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when I retire,
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CRICKET

Hyderabad set new
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WORLD CUP AND ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Captain Afif delighted with Qatar's qualification

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Captain Akram Afif was proud to see Qatar pass a tough Kuwait test to secure a 2-1 win that clinched their spot in the third round of the FIFA World Cup 2026 qualifiers and AFC Asian Cup 2027 on Tuesday. All three goals were scored in a space of four minutes late in the game with Almoez Ali's double doing the trick for the reigning AFC Asian Cup champions, confirming them as Group A winners with two matches to spare.

"Kuwait played a good match, especially when they were at home in front of their fans. That gave them big motivation to win and ignite their chances to qualify," said Afif. "It is normal that when you play away, the match will be difficult, as we faced a team who was looking for a win. For us, we got the important thing which is the win and the ticket to qualify for the next round of World Cup qualifiers, and we wish good luck to Kuwait for the last two matches."

Kuwait head coach Rui Bento was satisfied with the performance of their players, with the opportunity to advance still in their own hands despite the result leaving them a point adrift of both India and Afghanistan. "We did a good job against Asia's champions," said Bento.

"Yes, we could have performed better. It is true that we didn't win, but I am proud of the players. Our chances to qualify are still open, our plan from the beginning was to build a new national team and we are moving forward with this plan. Today luck was not on our side to score, but I'm sure in the future, luck will be on our side."

Meanwhile, Ashley Westwood was encouraged by the comeback of his Afghanistan side in their 2-1 win against India,



Qatar players celebrate after their win over Kuwait in the joint qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 on Tuesday.

with Sharif Mukhammad's 88th penalty deciding the match.

Sunil Chhetri had put India ahead via the penalty spot in the 38th minute but Afghanistan fought back to equalise through Rahmat Akbari in the 70th minute before Sharif sealed their first win in the group.

"I was not under pressure being 1-0 down at half-time because I knew we would score," said Westwood. "I never felt

pressured or under trouble because I always believed in the boys and am glad we got the result. We have six points to play for, we need a few results to go for us. We are not thinking that far ahead, we'll enjoy tonight and the next week or so and then start thinking about that."

Embattled India's coach Igor Stimac said his side can still progress to the third round of the World Cup Qualifiers, putting

up a brave front despite an embarrassing defeat to lower-ranked Afghanistan.

"Of course, I think we can qualify (for third round of World Cup Qualifiers) and I told you before as well we are going to be a different team after a long camp. You can see that half of our players are not able to bring that intensity and I cannot change that in five days, I am sorry," Stimac said.

"I repeat myself again and again and

again. I hope you remember all these players were the same players in June-July and Afghanistan is not a different team than Kuwait and Lebanon teams that we had beaten and dominated."

Stimac apologised for the defeat following a below-par performance from his wards. When asked if he would resign, he said that he is here to "fulfil a mission" and he would be in charge of the team till June.

DIAMOND LEAGUE

Chopra returns to Doha as javelin masterclass beckons

'Doha meet, with a great atmosphere, is a perfect opportunity to get my season off to the best start'

Reigning Olympic, world and Asian Games javelin champion Neeraj Chopra - India's national record holder with a best of 89.94m - will make a welcome return to Doha Diamond League Meeting on May 10.

Former world champion Anderson Peters of Grenada and Olympic and world medallist Jakub Vadlejch of Czech Republic will also participate. Chopra is an inspirational figure and has blazed a trail for Indian athletes throughout his career to date. He was the first Indian track and field athlete to set a world record (under-20) when he threw 86.48m to win the 2016 World U-20 Championships, which was also the first time an Indian athlete had won a global track and field title.

He won javelin gold at the 2018 Asian Games, the first Indian athlete to do so, and made history in Tokyo when he became the country's first Olympic gold medallist in track and field. That trend continued at the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest when he became the first athlete from India to strike gold. Chopra set the tone for his 2023 gold medal-winning summer with victory in the opening meeting of the Diamond League in Doha ahead of Vadlejch and Peters (88.67m). The javelin event has built a reputation for its high quality in recent years and conditions permitting, much will be expected of the key protagonists on May 10.

Peters, who finished third 12 months ago, delivered a national record and the fifth-longest throw in history in 2022 (93.07m), while Diamond League champion Vadlejch, who was runner-up to Chopra in 2023, recorded a personal best in the memorable 2022 meeting with his first ever throw over 90m (90.88m).

The trio will be joined at the Qatar Sports Club by European champion Julian Weber (Germany) - PB 89.54m; World Championships finalist Oliver Helander (Finland) - PB 89.83m; Qatari record holder



Neeraj Chopra is an inspirational figure and has blazed a trail for Indian athletes throughout his career.

Ahmed Bader Magour - PB 85.23m; Asian Games silver medallist and World Championships finalist Kishore Jena (India) - PB 87.54m; Lithuanian record holder and World University Games champion Edis Matusevicius - PB 89.17m; Asian champion and Asian Games bronze medallist Roderick Genki Dean (Japan) - PB 84.28m; Moldovan record holder and Olympic finalist Andrian Mardare - PB 86.66m; and Pan American Games champion Curtis

Thompson (USA) - PB 87.70m.

