe arrives at a press conference in Marseille yesterday, on the eve of a friendly against Chile at Velodrome stadium.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Rice named England captain against Belgium, Toney set to play



England's striker Ollie Watkins (left) midfielder Declan Rice (second from left), defender Ben Chilwell (second from right) and midfielder Jude Bellingham (right) during a team training session at the Tottenham Hotspur Training Ground in London yesterday, on the eve of their friendly against Belgium. (AFP)

Reuters
London

Ivan Toney is set to make only his second England appearance when they face Belgium in today's friendly while midfielder Declan Rice will mark his 50th cap by wearing the captain's armband, manager Gareth Southgate said yesterday.

Toney received his first England call-up since serving an eight-month suspension for breaching FA betting rules and the Brentford striker will play for the first time since his debut, exactly a year ago.

With skipper Harry Kane sidelined with an ankle injury, Toney will have the opportunity to lead the line and try to impress ahead of the Euros after Ollie Watkins struggled to make an impact up front in last week's 1-0 loss to Brazil.

"Ivan will be involved in the game for sure," Southgate told reporters.

"I have to say, with everything that's happened, the original idea or plan for the week is a little bit different. "We're probably finding out about more players but that's really helpful. To see all those players against high level opposition will help us make better decisions moving forward."

With several other senior figures such as defenders Kyle Walker and Harry Maguire also missing the game due to injury, Southgate said Arsenal's 105mn pounds (\$132.77mn) midfielder Rice would wear the captain's armband.

"It's his 50th cap. He has great leadership experience already at a tender age and I think it's a brilliant opportunity for some of our younger players to show leadership and experience it," Southgate

said. "Some of our core group are not with us, so it's a different dynamic, a great opportunity for others to step up, lead and grow. A lot of the players involved with the squad are the future and the more of those experiences they can have that's helpful for everybody."

Rice, 25, said he was left "absolutely speechless" when he was informed he would captain England and lead the side out at Wembley Stadium.

"When he (Southgate) told me last night, I shook his hand, gave him a hug and said, "Thank you," Rice said.

"I owe him a lot. Since I first came into the team, he's made me feel at home. I've always felt so comfortable playing under him and I've grown in confidence. For my 50th cap, to walk out in front of my friends and family is an absolute honour."

Nottingham Forest lodge appeal against points deduction

Nottingham Forest lodged an appeal yesterday against the four-point deduction imposed upon them for a breach of Premier League financial rules. "Nottingham Forest can confirm that it has today lodged an appeal against the four point sanction imposed by the Commission in relation to the Club's breach of the Premier League's Profit & Sustainability Rules," the club said in a brief statement on its website. On March 18, the Premier League club were docked four points after admitting breaching the profitability and sustainability rules (PSR) threshold of £61mn (\$77.5mn) by £34.5mn. They were the second top-flight team to be penalised for PSR breaches this season after Everton were hit with a 10-point penalty in November, which was reduced to six on appeal.

Dani Alves leaves Spain jail after posting bail

Convicted rapist and former Brazil international Dani Alves left a prison near Barcelona yesterday after posting the 1mn euro bail set by a court to ensure his release pending appeal. The 40-year-old has been in jail since his arrest in January 2023 on suspicion of raping a young woman in the VIP bathroom of a Barcelona nightclub in the early hours of December 31, 2022. Wearing jeans, a white poloneck and black jacket, his face expressionless, Alves walked out of the Brians 2 prison in San Esteban Sasroviras near Barcelona with his lawyer. He got

into a white car without saying a word to the hordes of reporters waiting nearby, just hours after depositing the sum determined by the court five days earlier. The former Barcelona player was convicted last month and sentenced to four-and-a-half years in jail, with his lawyers swiftly moving to file an appeal. But in a surprise move, the court agreed last Wednesday to conditionally release him conditionally in exchange for posting a \$1.08mn bail, handing over his Spanish and Brazilian passports, staying in Spain and presenting himself to court every week.

USA beats Mexico 2-0 for CONCACAF Nations League title

Gio Reyna and Tyler Adams scored as the United States beat Mexico 2-0 in Sunday's CONCACAF Nations League final, giving the Americans all three titles in the event's history. Adams scored a long-distance screamer in the 45th minute and Reyna fired home a loose ball from the edge of the box in the 63rd for the USA, who also won Nations League crowns in 2021 and 2023. The Mexicans appeared to have a lifeline into the match in the 73rd minute when a penalty was awarded after US defender Antonee Robinson was ruled to have fouled Santiago Gimenez in the penalty area. But a video review overturned the decision and instead Gimenez was issued a yellow card.

Zaman wins PSA 2 QSF Satellite Tournament



Pakistan's Waleed Zaman (second right) poses with Secretary-General of the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Padel and Badminton Federation Tareq Zainal (right) and Tournament Director Saad al-Mohannadi (left) after winning the PSA 2 QSF Satellite 2024 Tournament at the Khalifa Tennis and Squash Complex in Doha yesterday. Zaman defeated Qatar's Salem al-Malki (second left) 11-6, 11-5, 11-9 in the final.