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FOOTBALL

Qatar book Asian Cup spot, advance in WC qualifiers

ALMOEZ SCORES A BRACE AS ASIAN CHAMPIONS COMPLETE A DOUBLE AGAINST KUWAIT

Agencies
Kuwait City

Qatar left it late to defeat Kuwait 1-0 to ensure their place at the 2027 Asian Cup and third round of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers at Sabah Al Salem Stadium yesterday.

The two-time AFC Asian Cup champions had won each of their three previous matches in the group, including a 3-0 victory over Kuwait in the reverse fixture, while yesterday's hosts were sitting bottom of Group A with three points going into Matchday Four.

Almoez Ali was about to start celebrating when he bounced on a poor defensive clearance following Ismaeel Mohamed's cross from the right, with his shot looking destined for the back of the net, but a heroic interception from defender Khaled Hajiah denied the Qataris the opener.

Sulaiman Abdulghafoor needed to be at his best to stop Lucas Mendes' powerful header following Abdullah al-Ahrak's cross from the left, the Kuwaiti goalkeeper produced an exquisite reflex save to deny the Qatari defender.

Ismaeel Mohamed and Ali combined again early in the second half with the right back crossing for Qatar's all-time top scorer who rifled from a tight angle but watched his effort sail into the stands behind the Kuwaiti goal.

Qatar continued to press forward in pursuit of an opener and had one of their biggest chances of the game just before the hour-mark when Akram Afif fed Ahmed al-Rawi inside the box and the young forward had just the goalkeeper to beat, but his attempt to round Abdulghafoor was frustrated by a smothering save.

At the other end of the pitch, Kuwait came within a whisker of opening their account when Faisal



Qatar's Almoez Ali (centre) celebrates with Akram Afif after scoring against Kuwait during the World Cup 2026 and Asian Cup 2027 qualification match at Sabah Al Salem Stadium in Kuwait City yesterday.

al-Harbi curled a free-kick from 25 yards out, beating the wall but just not dropping quickly enough and ending up behind for a goal kick with his last effort before being subbed off.

The series of squandered chances from both sides continued with Kuwait's Mohamed Daham breaking free and finding his way inside the box, but as he attempted to finish into the near corner, his attempt was not accurate enough, instead passing just wide of the upright.

The stalemate finally came to an end in the 77th minute following a string of Qatari passes around the

Kuwaiti box, with the ball finding its way to Afif down the right, and the new Qatar captain squared for Ali to tap home at the far post to put his country in the lead.

The visitors' joy lasted merely two minutes before Kuwait restored parity. Substitute Eid al-Rashedi delivered a pinpoint cross from the right for Daham who beat his markers to the ball and headed it in for 1-1. Ali refused to give up and a minute later he had found the back of the net again.

The forward latched onto a long ball, beating the onrushing Abdulghafoor and lobbing him to restore Qatar's lead.

With the win, Qatar continue their perfect run in the qualifiers, sealing their place in the next round and the AFC Asian Cup 2027 in Saudi Arabia with 12 points, while Kuwait battle out for second place with India and Afghanistan, their next two opponents respectively.

AFGHANISTAN FIGHT BACK TO STUN INDIA

In another Group A match, an inspired Afghanistan came from behind to beat India 2-1 in Guwahati yesterday. Trailing to a Sunil Chhetri penalty at the interval, Afghanistan drew level through



Action from the match between Qatar and Kuwait at the Sabah Al Salem Stadium yesterday.

Rahmat Akbari in the 70th minute, with Sharif Mukhammad converting from the spot in the 88th minute for Afghanistan to take the win and draw level with India on four points.

India tried to seize the initiative early, and should have taken the lead in the third minute when a well-orchestrated attack saw Brandon finding Chhetri in the box but even as he beat his marker with his deft turn, his left footed shot bounced off the post with the rebound falling to Manvir Singh who failed to find the target despite a gaping goalmouth.

That did not deter Afghanistan, and they hit back with three back-to-back corners in the seventh minute - the first of which required an agile Indian goalkeeper Gurpreet Sandhu stretch to his full to prevent a Zohib Amiri header bulging the net.

The vociferous home support eventually inspired India to surge into the lead in the 38th minute. Desperate to keep Chhetri pouncing on Manvir Singh's cross from the right, Amiri was found guilty of handling the ball inside the box.

Off the resultant penalty, Chhetri, playing his 150th inter-

national match, converted from the spot - sending the ball to the right of a diving Afghan goalkeeper Oways Azizi for his 94th international goal.

The duo of Rahmat Akbari and Tauseef Skandari did create some problems for India down the left in the second half, and in an effort to add more thrust Afghanistan head coach Ashley Westwood introduced Fareed Sadat in place of Omid Popalzay in the 65th minute.

Afghanistan restored parity in the 70th minute.

Managing to find space behind the Indian high line of defence, Mosawer Ahadi cut inside only for his shot to be blocked but the rebound fell to Akbari whose effort squeezed between Rahul Bheke's legs for the equaliser. Afghanistan preferred to push the pedal a bit further, and in the 76th minute, an acrobatic Gurpreet dived to his left to palm off Skandari's curler.