Chopra's continued excellence has raised the bar for Indian athletes and for the first time in his country's history, he was joined in the World Championships final by two of his teammates. "Last year my dream was to win the World Championships, but to have three Indian athletes competing in the final - that shows we're progressing as a nation," said the 26-year-old.

"This year, my personal goal is to defend

my Olympic title, but it would also mean a lot to me to break the 90m barrier. The Doha Meeting, with good conditions and a great atmosphere, is a perfect opportunity to get my season off to the best start. I'm always overwhelmed by the warm support I get from Indians across the world and in Qatar that is particularly special. I feel privileged that so many people come out to support me and I hope I can repay their faith in me with a good performance."

The Doha meet has also attracted big names in other field events. Olympic, world and European long jump champion Miltiadis Tentoglou has confirmed he will make his first time appearance, as he aims to continue his title-winning form in 2024.

The 26-year-old Greek athlete - who retained his world indoor title with victory in Glasgow on March 2 - boasts a personal best of 8.60m from 2021 and is so far unbeaten this year. The 2022 Diamond League champion is hoping to regain his long jump title this season after Swiss rival Simon Ehammer claimed the Diamond Trophy in Eugene last year.

The 2022 Diamond League champion said: "I was in Doha for the World Championships in 2019, but I've never competed at the Diamond League meeting. The conditions in Doha are perfect and there is always a little wind, so I'm hoping to start strong in my 2024 outdoor season."

Meanwhile, Olympic and world pole vault champion Katie Moon (USA) will take on fellow world champion Nina Kennedy (Australia) and newly-crowned world indoor champion Molly Caudery (Britain) at the Doha Meeting.

Moon - ranked fifth all-time with a best height of 4.95m - famously shared global gold with Commonwealth champion and Australian record holder Kennedy (4.91m) at the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest after an enthralling contest failed to separate them. They were subsequently shortlisted for the 2023 International Fair Play Award as a result of their actions.

The Doha leg is the third meeting of the 2024 Diamond League. The series comprises 15 meetings in total across four different continents, starting with Xiamen on April 20 and concluding with a single final across two days in Brussels (September 13-14). Each of the 14 series meetings will be broadcast globally in a live two-hour programme.

CRICKET

Hyderabad beat Mumbai as both sides hit 38 sixes

SRH POST HIGHEST EVER SCORE OF 277-3 IN IPL HISTORY



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Heinrich Klaasen plays a shot during the Indian Premier League Twenty20 match against Mumbai Indians at the Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium in Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Hyderabad

Sunrisers Hyderabad posted 277-3 for the highest-ever Indian Premier League total and went on to beat Mumbai Indians by 31 runs in a six-hitting festival yesterday.

Australia's Travis Head made a 24-ball 62 to lead the assault after Hyderabad batted first and went past the previous IPL best of 263-5 by Royal Challengers Bengaluru in 2013.

Mumbai replied strongly in the match which witnessed 38 sixes for another IPL record, bettering the 33 hits over the fence clubbed three times in earlier seasons.

Left-handed Tilak Varma stood out with his 64 in 34 balls for Mumbai but the effort was not enough on a batting-friendly pitch in veteran batsman Rohit Sharma's 200th IPL match.

Rohit smashed a 12-ball 26 and fellow

opener Ishan Kishan made 34 to give Mumbai a flying start but the innings lost momentum after 10 overs due to the ever-increasing asking rate.

Tim David smashed an unbeaten 42 in a late charge but the chase was beyond reach as Mumbai ended on 246-5 - the team's highest IPL total.

It was records galore as the match also featured the highest run aggregate of 523 runs in 17 years of the IPL.

Hyderabad skipper Pat Cummins was the best of the bowlers with 2-35 in his four overs of pace, leading his side to their first win of the season.

Earlier the left-handed Head, dropped on five by David off skipper Hardik Pandya, reached his fifty in 18 balls and after his departure Abhishek Sharma reached his half-century off just 16.

The team's 100 came up in only seven overs and Hyderabad posted the tournament's highest ever total in the first 10 overs of 148-2.

Abhishek fell for 63 off 23 balls but there was no respite for the bowlers who were at the receiving end of some punishing batting yesterday.

It was raining boundaries in Hyderabad's innings with 18 sixes and 19 fours as the South African pair of Heinrich Klaasen (80 not out in 34 balls) and Aiden Markram, who hit 42, posted an unbeaten stand of 116.

Mumbai's South African import Kwena Maphaka had a bruising introduction to IPL when the 17-year-old left-arm quick went for 66 runs in his four overs.

Five-time winners Mumbai, who had a change in captaincy after Pandya took over from the experienced Rohit, and Hyderabad started this edition with a loss each.

BRIEF SCORES
Sunrisers Hyderabad 277 for 3 (Klaasen 80*, Abhishek 63, Head 62) **beat Mumbai Indians 246 for 5** (Tilak 64, David 42* Cummins 2-35, Unadkat 2-47) **by 31 runs**

Van Aert hospitalised as American Jorgenson wins Around Flanders



US cyclist Matteo Jorgenson of Team Visma-Lease a Bike celebrates winning the Around Flanders classic, 188.6km from Roeselare to Waregem yesterday. Jorgenson won the Around Flanders classic after his teammate Wout van Aert and Eritrea's Biniam Girmay were taken away in ambulances after a high-speed crash. (AFP)

Waregem, Belgium: Matteo Jorgenson won the Around Flanders cycling classic yesterday after his teammate Wout van Aert and Eritrea's Biniam Girmay were taken away in ambulances after a high-speed crash.

The 24-year-old Californian Jorgenson won the Paris-Nice earlier in March and confirmed his burgeoning status in his first season with Dutch team Visma. Jorgenson broke away from an elite clique of six riders with a devastating turn of pace 6km away from the finish line after a 188km run with huge crowds. "It's surreal," said Jorgenson, wiping tears from his eyes at the finish line.

Norway's Jonas Abrahamson and the Swiss Stefan Kueng was third, 29sec off the pace. More memorably a mass collision in the peloton caused by an uneven road surface felled up to a dozen unwitting riders, with Van Aert suffering major abrasions to his back as his yellow Visma team jersey was ripped almost entirely off.

"I was on Wout's wheel when it happened. It was a really ugly fall," said the winner. "We were going so fast. My

thoughts are with Wout and all the guys involved," said Jorgenson.

"I have no news, all I know is he's in the hospital."

The accident occurred on a three-lane highway where there appeared to be one lane slightly higher than the neighbouring two.

Other high-profile riders hurt were Belgian Jasper Stuyven of Lidl-Trek and his Danish teammate Mads Pedersen.

All four of those riders have won major classics and would have been contenders for the Tour of Flanders on Sunday and Paris-Roubaix the following Sunday, two major dates on the one-day racing calendar.

Van Aert was one of the favourites for Sunday's Tour of Flanders where up to 750,000 fans usually turn out for Belgium's biggest sports event.

The 29-year-old Van Aert sobbed and rocked in agony as he was placed onto a stretcher and transferred to an ambulance.

Girmay's team Wanty confirmed the Eritrean 23-year-old "crashed hard during Dwars door Vlaanderen and is heading to hospital for checks".

BANGLADESH COACH TO MISS SECOND SRI LANKA TEST

Dhaka: Bangladesh coach Chandika Hathurusinghe will miss the second and final Test against Sri Lanka due to personal reasons, the cricket board said yesterday. The second Test begins on Saturday in Chittagong, with Bangladesh needing a win to level the series after their 328-run defeat in Sylhet.

"The head coach will be travelling to Australia due to personal reasons, necessitating his immediate departure," the Bangladesh

Cricket Board said in a statement. Assistant coach Nic Pothas will stand in for him, it added.

Bangladesh on Tuesday recalled all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan. Shakib has not played any matches for Bangladesh since the World Cup in India in October-November 2023.

The former captain, an all-rounder, successfully won a parliamentary seat for the ruling Awami League during general elections in January.

CRICKET

England vice captain Pope wants to send Surrey legend Stewart out on a high



A 20-year-old Ollie Pope receives his English Test cap from former England captain and Surrey great Alec Stewart in this August 2018 photo.

AFP
London

England batsman Ollie Pope has urged his Surrey teammates to ensure departing director of cricket Alec Stewart ends his time at The Oval with yet more silverware.

Former England captain Stewart, who spent his entire 22-year playing career with Surrey, announced last week he would be stepping down at the end of the 2024 season after more than a decade in charge.

The 60-year-old has overseen

the development of several England internationals, including Pope, as well as guiding holders Surrey to three County Championship titles.

But the former England batsman - whose father Micky was also a Surrey stalwart - wants to step away from the job when the upcoming season is finished in order to spend more time with his wife, who is suffering with cancer.

"I can't imagine a club where you don't see Stewie in every morning," Pope told reporters yesterday. "I think he's in at 6:00am (0600 GMT) every day on the rowing machine or on the treadmill or

doing some weights, but that's because he loves the club and loves being here. "And he's also ridiculous at his job as well. The way he sort of makes you feel like you've got a personal relationship, but he's also got the job to give you your contracts or release you."

Pope, now the England vice-captain, also has a long-standing personal connection to Stewart who played in 133 Tests and 170 ODIs.

"I've got a great picture of him giving me my Surrey under-eight player-of-the-year award, which is one I'll always have," said Pope. "He presented me with my Eng-

land cap, again the video and the pics of that are seriously special.

"It's going to be sad when he leaves, but hopefully we can win a couple of trophies for him this year to give him a good send-off."

England wicketkeeper Ben Foakes, brought to Surrey from Essex by Stewart in 2015, said: "I was trying to think the other day if there is anyone that has done more for English cricket after their playing career and I couldn't think of anyone. He is going to obviously be massively missed."

Surrey begin the defence of their Championship title away to Lancashire on April 5.

OLYMPICS

Brisbane Games must fit the region, says IOC

Reuters
Brisbane

The Brisbane 2032 Olympics must fit the city and the region and not the other way round, the International Olympic Committee said yesterday, less than two weeks after plans to construct a new stadium were scrapped.

The existing Lang Park stadium will host the Games' opening and closing ceremonies after the Queensland government rejected the recommendation of a review that a new A\$3.4bn arena be built in the city.

The Quirk Review was commissioned by the government to look into a plan to rebuild the city's Gabba cricket ground to host the ceremonies and athletics at the Games as part of a A\$2.7bn redevelopment of the Woolloongabba suburb.

Queensland Premier Steven Miles, however, decided the stadium would be upgraded rather than torn down and rebuilt.