Gurpreet, a tower of composure till then, however, was guilty of giving away a penalty when he fouled substitute Sadat on the edge of the box. An ice-cool Mkuhamad sent the keeper the wrong way in the 88th minute for Afghanistan to take the points.

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Rampant Iraq, Australia progress as South Korea win

AFP
Hong Kong

Australia and Iraq were in rampant goalscoring form yesterday as they both cruised into the next stage of Asian qualifying for the 2026 World Cup, while Son Heung-min's South Korea are on the brink of joining them after beating Thailand.

Australia handed out a 5-0 drubbing to Lebanon in Canberra in Group I while Iraq progressed from Group F after brushing aside the Philippines by the same score in Manila. Iran also made sure of their place in the next round with a 1-0 win in Turkmenistan.

In Group C, Son scored as South Korea look favourites to go through after a 3-0 win against Thailand in Bangkok, while China got their qualifying hopes back on track with a 4-1 win against Singapore. Park Jin-seob and Lee Jae-sung joined the Tottenham Hotspur star on the scoresheet and South Korea now need only a draw in Singapore in June to go through.

Australia's Craig Goodwin led his side to a fourth straight qualifying victory with two goals in a man-of-the-match performance, together with strikes from Kusini Yengi, John Iredale and an own goal. "When I knew Craig Goodwin younger, he didn't believe in himself like he does these days," Australia coach Graham Arnold said of the 32-year-old, who also created the

opener for Yengi and whose free-kick led to the own goal. "He's a top-quality player, but he's a fantastic person and a great leader. His delivery, set pieces, is fantastic and his finishing, it's just got better and better as he gets older."

Palestine, their supporters in Gaza reeling from the Israel-Hamas war, gave themselves a great chance of going through with Australia by beating Bangladesh 1-0 in Dhaka. Palestine just need a draw with third-placed Lebanon in their next match in June to guarantee their progress from Group I.

Aymen Hussein's 14th-minute penalty set Iraq on their way against the Philippines, ranked 139th in the world. Amir al-Ammari's goal and a second from centre-forward Hussein gave the visitors a 3-0 half-time lead. They completed the job with second-half strikes from Zidane Iqbal and Zaid Tahseen to make it four wins out of four in qualifying. Indonesia beat Vietnam 3-0 in Hanoi in the group's other game.

Iran reached the next round with a 1-0 win over Turkmenistan in Ashgabat. Mehdi Ghayedi headed in the only goal in first-half stoppage time from Mehdi Taremi's cross. Iran top Group E with 10 points from four games, the same as fellow qualifiers Uzbekistan.

In Group G, 2034 World Cup hosts Saudi Arabia moved to the brink of qualification after drawing 1-1 in Tajikistan. Firas al-Buraikan put the Saudis ahead in the 46th

minute but Rustam Soirov's equaliser 10 minutes from time delayed the celebrations for Roberto Mancini's Gulf side. Saudi Arabia have 10 points from four games with matches against Pakistan and Jordan to come in June.

In Tianjin, China moved into second place in Group C behind South Korea after hammering Singapore 4-1 thanks to new captain Wu Lei's double, Fei Nanduo's second-half penalty and a late goal from Wei Shihao. Wu took over the armband from Zhang Linpeng who was left out of the starting line-up by coach Branko Ivankovic. Zhang had quit the national side after China threw away a two-goal lead in the 2-2 draw in Singapore last week, only to make an abrupt U-turn. Wu put China ahead in the 21st minute, running on to Zhang Yunying's through ball before deftly chipping the onrushing Singapore goalkeeper Hassan Sunny.

But the lead lasted only seconds as Singapore broke down the right straight from the restart with Ryhan Stewart crossing for Faris Ramli to power a header past Wang Dalei. Fei restored the lead from the spot on 65 minutes.

China finished the match with 10 men after Li Yuanyi was given a straight red card for a foul in the 79th minute. But Wu cut in from the left and lashed home five minutes from time before Wei scored the fourth. The top two from each of the nine Asian groups will advance to the third round of 2026 World Cup qualifying.



Australia's Kye Rowles (right) vies for the ball with Lebanon's Nassar Nassar during the FIFA World Cup 2026 and Asian Cup 2027 qualifier match in Canberra. (AFP)

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Ravindra, Dube help Chennai thrash Gujarat

‘They want me to do better and I also want to win some matches’

AFP
Chennai

New Zealand’s Rachin Ravindra hit an explosive 46 and took three catches to help holders Chennai Super Kings to their second straight IPL win with a 63-run thrashing of Gujarat Titans yesterday.

The left-handed Ravindra, in his debut IPL season, made his runs off 20 balls while captain Ruturaj Gaikwad also hit 46 as Chennai posted 206-6 at their home MA Chidambaram Stadium.

Seam bowlers Mustafizur Rahman, Deepak Chahar and Tushar Deshpande took two wickets each to help restrict Gujarat, led by Shubman Gill, to 143-8 and go down to their biggest IPL loss by runs.

Chennai skipper Gaikwad said: “Today’s game was near to perfect game, in the sense of batting-bowling-fielding, all three departments. Against a team like Gujarat, we had to produce this kind of performance (100+ runs in first 10 overs). In Chennai, when you are not sure how the wicket will be, you must bat well irrespective of when you’re batting. Having wickets in the last 10 overs really helps here.”

He added: “Personally, I thought Rachin batted and put us in the game. Jinx and Shivam played good roles. Not to forget our youngster Rizvi as well. When he (Dube) came here the management worked with him personally, Mahi bhai (Dhoni) worked with him personally. He knows what role he is playing and which bowler to take on. A big plus for us. Great effort from Jinx even in the last game and this game.”

Chennai’s Shivam Dube top-scored with his 51 off 23 deliveries to boost the total after Ravindra and Gaikwad gave the team a quick start in their opening stand of 62.

Old warhorse MS Dhoni shocked his fans ahead of the T20 tournament when he passed on the Chennai captaincy to Gaikwad after he had led the team to its fifth IPL title last year.

Gaikwad, who led the team to a win over Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the IPL opener last week, survived an early reprieve on one and made use of the spill.

The left-handed Ravindra remained defiant and clubbed three sixes and six fours.

Gujarat’s Afghanistan spin wizard Rashid Khan denied Ravindra his fifty as the leg-spinner had the batsman stumped while Gaikwad fell caught behind off Australia’s Spencer Johnson.

Dube reached his fifty in 22 balls before he fell in the 19th over to Rashid, who took two



Chennai Super Kings’ Shivam Dube plays a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Gujarat Titans at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai yesterday. (AFP)

wickets but leaked 49 runs. Dube, the Player of the Match, said: “This franchise is something different from all others. They are giving me the freedom. They want me to do better and I also want to win some matches. I know they will bowl me some short balls and I’m ready for that. They want me to do the same thing I did today. They want me to score with a higher strike-rate and that is what I am doing.”

Gujarat, who won a title in their debut IPL season in 2022, were never in the chase after they lost Gill lbw off Chahar.

Gill took charge of the team and won his opening match on Sunday after Hardik Pandya switched to Mumbai Indians for another captain’s role.

The final of the lucrative T20 tournament will be played in Chennai on May 26.

BRIEF SCORES
Chennai Super Kings 206 for 6 (Dube 51, Ravindra 46) **beat Gujarat Titans 143 for 8** (Sudharsan 37, Chahar 2-28, Deshpande 2-21) **by 63 runs.**

CRICKET

Australia-India Test series to start in Optus Stadium in Perth



A spectacular view of the Optus Stadium in Perth. Optus Stadium will welcome India for a five-Test series by hosting the first match later this year in November, it was announced yesterday. (@OptusStadium)

AFP
Sydney

Perth will host the first match of a blockbuster five-Test series against India from November 22, Cricket Australia (CA) said yesterday as it released its international schedule for the 2024-25 season.

The series will then move to Adelaide for a day-night Test and then Brisbane’s Gabba, which traditionally was the opening venue of Australia’s Test summer.

The Melbourne Cricket Ground will stage the Boxing Day Test and the Border-Gavaskar Trophy series will wrap up at Sydney Cricket Ground starting on January 3.

CA chief executive Nick Hockley called it “one of the most highly anticipated summers of cricket in memory”.

“Fittingly, the Border-Gavaskar Trophy has been put on the same footing as the (men’s) Ashes with a five-Test series for the first time since 1991-92,” he said.

Australia have not beaten India in a home Test series since 2014-2015. The hosts have, however, won all four previous Tests at Perth Stadium.

“We’re confident the schedule will maximise viewership and attendances and there will be a tremendous atmosphere in stadiums across the country,” Hockley said yesterday.

Also released yesterday were dates for Australia’s home one-day and Twenty20 series against Pakistan in November that will precede the India Test series, and the Women’s Ashes against old rivals England.

The final match of the Women’s

2024-25 BORDER-GAVASKAR TROPHY

1ST TEST
NOV 22-26, PERTH

2ND TEST
DEC 6-10 (D/N), ADELAIDE

3RD TEST
DEC 14-18, GABBA

4TH TEST
DEC 26-30, MCG

5TH TEST
JAN 3-7, SCG

Ashes, starting January 30, 2025, will be the first women’s Test at the MCG since 1949.

AUSTRALIA V PAKISTAN WHITE-BALL SCHEDULE

First ODI: November 4, Melbourne
Second ODI: November 8, Adelaide
Third ODI: November 10, Perth
First T20i: November 14, Brisbane
Second T20i: November 16, Sydney
Third T20i: November 18, Hobart

NBA

Atlanta Hawks shed 30-point deficit to edge Boston Celtics

AFP
Los Angeles

The Atlanta Hawks produced a comeback for the ages to overturn a 30-point deficit and defeat the Eastern Conference-leading Boston Celtics 120-118 on Monday.

Boston, who were confirmed as having clinched the Eastern Conference’s top seed earlier on Monday, appeared to be cruising towards a resounding win after outscoring Atlanta 44-22 in the first quarter.

The Celtics raced into a 30-point advantage midway through the second quarter before Atlanta woke up and began chipping into the Boston lead.

The Hawks kept the rally going into the second half, narrowing the gap further with a 34-22 third quarter before harnessing that momentum into the fourth quarter to complete a dramatic win.