"For us the messaging is clear: The Games will need to fit the region," Kirsty Coventry, who heads the IOC's Coordination Commis-



sion, said in a media call following a meeting with Brisbane Games organisers.

"They (region) need to decide what's best for them and everyone who lives in these areas, and the Games will adapt to that."

She said with the Games still more than eight years away this was the time for any major changes.

"Brisbane will now refine the venue master plan. It will take a bit of time for stakeholders, specifically in different levels of government, to decide what's best for city, the region and

the country. The Games will fit into that," Coventry said.

Lang Park holds 52,500 fans and hosts both rugby codes as well as concerts.

Brisbane was awarded the Olympics in 2021 under the IOC's New Norm process, a targeted procedure aimed at saving hundreds of millions of dollars for host cities and increasing long-term sustainability.

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

"There is no concern at this stage. Not at all," Olympic Games Executive Director Christophe Dubi said when asked whether the IOC now had concerns about more major changes.

"These are decisions to be made by the communities and when you have the support from the ground up this is how you ensure you have no further issues down the road," Dubi said.

The 2024 Olympics will be held in Paris and Los Angeles will host the 2028 Games.

Hussey hails Ravindra for making fast start to IPL career

Chennai: Keeping a clear head and showing plenty of positive intent has helped Chennai Super Kings batsman **Rachin Ravindra** make a strong start to his Indian Premier League (IPL) career, the team's batting coach Michael Hussey said.

New Zealand all-rounder Ravindra emerged as a hot prospect for IPL teams after finishing as the fourth-highest scorer in the 50-overs World Cup in India last year with 578 runs including three centuries. Some Royal Challengers Bengaluru fans had hoped Ravindra would join them, given his roots in the city, but having joined their fierce southern rivals Chennai in the player auction the 24-year-old has hit the ground running in his debut IPL season.

"Yeah, he's had a great start. It's been awesome to watch. He's just

come here full of energy and he just wants to learn so much and make a positive impact on the team environment. It's fantastic," former Australia batsman Hussey told reporters. "He's enjoying his time and soaking up as much



knowledge as he possibly can." After taking two catches - including a stunner to dismiss Virat Kohli - and making 37 off 15 balls in Chennai's win over Bengaluru last week, Ravindra smashed 46 off 20 balls to lay the platform for Tuesday's 63-run victory over Gujarat Titans. "He really feeds off the crowd as well. Once he got a couple of good shots away early (against Gujarat), his confidence grew and he believed he could perform on this stage," Hussey added. "I think he's gone out there with a clear mind and positive attitude."

TENNIS

Medvedev, Alcaraz and Sinner through in Miami

'I DON'T KNOW IF THIS IS THE BEST GAME I'VE PLAYED BUT WITHOUT A DOUBT IT IS THE BEST FEELING'

AFP
Miami

Defending Miami Open champion Daniil Medvedev and top seed Carlos Alcaraz marched into the quarter-finals of the tournament on Tuesday with convincing victories.

Medvedev earned a 7-6 (7/5), 6-0 win over Germany's Dominik Koepfer while Alcaraz took care of Italian Lorenzo Musetti with a 6-3, 6-3 win in 85 minutes.

Second seed Jannik Sinner of Italy also moved into the last eight beating Christopher O'Connell of Australia 6-4, 6-3.

Alcaraz, who is searching for the 'Sunshine Double' after winning in Indian Wells, was too much for 23rd seed Musetti although the Italian certainly contributed to a crowd-pleasing contest.

Stadium court erupted after a rally in the third game of the second set saw Musetti clip the ball between his legs, lobbing Alcaraz but the Spaniard returned it with a 'tweener' only to lose the point to a deft volley at the net.

But overall it was a comfortable match for Alcaraz whose all-round game looks in strong shape.

"I don't know if this is the best game I've played but without a doubt it is the best feeling. I feel great on the court, I'm moving great, I am not injured and not thinking about my ankle anymore....it's the best feeling since the summer," he added.

In the quarters, Alcaraz will face Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov, who beat Pole Hubert Hurkacz, triumphing in a third set tie-break for a 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) win.

Medvedev made an unusually sloppy start on Stadium court, with a series of unforced errors, and found himself trailing 4-0 in the first set tie-break.

But having overturned that deficit, Medvedev went on to win all the remaining games as he showed that, despite his concerns over the rapid deterioration of balls on the hard court surface, he is comfortable with the conditions.

The Russian suggested that Koepfer had struggled to recover from the blow of seeing his tie-break lead vanish.



Daniil Medvedev serves against Dominik Koepfer of Germany during their Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami. (AFP)

The world number four, Medvedev will face Chilean Nicolas Jarry who upset Norwegian seventh seed Ruud with a 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 win.

Cheered on by a large contingent of Chilean supporters, Jarry had 39 winners to Ruud's 17 and was delighted at his progress into the last eight.

Italy's Sinner trailed 3-1 in the first set against O'Connell, as the Australian cleverly mixed up his approach, asking a variety of questions of his Italian opponent.

He faced a potential double break at 0-30 but responded

strongly to come back and take the set after 58 minutes.

The second set was more straightforward for Sinner who broke O'Connell's first service game and then took care of business to wrap up the win.

"He started off really well, I made a couple of mistakes. When you are a break down especially in the beginning, it's always tough, also mentally," said Sinner.