DeAndre Hunter led the Hawks scoring with 24 points, including a decisive three-pointer with 10 seconds remaining that gave Atlanta a four-point cushion and effectively made the game safe. Hunter was backed with 22 points from Bogdan Bogdanovic while Dejounte Murray finished with 19 points, 15 assists and five rebounds.

Hawks coach Quin Snyder praised the unrelenting support of the Atlanta home crowd in helping drive his team to a remarkable victory.

“Tonight the way we started the game, and the way Boston started, their energy really gave



Indiana Pacers guard TJ McConnell moves the ball against Los Angeles Clippers forward Paul George during the second half of their NBA game at Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles. (USA TODAY Sports)

us a lift?” Snyder said of the Atlanta fans. “Anytime you’re down that much you have to have something out of the ordinary a little bit to get back in the game.

“And when you have a group of people you know who are behind you thick or thin, rain or shine -- and there was a lot of rain early -- they were a big part of helping the sun come out tonight.”

Atlanta improved to 32-39 and remain in 10th place in the East, on course for a spot in the play-in tournament.

Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said his team paid the price for not killing the game off, adding that Atlanta’s physicality had caused his team problems in the second half. “It’s a good lesson,” Mazzulla said. “Credit to them for battling back.

“I thought their physicality - they were extremely physical

as soon as the ball got past half-court. I thought that messed up our offense, and they made us work for everything.”

Celtics star Jayson Tatum had no excuses after the defeat.

“It’s tough, you won’t win every game you play,” Tatum said. “We were up a lot but we didn’t do the things we needed to do to win. The key is to not over-react. Take it on the chin and get ready for (the next game).”

Elsewhere, Donte DiVincenzo put on a three-point shooting clinic to finish with a career-best 40 points as the New York Knicks kept rolling towards the postseason with a 124-99 blowout against the league-worst Detroit Pistons. DiVincenzo drained 11-of-20 from outside the arc, just three away from Klay Thompson’s single-game record of 14 set in 2018.

SPOTLIGHT

Lyon backs veteran Australia squad to keep playing past next Ashes series

Reuters
Lyon

Most players in Australia’s Test squad are “closer to the end than the start” of their careers but they should be able to play on for another three to five years after working hard on their fitness and looking after their bodies, bowler **Nathan Lyon** said.

Australia had just two players under the age of 30 in the squad that claimed a 2-0 Test series win over New Zealand earlier this month.

The world’s second-ranked test side saw one high-profile retirement this year, with 37-year-old batter David Warner bringing down the curtain on his career in January, but Lyon did not expect other veteran exits ahead of the next Ashes series against England in 2025-26.

“We’re definitely getting closer to the end than the start,” Lyon, 36, said in an episode of the ‘Willow Talk’ podcast released yesterday. “But I think also where we are in our careers is that we’ve done the hard work when we’re continuing to do the hard work in our preparation, our recovery, our rehab.

“There’s no reason why we can’t keep playing on for three to four or five years.”

Bowlers Lyon, Josh Hazlewood (33), Scott Boland (34) and Mitchell Starc (34) are among the older heads in the group, but Lyon said that captain Pat Cummins’ management of the bowling department helps keep them fresh.

“The only thing going to stop blokes is potential injuries and how the body holds up.

“The skill is always going to be there. The guys have played long enough now and they know what to do and how they go about it,” Lyon said.

“And another thing is that, especially within the bowlers, under Pat (Cummins), Pat gets it as well,” Lyon said. “He understands when the bowlers are cooked ... he understands the importance of managing (our) bowlers pretty well.”

BANGLADESH LAWMAKER SHAKIB RECALLED FOR SRI LANKA TEST

Newly elected lawmaker Shakib Al Hasan was yesterday recalled to the Bangladesh squad for the second Test against Sri Lanka.

The former captain, an all-rounder, successfully stood for the ruling Awami League during general



elections in January. Shakib has not played for the Bangladesh team since the end of the 50-over World Cup in November and his last Test was in April 2023, against Ireland.

On top of his parliamentary duties, Shakib has been playing in the 50-over Dhaka Premier League this month. Shakib’s inclusion by the Bangladesh Cricket Board followed a 328-run thrashing in the opening Test in Sylhet on Monday, with the hosts failing to post 200 runs in either innings.

Batsman Towhid Hridoy, 23, who has yet to make his five-day debut, made way for Shakib in the squad after being left out of the first Test playing side. Uncapped Mushfik Hasan has been ruled out of the second and final Test because of an ankle injury and was replaced by fellow pacer Hasan Mahmud.

BANGLADESH TEST SQUAD

Najmul Hossain Shanto (capt), Zakir Hasan, Mahmudul Hasan Joy, Shadman Islam, Liton Das, Mominul Haque, Shakib Al Hasan, Shahadat Hossain Dipu, Mehidy Hassan Miraz, Nayeem Hasan, Taijul Islam, Shoriful Islam, Syed Khaled Ahmed, Nahid Rana, Hasan Mahmud.

TENNIS

Alexandrova stuns Swiatek, Garcia battles to beat Gauff

THE PREMIER WTA TOURNAMENT IS WITHOUT ANY OF THE TOP THREE SEEDS IN THE QUARTERS



Ekaterina Alexandrova celebrates after her match against Iga Swiatek (not pictured) on day eight of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (USA TODAY Sports)

AFP
Miami

World number one Iga Swiatek was knocked out of the Miami Open after inspired Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova triumphed 6-4, 6-2 in their fourth round match on Monday.

The 16th seed Alexandrova played brilliant attacking tennis from the outset to beat the Pole and leave the WTA tournament without any of the top three seeds in the quarter-finals with Aryna Sabalenka and Coco Gauff also out.

France's Caroline Garcia upset world number three Gauff beating the American 6-3, 1-6, 6-2 on Monday to advance to the quarter-finals of the Miami Open, while world number two Aryna Sabalenka had been eliminated by Ukraine's Anhelina Kalinina on Saturday.

Swiatek never looked comfortable after Alexandrova broke her in the opening game and took control of proceedings with some outstanding, attacking tennis.

The Pole, who was looking to become the second woman to win the 'Sunshine Double' after her triumph at Indian Wells, generated just one break point in the match but Alexandrova saved it to take a 4-2 lead in the second set.

Having come from a set down in the previous round against Linda Noskova, Swiatek would have had some belief in turning the contest around but her Russian opponent was in no mood for mistakes.

She made short work of the second set, breaking to go 2-1 up with



Caroline Garcia of France reacts after defeating Coco Gauff of the US during their Miami Open match at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

an startling cross-court return and ending the match with with 31 winners to Swiatek's 11.

The match was the first in which Swiatek has not broken serve since her defeat to Ash Barty in Adelaide in January, 2022.

"I just feel disappointed, for sure, because I thought I was going to play better here in Miami. But she played an amazing match and for sure was the better play out there today," said the 22-year-old, four-time Grand Slam winner. Swiatek said she had a hard time reading Alexandrova's serve but felt that things just hadn't clicked for her in the tournament.

"I was feeling that I couldn't play in a natural way but it's not like I always feel comfortable on court.

I thought I would be able to work through that," she said.

Alexandrova laughed off the suggestion that she had played a perfect match but was certainly not going to downplay her performance. "It was such a great game for me in consistency, the serve, the returns, the playing from the baseline, I think it was pretty good and I hope I can keep for the next match," she said. A quarter-finalist also in Miami last year, that next match will be against fifth-seed Jessica Pegula today.

Garcia, who had beaten four-times Grand Slam winner Naomi Osaka in straight sets on Sunday, continued her inspired form as she defeated Gauff on her home court in one hour 43 minutes.

'TOUGH LOSS'

After a thrilling encounter, which ebbed and flowed, Garcia, ranked 27th in the world, emerged to face a last-eight meeting with the winner of Monday's match between Romanian Sorana Cirstea and American Danielle Collins.

The victory was Garcia's first against a top ten opponent since late 2022 but her third career win (3-2) against Gauff, who she also beat in the 2022 US Open.

"It was definitely a great match and great win for me. And the last couple of months have not been easy. And definitely today, following the match of yesterday, it means a lot. And it was some great tennis," she said.

Gauff, who hails from South Florida, was disappointed not to have progressed further in front of a home crowd. "It is a tough loss," she said.

"It was basically an up and down match. She played aggressive, which I knew coming in and I think it was really important for me to just change the height of the ball. I did that well for the majority of the second set. And then starting off the third with an early break, I think just completely changed the momentum."

Fourth seed Elena Rybakina defeated American Madison Keys 6-3, 7-5 to set up a quarter-final with Greece's Maria Sakkari.

Sakkari advanced with a walkover after Anna Kalinskaya had to withdraw ahead of their match on Monday due to a right thigh injury.

Victoria Azarenka also progressed with a 7-5, 6-1 win over Britain's Katie Boulter.

GYM WORK WILL PAY DIVIDENDS AT SOME POINT, SAYS FINAU



American golfer Tony Finau is seen with Nelly Korda of the US during a promotional event in December 2023. (@tonyfinaugolf)

Houston, Texas: Tony Finau is making his sixth career PGA Tour title defence at this week's Texas Children's Houston Open, but this one has a unique flair to it. Finau's title at the Memorial Park Golf Course came in the fall of 2022. The event returns to a spring date for the first time in four years, and Finau expects to find a significantly softer golf course than the one he posted a four-shot victory on.

He also arrived in Houston coming off a missed cut at last week's Valspar Championship and has a lone top-10 through his first eight starts in 2024. Finau has dropped to No. 30 in the Official World Golf Ranking, his lowest position since August of 2018.

"I've been working hard at my game," he said. "I'm as strong as I've ever been as far as getting in the gym and doing the work. I know at some point the results will come. The work is there and the body of work is there and I just know sometimes you go through spurts where you just don't score nearly as well as when you do at other times throughout the season. But, hopefully, this week I can spark a nice run."

Finau was coming off a missed cut when he won in Houston 16 months ago, and he hopes to rekindle that form after missing the weekend by five shots at the Valspar. Previous to that was a disappointing T45 at The Players Championship, and there isn't much time to find his form with the Masters in just two weeks. Finau is confident that the results will start to come with the time he has put in the gym working on his body.