Sinner will face Czech Tomas Machac who eased into the quarters with a 6-3, 6-3 win over another Italian, Matteo Arnaldi.

Hungary's Fabian Marozsan,

ranked 57th in the world, continued his impressive run with another upset win, triumphing 6-4, 0-6, 6-1 over ninth seed Australian Alex de Minaur.

Marozsan, who will break into the top 40 in Monday's rankings, is playing in just his fourth Masters 1000 event and will play in his second quarter-final at this level against German Alexander Zverev.

World number five Zverev crushed Karen Khachanov 6-1, 6-4 inside 69 minutes, losing just nine points on his serve all match and never facing a break point.

Azarenka battles into Miami semis, Rybakina beats Sakkari

Three-time Miami Open winner Victoria Azarenka battled for nearly three hours to get past a determined Yulia Putintseva and take her place in the semi-finals with a 7-6 (7/4), 1-6, 6-3 win on Tuesday.

Fourth-seeded Elena Rybakina, the highest seeded player left in the tournament, held off a strong challenge from eighth-seed Maria Sakkari of Greece before emerging with a 7-5, 6-7 (4/7), 6-4 win.

The 34-year-old Azarenka, who won in Miami in 2009, 2011 and 2016, had to deal not only with the spirited display from the Moscow-born Kazakh player, but also a long disruption to the match due to a technical problem.

The match was stopped for 45 minutes in the fourth game of the first set due to a power outage which impacted the umpire's communications and the hawk-eye system.

Azarenka had to save three set points on Putintseva's serve at 5-4 in the first set, then missed out on two set points of her own at 6-5 before the tie-break.

Putintseva dominated the second set but Azarenka found the strength to get ahead in the third but still her opponent refused to relent, fighting off match point before breaking.

But Azarenka held on her next serve to secure passage to the last four and keep alive her hope of a fourth Miami title.

"Yulia played great, she's in such great form and I really had to dig deep. I felt like my legs were kind of giving in a little bit and I lost a little bit of self-belief because she was playing so well and moving me around everywhere," said Azarenka.

"But I'm happy that I was able to regroup, reset and really take my chances, come out and play aggressive and face the challenge," she said.

Azarenka said the win showed that there can be no doubt about her desire to compete at the highest level.

Belarusian Azarenka will face Rybakina for a place in the final.



Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan reacts after defeating Maria Sakkari of Greece during the Miami Open. (AFP)

Rybakina, at 24, is the youngest player left in the tournament and she needed all her energy to survive a 2hr 48min tussle with Sakkari.

Rybakina led 6-5 in the first set and the match looked poised for a tie-break but Sakkari's service game deserted her at the crucial moment and she was broken with a fine down the line winner from the Kazakh, last year's beaten finalist in Miami.

Sakkari opened up a 4-2 lead in an error-strewn second set but allowed Rybakina to win the next three games and had to save two match points. The Greek ran out the winner in the tie-break but Rybakina, who looked to have an ankle problem, was able to finally break at 3-3 converting on her third break point.

Sakkari's determination saw her save four match points when 5-3 down as she held but this time Rybakina was able to close out the contest on her serve.

"It was such a tough battle, as it has been before. I am really happy but now I just need to recover," said Rybakina. World number one Iga Swiatek, Aryna Sabalenka and third seed Coco Gauff have all been eliminated.

FOCUS

Djokovic splits from Ivanisevic with bitter sweet message

AFP
Paris

Novak Djokovic and Goran Ivanisevic are to go their separate ways, the tennis world number one announced yesterday, ending a five-year association which yielded 12 Grand Slams.

Djokovic brought Croatia's 2001 Wimbledon champion on board as a member of the coaching team ahead of the grass court Grand Slam in 2019 and although the Serbian admitted their "on-court chemistry had its ups and downs", it also resulted in huge success.

However, Djokovic has had by his high standards a poor start to the year, losing to eventual champion Jannik Sinner of Italy in the Australian Open semi-finals.

The 36-year-old Serbian then lost to Sinner's unheralded compatriot Luca Nardi in the third round at Indian Wells, prompting him to withdraw from the Miami tournament for what he claimed were scheduling reasons.

"Goran and I decided to stop

working together a few days ago," Djokovic posted on Instagram.

"Our on court chemistry had its ups and downs, but our friendship was always rock solid.

"In fact, I am proud to say (not sure he is) that apart from winning tournaments together, we also had a side battle in Panchisi going on... for many years," he said, referring to the online game.

"And - that tournament never stops for us. Sefinjo, thanks for everything my friend. Love you."

Djokovic said the volatile and charismatic Ivanisevic had brought more than just his tennis acumen to the partnership, which was exactly what he and his then head coach Marian Vajda had been looking for. "I remember clearly the moment I invited Goran to be part of my team," said Djokovic.

"It was back in 2018, and Marian (Vajda) and I were looking to innovate and bring some serve magic to our duo.

"In fact, not only we brought serve, but also lots of laughter, fun, year end No1 rankings, record breaking achievements and 12 more Grand Slams (and a few finals) to the count since then."

FOOTBALL

Germany find the right mix with Euro on the horizon

AFP
Frankfurt, Germany

With two wins out of two against top-class opposition, Euro 2024 hosts Germany look to have found the right balance under coach Julian Nagelsmann with the tournament on the horizon.

Having failed to make it past the last 16 of a major tournament since 2016, successive wins in the space of four days over France and the Netherlands have propelled Germany back into contention.

Nagelsmann reshuffled his squad ahead of the March friendlies, leaving out big names Leon Goretzka, Serge Gnabry, Emre Can and Mats Hummels. Instead, he selected a mix of young talents and unheralded debutants, alongside a few experienced heads. Days after a dominant 2-0 win over France in Lyon, Germany came from a goal down inside four minutes to beat the Dutch 2-1.

Other than securing two wins in a row for the first time since 2021, Germany demonstrated the cohesion, impetus and desire which had been sorely lacking.

Nagelsmann said as much after beating the Dutch, telling re-



Germany's head coach Julian Nagelsmann (left) and midfielder Joshua Kimmich (second left) hug to celebrate after winning the friendly against Netherlands in Frankfurt. (AFP)

ports the three-time European champions had "found a good mix" less than three months out from the first match against Scotland in Munich on June 14.

"The spirit in the team is good. Everyone has their role, even those who did not play, when they returned they contributed," the 36-year-old manager said.

Unlike recent Germany squads which leant heavily on players from Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund, Nagelsmann chose form over reputation in his

26-man squad. Only two Bayern players made the starting XI on Tuesday, while just one from Dortmund was in the squad. Instead, Nagelsmann chose in-form players from Xabi Alonso's league leaders Bayer Leverkusen and surprise package Stuttgart, who sit in third place having narrowly avoided relegation last campaign.

Both games confirmed Nagelsmann made the right call, with strong performances coming across the squad's spectrum of age and experience. In addition

to the masterful return of veteran midfielder Toni Kroos, Saturday's win over France was fuelled by Germany's youthful forward line of Florian Wirtz, Kai Havertz and Jamal Musiala - who have a collective age of just 65.

On Tuesday, with the scores locked at 1-1 and just over 15 minutes remaining, Nagelsmann took off Havertz and Wirtz, turning to veterans Thomas Mueller and Niclas Füllkrug - who boast the same collective age.

Füllkrug linked well with Musiala before heading in the winner from a Kroos corner. As a result, Nagelsmann seems to have settled on his squad for the summer's tournament, ruling out "big changes." "The door is open for everyone. We won't trade in five or ten new players in the summer, that's for sure. Maybe one or two if someone gets injured."

Mueller, one of three 2014 World Cup winners in the squad, welcomed the results but was most impressed by the "style and manner" of the performances.

"We want to build on it. Against France we were more dynamic, today we dug in as both teams defended deeper.

"What was really nice was that we confirmed that we can actually react the potential that this great football nation has."

British Olympic diving champion Lee to miss Paris Games after spinal surgery

British Olympic diving champion Matty Lee, who won gold alongside Tom Daley three years ago, will miss the Paris Games following spinal surgery. The British pair won the men's synchronised 10m platform at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 and Lee also triumphed alongside Noah

Williams at the Commonwealth Games the following year. But Lee, 26, will miss the Olympics after receiving treatment. "The surgery went well but my surgeon told me my nerve was very stuck and it took longer than expected to remove my bulging disc without damaging my

nerve," he said in an Instagram post.

"He also told me it wouldn't have got better on its own so to have the surgery was the right decision."

Lee added: "What this means for me this year is self-explanatory, which is very sad, but the reason I

look so damn happy in hospital is that I'm no longer in chronic pain, we've found a solution and I have something to work on." Daley, 29, still has a chance of winning a second straight Olympic gold after joining forces with Williams.

(AFP)



EURO 2024

Southgate ponders tough choices

AFP
London

Gareth Southgate has watched his final England international before he names his Euro 2024 squad. Now he faces tough decisions that could make or break the campaign.

Jude Bellingham scored a last-gasp equaliser in an entertaining 2-2 draw at Wembley on Tuesday, which lifted the mood after a disappointing 1-0 defeat to Brazil at the weekend. Friendlies are not a reliable predictor of a team's likely performance when the pressure is truly on but Southgate gleaned important information about his men over the two matches in London. England will travel to Germany in June among the favourites to win the European Championship for the first time after coming up agonisingly short against Italy in the final in 2021.

In what could be Southgate's last hurrah as England boss, the pressure will be intense on the side to finally deliver a first major trophy since the 1966 World Cup. The manager, who has been at the helm since 2016, admits he will have to take stock of his resources, especially given the spate of injuries that has disrupted his preparations.

"I'd have to sit and go through it all because I'm a little bit lost as to who we've got and we haven't really," he said after the draw against Belgium, who are ranked fourth in the world, one place below England.

"The great thing is definitely some players have emerged positively from the opportunities they've had so we've perhaps got more depth in one respect but the injuries are a concern. We've got so many players missing at the moment and we've still got the real heat of the (club) season to come, the intensity of the games, what's resting on the games. We're not going to know what we're left with until right at the end but we'll just make the best decisions that we possibly can."

The reality is that if England have a clean bill of health, there will be limited places up for grabs in the 23-man squad. Despite a flat performance against Brazil - the team's first defeat since they lost to France at the 2022 World Cup - England showed over the two

Keyhole
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games they have attacking strength in depth.