"The numbers have shown this year my speed is up. I think I'm fourth on ball speed or swing speed this year. I haven't been that high since really my first couple years on tour," he said. "It's paying off. It hasn't paid off in results yet, but again, the work is there and I know at some point - it's how the game is, at some point you start getting results and that turns into more confidence and, hopefully, better results more often."

"The work never ends, but I've put in a lot of work outside the golf course to make sure that my body's strong and fit. At some point I know it's going to pay some dividends."

Ex-world athletics champion Barber attacked

Paris: Former world heptathlon champion Eunice Barber suffered minor injuries after being punched in the face by a passenger on a Paris suburban train, a police source said yesterday.

Barber, 49, was attacked after asking "a drunken passenger" to speak less loudly on his phone during the journey from Franconville, 17km north-west of Paris, into

the city. A 43-year-old man was arrested when the train reached its destination at the Gare du Nord station in central Paris. Barber filed a complaint with police. Barber, a five-time world medalist, won the world heptathlon gold in Seville in 1999 and the long jump title at the 2003 world championships in Paris. Paris will host the Summer Olympics from July 26 to August 11.

SPOTLIGHT

Alcaraz beats Monfils, to meet Musetti in last 16



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain returns a shot against Gael Monfils of France in their Miami Open match at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens. (AFP)

Reuters
Miami

Top seed Carlos Alcaraz dominated Gael Monfils 6-2 6-4 and fourth seed Alexander Zverev escaped a tight first set en route to a 7-6(4) 6-3 win over Christopher Eubanks to reach the last 16 at the Miami Open on Monday.

Alcaraz is on a quest to capture the 'Sunshine Double' after his triumph at Indian Wells and the 20-year-old was never really threatened in a match-up of two of the game's most entertaining players.

The Spaniard appeared to be cruising to the finish line when he served for the match leading 5-2 but Monfils rifled a forehand winner to break and extend the match.

The comeback would prove short lived, however, with Alcaraz deploying a textbook serve and volley on his first match point to seal the win with a love hold.

"He's a great athlete. He reaches almost every ball," Alcaraz said of 37-year-old Frenchman Monfils. "But at the same time, with my forehand, my best shot, I tried to move him around the court, tried to get him tired a little bit."

Brazilian soccer player Neymar, Miami Heat forward Jimmy Butler and former Grand



Brazil football player Neymar Jr attends a match between Carlos Alcaraz of Spain and Gael Monfils of France during the Miami Open. (AFP)

Slam champion Juan Martin del Potro were among those on hand for the contest.

"It's kind of difficult to stay focused on the match, having such legends from every sport," Alcaraz said. "It's a great opportunity to have them here, to talk with them a little bit. It's great to put on a show in front of them."

Alcaraz, who won the tournament in 2022, will next face Italy's Lorenzo Musetti, who beat American Ben Shelton 6-4 7-6(5).

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."

Awaiting Zverev in the last 16 will be 15th seed Khachanov, who converted his fifth match point to secure a 6-1 5-7 7-6(5) win over Argentine 20th seed Francisco Cerundolo. Zverev has a 3-2 record against Khachanov and won their most recent meeting in the gold medal match at the Tokyo Olympics.

Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov, Poland's Hubert Hurkacz, Australia's Alex de Minaur and Hungarian Fabian Marozsan also all advanced.

Briton Andy Murray said he will be sidelined for an "extended period" after suffering a severe ankle injury during his 5-7 7-5 7-6(5) third-round loss to Tomas Machac on Sunday.

"Yesterday towards the end of my match in Miami I suffered a full rupture of my ATFL (anterior talofibular ligament) and near full thickness rupture of my CFL (calcaneofibular ligament)," the 36-year-old posted on Instagram.

"Goes without saying this is a tough one to take and I'll be out for an extended period."

FOCUS

Georgia beat Greece on penalties to seal Euro 2024 berth

It will be Georgia's first appearance at a major tournament



Georgia's players react after their penalty shootout win over Greece in the UEFA Euro 2024 qualifying play-off in Tbilisi yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Tbilisi

Georgia qualified for Euro 2024 yesterday, winning their play-off against Greece 4-2 on penalties after a 0-0 draw at the end of extra time to advance to their first ever major tournament finals. Nika Kvekveskiri stroked in the decisive penalty in the shoot-out to spark a pitch invasion from fans at the Boris Paichadze Stadium in Tbilisi after Tasos Bakasetas and Giorgos Giakoumakis both failed to score from the spot for Greece.

Surprise European champions in 2004, Greece's defeat means their wait to qualify for a first major tournament since the 2014 World

Cup goes on. Ranked 77th in the world, Georgia will join Türkiye, Portugal and the Czech Republic in Group F at the European Championship in Germany in June.

It will be their first appearance at a major tournament since the country in the Caucasus of 3.7mn people gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. They had never come close to qualifying before, until losing in a play-off at the same stage in qualifying for the last Euro, going down 1-0 at home to North Macedonia in 2020.

This time they finished fourth out of five teams in their qualifying group, with their only two wins both coming against bottom side Cyprus. However, their previous performances in the UEFA Nations League gave them a chance to advance via the play-offs, and they

beat Luxembourg at home in last week's semi-finals to set up yesterday's decider.