In the absence of the injured Harry Kane and Bukayo Saka, who are both certainties for the Euros, Jarrod Bowen and Ivan Toney, making his first England start, impressed their manager, with Toney scoring a penalty. Midfield looks strong, with Bellingham and Declan Rice certain starters, but Manchester United starlet Kobbie Mainoo appears close to booking his place on the plane after just two caps.

Southgate said the 18-year-old prodigy, who has played just 15 times for United in the Premier League, gives England a "different profile of midfield player to anything else we've got". "His attributes are there for everybody to see, that ability to receive under pressure and ride challenges, to manipulate the ball in tight areas," he said.

"He's adapted and adjusted brilliantly. You can't believe his age really, that he's taken it all in his stride."

But doubts linger over whether England have what it takes in defence, particularly in

central areas, with costly errors blighting the performances against Brazil and Belgium. Southgate has been loyal to Harry Maguire even though the Manchester United man is not a regular for his club, partly due to a lack of compelling alternatives.

Maguire was an injury absentee on Tuesday, replaced by Lewis Dunk, who has done little to press his case, at fault for goals conceded in both matches. "We've had a consistent defence because of the qualities that they have and that's always been apparent to us," said Southgate.

"We needed to test the other guys against high-level opponents and we've been able to do that in the two games so that allows us to go away, it allows them to think about how they've played and to win a tournament you've got to defend really well as a team, not just the back four. We definitely gave up more chances than we have, or better-quality chances than we have done for a while but we have also played two top-level teams and that's the reality of those games as well."

FOCUS

Age won't determine when I retire: Messi

Reuters
Bengaluru

Lionel Messi will not consider his age as a deciding factor in his retirement plans, the Argentine forward said, adding that he has no clear idea of what he will do when that time comes.

Messi, who played for 17 years at Barcelona before signing for Paris St Germain in 2021 and Inter Miami last year, will turn 37 in under three months but knows for sure that his age will not determine when it is time to hang up his boots. "I know that the moment I feel that I am no longer performing, that I am no longer enjoying it or helping my teammates (I will retire)," Messi told the *Big Time* podcast in an interview published yesterday.

"I am very self-critical. I know when I am doing well, when I am not, when I play well and when I play poorly. When I feel it's time to take that step, I will do it without thinking about age. If I feel good, I will try to continue competing because it's what I like and what I know how to do."

Asked whether he had started to think about what he does next, the record eight-times Ballon d'Or winner had no straight answer. "I haven't thought about it yet. For now, I try to enjoy each day, each moment, without thinking about the future. I don't have anything clear yet," Messi said. "I hope to keep playing for a while longer, because that's what I enjoy. When the time comes, I will surely find the path to what fulfils me and what I like, and a new role."



Messi missed Argentina's friendlies against El Salvador and Costa Rica in the United States this month due to a hamstring injury. Messi's most decorated period as a player came during 17 years at Barca, where he helped the club to 10 La Liga and four Champions League titles.

However, in 2021 - with the club in a state of financial and political disarray - he was unable to agree a new deal and left on a free transfer to join PSG. Messi admits he never wanted to leave the Catalan club and found it hard to come to terms with having to depart. "It was difficult to change when I went to PSG, because I was doing very well at Barcelona and I thought I was going to stay there," he said.

"I wasn't ready to leave, everything happened very quickly. I had to rebuild my life from one day to the next. I got to know another league, another club, a new locker room. It was a change we weren't looking for and that's why it was difficult at the start."

SPOTLIGHT

Ukraine and Poland qualify for Euro 2024

Ukraine grabbed the winner with six minutes left as Mudryk finds the net

AFP
Paris

Ukraine came from behind to beat Iceland in a play-off to qualify for Euro 2024 on Tuesday, while Poland secured their place at the finals with a penalty shoot-out victory over Wales and Georgia qualified for a first ever major tournament.

The Ukrainians were aiming to qualify for a first tournament since the Russian invasion of the country two years ago, and they did so by coming from behind to defeat Iceland 2-1 in a game played in the Polish city of Wroclaw. Albert Gudmundsson silenced the crowd in a city with a large Ukrainian refugee population as he fired Iceland into the lead on the half-hour mark.

Iceland, with a population under 400,000, were hoping to return to the finals of a competition in which they reached the quarter-finals in 2016. However, Euro 2020 quarter-finalists Ukraine equalised nine minutes after half-time thanks to a superbly taken goal by Viktor Tsygankov of Spanish side Girona.

Extra time was looming when Ukraine grabbed the winner with six minutes left as Chelsea's Mykhailo Mudryk swept home a first-time shot from the edge of the area. "Thank you, guys! Thank you, team! For significant emotions for the entire country. For the important victory and making it to EURO. For proving once again: whenever Ukrainians face difficulties but do not give up and continue to fight, Ukrainians certainly win," Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, wrote on X.

Having narrowly missed out to Italy in their qualifying group and being forced into the play-offs, Ukraine can now look forward to the European Championship which begins in Germany on June 14. They will go into Group E alongside Belgium, Slovakia and Romania and will have ambitions of progressing to the last 16.

Poland go into a difficult Group D at the

Euro along with France, the Netherlands and Austria after getting the better of Wales in a tense shoot-out at the end of their play-off final in Cardiff. The match ended 0-0 after 90 minutes and there were no goals either in extra time, which ended with Wales having Chris Mepham sent off for a second booking.

A high-quality shoot-out, which began with Robert Lewandowski converting Poland's first kick, saw nine successful penalties before Daniel James had his effort saved and Wales lost 5-4. There will be no third consecutive European Championship for the Welsh team, who were semi-finalists in 2016, but Poland will be present at a fifth continental finals in a row. "It's a cruel game, that's what I've said to the players, one kick away from qualifying. It hurts," Wales manager Rob Page said.

Earlier, Georgia made history by winning through to a major international tournament for the first time since the country in the Caucasus of 3.7m people gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. They beat Greece 4-2 on penalties after a 0-0 draw at the end of extra time in Tbilisi, sparking a pitch invasion from delighted fans at the Boris Paichadze Stadium.

Nika Kvekveskiri stroked in the decisive penalty for Georgia 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, a Georgia team coached by former France full-back Willy Sagnol will join Türkiye, Portugal and the Czech Republic in Group F at the European Championship. "I would pay to feel what I feel today," said Sagnol after the game, speaking in English. They had never come close to qualifying before, until losing in a play-off at the same stage for the last Euro, going down 1-0 at home to North Macedonia in 2020.



Ukraine's Mykhailo Mudryk (centre) celebrates with teammates Olexandr Zinchenko and Volodymyr Brazhko after scoring against Iceland during the Euro 2024 qualifier play-off match in Wroclaw, Poland, on Tuesday. (Reuters)

Bayern's Kane back but Neuer doubtful for Dortmund match

Berlin: Bayern Munich striker Harry Kane returned to team training yesterday while captain Manuel Neuer remains doubtful ahead of Saturday's home clash with Borussia Dortmund.

Bayern released a statement saying Kane "was able to take part in team training again", having returned to individual training on Monday.

Neuer, who turned 38 yesterday, tore a muscle fibre on duty with Germany, missing both of his country's friendlies. Kane injured his ankle after colliding with the goal post in Bayern's 5-2 win over Darmstadt.

The England captain missed England's friendlies against Brazil and Belgium as a result of the injury. The 30-year-old striker has a history of ankle problems but last missed a match due to injury back in April 2021 with previous club Tottenham.

Bayern sit 10 points behind Xabi Alonso's unbeaten Bayer Leverkusen in the league with eight games to play this season.

SPAIN PROSECUTORS WANT RUBIALES JAILED FOR 2.5 YEARS

Spanish prosecutors are seeking two-and-a-half years jail for disgraced ex-football chief Luis Rubiales who is facing trial for kissing Spain midfielder Jenni Hermoso on the lips against her will, court documents showed.

Prosecutors also want Rubiales, who has been charged with sexual assault and coercion, to pay at least 50,000 euros in compensation to Hermoso, they wrote in a document sent to Spain's Audiencia Nacional court. During the incident, which took place on August 20 after Spain beat England to win the Women's World Cup final in Australia, Rubiales held Hermoso's head in both hands and forcibly kissed her on the lips.

VIETNAM FIRE TROUSSIER AFTER ANGRY FANS TURN ON FRENCH COACH

Frenchman Philippe Troussier's reign as Vietnam coach is over after barely a year in charge following back-to-back defeats to regional rivals Indonesia in World Cup qualifying. Vietnam's hopes of reaching the next qualifying stage were left hanging by a thread after a 3-0 home defeat to Indonesia on Tuesday, five days after losing 1-0 away to the same opponents.

It was Vietnam's first home defeat to Indonesia in nearly 20 years and angry home fans chanted afterwards for the 69-year-old to be sacked. Vietnam are third in their qualifying group on three points from four matches. Only the top two reach the next stage.

LIVERPOOL 'NOT THE RIGHT OPTION' FOR ALONSO, SAYS MATTHAEUS

Berlin: Ballon d'Or winner Lothar Matthaeus said a move to Liverpool in the summer was "not the right option" for in-demand Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso. Alonso has been linked with moves to Liverpool, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich, clubs where he all spent time as a player, having so far done a stunning job at runaway Bundesliga leaders Leverkusen.

Alonso has the unbeaten side 10 points clear of Bayern Munich and on track for a

first-ever German title with eight games remaining this season. Matthaeus said following outgoing manager Jurgen Klopp would be difficult for any coach and that the in-demand Alonso should stay with Leverkusen. "Liverpool is not the right option for Xabi Alonso after this season. He has better options."

Matthaeus spent the majority of his career at Bayern and said he would welcome Alonso as the replacement for outgoing

coach Thomas Tuchel in the summer but admitted in Munich "Alonso" would have to build a new team for the future, with new players."

Leverkusen have won 34 and drawn four of 38 games this season. With the club in the final four of the German Cup and the quarter-finals of the Europa League, Alonso has Leverkusen on course for a treble. "Why move to Liverpool? Why should he leave this beautiful team which makes

us happy with their beautiful football, like Barcelona 12 years ago?"

Klopp shocked the football world in January by announcing he would leave Liverpool at the end of the season after nine years at the Reds, citing exhaustion. Matthaeus said Klopp's success at Liverpool made him a hard act to follow. To coach at Liverpool after Jurgen Klopp is not easy because Jurgen is a hero, he's fantastic. What he was doing is great."