Coached by former France international Willy Sagnol, Georgia's undisputed star man is the Napoli winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. He was not on the pitch for the penalty shoot-out, having been substituted in extra time of a game lacking in chances.

Greece came closest to scoring when defender Konstantinos Mavropanos headed against the bar in extra time. Yet their captain Bakasetas had his penalty, Greece's first in the shoot-out, repelled by the Georgia goalkeeper, Giorgi Mamardashvili of Valencia. Georges Mikautadze then missed for Georgia, meaning the sides were all square until Giakoumakis of Atlanta United squandered Greece's fourth kick, allowing Kvekveskiri to score the winner.

OPINION

Germany have belief back ahead of Euro 2024, says Lahm

AFP
Berlin

Germany have regained their self-confidence after a 2-0 win against France last week three months before hosting Euro 2024, said **Philipp Lahm**. The World Cup winner Lahm, who is tournament director for Euro 2024, said the promising performance brought back "euphoria in our country" because the "German national team played football well and played football passionately".

In Qatar in 2022, Germany reached a new low when they were eliminated at the group stage of a World Cup for the second time in a row. Hansi Flick became the first Germany coach in history to be sacked and was replaced by Julian Nagelsmann in September.

In Lyon on Saturday, Nagelsmann appeared to be finally moulding a new, young team, less than three months from the opening match of the tournament against Scotland on June 14.

"(Germany) performed completely differently" against France, Lahm said of the victory that came thanks to a first international goal from Bayer Leverkusen's Florian Wirtz and a Kai Havertz strike. "We had an established midfield and of course very, very young, dynamic, attacking players. And of course that brings self-confidence. But we can only know for sure over a longer period of time."

Lahm played every minute in Germany's run to the semi-finals as hosts of the 2006 World Cup before captaining the side to victory in Brazil eight years later. As captain of the last world-beating German team, Lahm understands how complex the process of developing a top team can be – and that talent may not be enough.

"Super-talented players like Jamal Musiala and Florian Wirtz are still relatively young, but have a lot of experience," he said. "They certainly have the talent to raise the German national team to another level, but it's important everything fits together, that the pieces of the puzzle fit together – and that was certainly the case in 2014. Everyone identified with their role and made their skills available to the team."

Saturday's victory against France even overshadowed the controversy surrounding the DFB's decision to ditch long-time kit maker Adidas in favour of Nike, ending a 70-year collaboration with the German sports brand. "I made 113 international appearances for Germany in Adidas, I played at Bayern Munich

in Adidas, I only know the national team in Adidas," Lahm said. "When I watched Germany play on TV as a child, it was in Adidas."

Lahm admitted the move was "a change for us in Germany", but said: "There must have been serious reasons to change." Despite the hope fuelled by Germany's defeat of France on Saturday, Lahm still named the French – spearheaded by Kylian Mbappe – as tournament favourites.

"They have 40 players who are very, very talented. They have a balanced squad," he said. "They can always bring players off the bench who would normally be good enough to play from the start. But the important thing is that you have a team on the field."

While predicting a "big football nation" will win, Lahm said he hoped "perhaps there will be a surprise, that a smaller nation will go far in the tournament and will celebrate together with their fans." "But as for winning the title? I'm pretty sure it will be a football nation and one of the favourites, one who has won in the past few years."

Euro 2024 hosts hope to channel the spirit of the 2006 World Cup which still holds a defining place in the collective German consciousness. Known as the "summer fairytale", it was the moment where a unified and modern Germany showcased itself on the world stage. Just 18 years ago, the tournament seems from a different time, with this year's event held in a time of global conflicts and uncertainty.

Late in 2023, Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) warned the danger of a terror attack was "higher than it has been for a long time". The attack on a concert in Moscow on Friday by militants linked to the Islamic State group which killed 137 people has prompted new security fears in Germany. Neighbouring France has already raised its security alert to its highest level.

Lahm acknowledged the challenges, but said he hoped the tournament could play a unifying role as the World Cup had done in 2006. "Safety is the highest priority, right from the start until the end of the tournament," Lahm said.

"It's a tournament in challenging times, but I still believe it's important that we keep coming together. In Europe, we always come together to strengthen ourselves, to strengthen our democracy. Everyone is warmly welcomed to Germany, especially at this time, when there are many challenges all over the world. (It is important) that people can come together again and celebrate together again."

Napoli 'stunned' after Acerbi racist probe dropped due to lack of evidence

Rome: Italian club Napoli said they were "stunned" after Italy's football federation (FIGC) yesterday dropped a probe into alleged racist comments made by Inter Milan's Francesco Acerbi to Juan Jesus due to lack of evidence.

Brazil's Jesus had initially played down the incident following Napoli's 1-1 draw at Inter Milan earlier this month saying "what happens on the pitch, stays on the pitch" after accepting Acerbi's on-field apology for unspecified insults.

The FIGC said "considering that the minimum level of reasonable certainty as to the discriminatory content of the offence committed has not been reached, it was decided not to apply the sanctions". "The discriminatory content, without calling into question the

good faith (of Juan Jesus), seems to have been perceived only by the offended player, without the support of any external proof, whether audio, video or even testimony," the FIGC statement added.

Reacting to the news, Jesus' club Napoli said they were "stunned" by the FIGC's decision. "It is not reasonable to think that he (Juan Jesus) misunderstood," the club said.

Napoli added they would no longer join "purely cosmetic initiatives" against racism and discrimination co-ordinated by the federation. "We will continue to lead them ourselves... with renewed conviction and determination."

Acerbi, 36, faced a possible 10-match suspension which would end his season with Inter and could have ruled him out of Euro 2024

which starts on June 14. Jesus, 32, had initially explained that Acerbi "realised that he had gone too far" and apologised to him. The next day, Acerbi joined Italy's training camp ahead of two friendlies after giving his version of events to his Azzurri teammates and coach Luciano Spalletti "on the alleged racist remark".

It sparked an angry reaction from Jesus on Instagram: "I thought that the incident was done with on the pitch and frankly I was hoping not to have to come back to something so despicable. "However today I read Acerbi's comments which conflict completely with what happened, with what he himself said on the pitch which is backed up by video footage of him asking me for forgiveness. I'm not having it, racism is going to be fought here and now."

SPOTLIGHT

Ten years from home World Cup, Saudi sizes up 'huge challenge'

AFP
Riyadh

A decade before it hosts football's World Cup, the size of the task facing Saudi Arabia is becoming apparent, including building stadiums, hotels and transport links. As the only bidder, Saudi Arabia was anointed host of the 2034 World Cup last October by FIFA.

Infrastructure is the initial concern for the oil-rich kingdom, which is snapping up high-profile sports events in an attempt to sweep away its conservative image and entice foreign investment. Despite its oil riches, the world's biggest crude exporter has much on its plate. It has committed to several other giant projects – including NEOM, a \$500bn, futuristic new city – as part of de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman's ambitious Vision 2030 economic diversification plan.

To host the 48-team World Cup, the country needs 14 all-seater stadiums capable of holding at least 40,000 people, according to the bid document. It currently has two: Jeddah's King Abdullah Sports City Stadium and Riyadh's venerable King Fahd International Stadium, which is undergoing a major refit.

Saudi Arabia has a well-established and popular football league but among

its 30-plus stadiums, many are old, small and have pitches surrounded by athletics tracks, a design that has long gone out of vogue.

"We still have 10 full years ahead of us that will see the state of stadiums in Saudi Arabia change radically," a Saudi Football Federation official said. "It is a huge challenge, but we will overcome it," the official said on condition of anonymity, because he was not authorised to speak to media.

By the time the World Cup kicks off, the desert country of 32mn will have hosted the 2027 Asian Cup and even the 2029 Asian Winter Games, a decision that was panned by environmentalists. In 2034, the same year as the World Cup, Riyadh will host the Asian Games – a two-week tournament with more events than the Summer Olympics and a similar number of athletes.

Saudi Arabia became the sole bidders for 2034 a year after Qatar hosted the Middle East's first World Cup at an eye-watering cost of \$220bn, including related infrastructure.

As the 2027 Asian Cup looms, work has started not just on the King Fahd International Stadium refit but also on a new cliff-top venue in Qiddiya, a mega-project outside the capital, and another stadium in the eastern city of Dammam. All of them are scheduled to open in 2026.

Authorities are planning another in



To host the 48-team World Cup, Saudi needs 14 all-seater stadiums capable of holding at least 40,000 people, according to the bid document. It currently has two: Jeddah's King Abdullah Sports City Stadium and Riyadh's King Fahd International Stadium. (AFP)

Diriyah, former base of the Al Saud royal dynasty, with its design already approved, according to a Saudi official. The sports ministry is preparing to issue tenders worth 10bn riyals (\$2.69bn) to build and expand football venues, according to domestic media.

World Cup games are planned for Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam and Abha along with Qiddiya and NEOM, both cornerstones of Prince Mohamed's Vision 2030 and under construction. Saudi is going to need more

than just stadiums, said architect Hussein Mahran. "Factors such as accommodation and public transportation inside cities and between cities still need development," he said in Riyadh last month, at a conference on stadium design and engineering. "But it is clear that the kingdom is moving strongly on this path," he added.

Summer in a country where temperatures top 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) daily can make any outdoor activity hazardous, risking dehydration,

heat stroke and heart failure. However, Yasser al-Mishehal, president of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, last year said that he is open to a summer or winter World Cup.

Radwan Darwish of Saudi's GreenAire cooling company said his firm has applied for contracts to cool three existing stadiums used for the Saudi Pro League, which has started a campaign to attract top international players and has already lured stars including Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar. "Trying to transfer Europe's success in the world of football to the kingdom is difficult, realistically without adapting all the stadiums," Darwish said, given the intense heat.

One of the biggest tasks is upgrading the Saudi workforce to run a successful World Cup. Stadiums need event managers, security, ticketing staff, cleaners and food and beverage teams. Lee Collier of the STRI consultancy group called it a "significant challenge" to "upskill and create a sufficient number of people to be able to manage these venues".

While Saudi has the petro-dollars to import such expertise, it also has a mission to develop Saudi talent, Collier said.

"The journey is not easy at all," said Sophocles Sophocleous, who represents a hybrid grass firm. "But what grants hope is the commitment at the very top in helping Saudi Arabia achieve this goal – and the financial capital, of course."