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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

'Very special' Parag
powers Rajasthan
to IPL victory
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Sheikh Hamad crowns winners of Sports and Youth Excellence Awards



HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, Minister of Sports and Youth, honoured the winners of Sports and Youth Excellence Awards for clubs at an event held yesterday. In the Sports category, Al Arabi SC came first, ahead of Al Sadd SC and Al Rayyan SC. The Youth category top prize went to Qatari Scientific Club, followed by Simaisma and Al Daayen Youth Centre and Pioneership Centre for Girls.

SPOTLIGHT

France asks for foreign help over Olympics security

Organisers had asked 46 allies to send 2,185 police reinforcements

AFP
Paris

France has asked its foreign allies to send several thousand members of their security forces to help guard the Paris Olympics, officials said yesterday, underlining the strains caused by the sporting extravaganza which begins in July.

"Several foreign nations are going to reinforce us in certain critical areas, such as dog-handling capabilities where the needs are enormous," an official at the defence ministry told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The official did not say how many foreign soldiers would be on French soil, but Polish Defence Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz confirmed his country was joining "an international coalition established by France" for the Olympics.

An official in the French interior ministry said separately that in January Paris had asked 46 allies to send 2,185 police reinforcements. Both officials played down the significance of the requests for foreign assistance. "It's a classic move for host countries ahead of the organisation of major events," the French interior ministry official said on condition of anonymity.

For the Rugby World Cup in France last year, European allies sent 160 police officers to help with security, the official added, with some of them visible to fans as they patrolled the streets. Securing the Paris Olympics is stretching France's domestic forces, however, and an attack last Friday on a concert hall in Moscow that killed more than 140 people, claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group, underlined the stakes.

"The terrorist threat is real, it's strong," French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal told reporters on Monday, adding that two plots by suspected extremists had already been thwarted this year. Up to 45,000 French police and gendarmes are set to be deployed each day during the Olympics, while 18,000 troops are also expected to be mobilised, according to government figures.

Another 18,000-22,000 private security guards will be on the ground for the Games, which run from July 26 to August 11. The request for foreign help was "for the spectators' experience, to respond to the capacity challenge of the Games and to reinforce international cooperation," the French interior ministry official explained.

Germany said in March that it would send an unspecified number of police to France for the Olympics, while French forces are set to travel to Germany when it holds the Euro 2024 football tournament in June and July.



A view of the Olympic Aquatics Centre, a multifunctional venue for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games in Saint-Denis, near Paris. (Reuters)

The Olympics have been attacked in the past – most infamously in 1972 in Munich and again in 1996 in Atlanta – with the thousands of athletes, huge crowds and live global television audience making it a target. French organisers have faced persistent questioning over their decision to hold the opening ceremony outside of the athletics stadium for the first time.

Athletes are instead set to sail down the river Seine in a flotilla of boats in a made-for-TV extravaganza. The choice has been resisted by some security officials because of the challenges for police. The crowd size for the ceremony has been significantly reduced, but 326,000 are set to attend with tickets while hundreds of thousands more are expected on the streets or watching from windows overlooking the waterway.

French security forces are screening up to a million people before the Games, including athletes and people living close to key infrastructure, according to the interior ministry.

France was placed on its highest terror alert on Sunday following the attack in Moscow.

OLYMPIC FLAME TO BURN NEAR LOUVRE DURING PARIS GAMES

Meanwhile, the Olympic flame is set to burn in the Tuilleries Garden in front of the Louvre museum for the duration of the Paris Games in July and August, a source involved in the discussions said.

The decision to place the Olympic cauldron in the tourist hotspot in the centre of the city was taken "several weeks ago", the source said on condition of anonymity.

"The Tuilleries emerged as the first choice because of the ease of access for the public," the source said.

There had been speculation that the flame might be placed on the Eiffel Tower, while organisers also contemplated putting it in the courtyard of the Louvre, the world's biggest museum, the source said.

The Tuilleries "is an area that can be easily secured. There will be security forces on duty round the clock to protect the flame and the general public will be able to see it thanks to the raised footpaths around the garden," the source added.

five-length win. Also on Wednesday night, Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri rode Shobrom to Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80) win, while Jabahat landed the Local Thoroughbred Handicap (30-50) title under Ivan Rossi.

Hamad al-Jehani-trained John Steed combined with jockey Arnaud De Lepine to claim the Thoroughbred Novice Plate victory while Keheilan al-Sakab sprinted to Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate triumph with Mohamed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik in the saddle.

RESULTS

38th Al Rayyan Meeting: Al Dibal Cup Day

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

1: Al Dibal Cup, Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (70-90) Tajamhor, Zuhair Mohsen, Anas al-Seyabi

2 - Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90) Mobilise, Zuhair Mohsen, Soufiane Saadi

3 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80) Hidalgo Du Croate, Zuhair Mohsen, Maxim Bozzio

4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80) Shobrom, Owaida Salem al-Hajri, Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri

5 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (30-50) Jabahat, Jihad El Ahmad, Ivan Rossi

6 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate John Steed, Hamad al-Jehani, Arnaud De Lepine

7 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate Keheilan al-Sakab, Bader YA al-Baloshi, Mohamed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik



Anas al-Seyabi rides Tajamhor to Al Dibal Cup victory at the Al Rayyan Racecourse on Wednesday. PICTURE: Juhaim



CRICKET

Parag powers Rajasthan to IPL win over Delhi

'There is something very special he can give to Indian cricket'

AFP

Jaipur, India

Ryan Parag's unbeaten 45-ball 84 propelled Rajasthan Royals to 185-5 and sealed a 12-run win over the Delhi Capitals in IPL yesterday.

Rishabh Pant-led Delhi won the toss and chose to field first and maintained a stranglehold over the game until the second half of the Royals' innings.

Rajasthan lost both their explosive openers Yashasvi Jaiswal (five) and Jos Buttler (11) early and even batting mainstay, captain Sanju Samson, failed to convert his start and fell for 15.

With the team reeling at 36-3 in the eighth over, Rajasthan promoted India's spin-bowling all-rounder Ravichandran Ashwin, who built a crucial 54-run partnership with Parag.

Ashwin scored 29 off 19 balls and took the team to 90 before he was dismissed in the 14th over by India teammate Axar Patel.

Parag, who has been criticised in previous IPL seasons for his rash shot selection, kept the scoreboard ticking until after the 17th over.

The 22-year-old put together another key partnership with Indian wicketkeeper Dhrav Jurel (20). Parag, who reached his 50 off 34 balls, cracked 25 runs with three fours and two sixes off the final over bowled by South African paceman Anrich Nortje.

He was ably supported by West Indian Shimron Hetmyer, who hit an unbeaten seven-ball 14 that propelled the team to an impressive 185-5.

Samson praised player of the match Parag.



Rajasthan Royals' Ryan Parag plays a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Delhi Capitals at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur yesterday. (AFP)

"Wherever I go, people ask me about him. There is something very special he can give to Indian cricket," he said.

Patel was the standout bowler for Rajasthan and finished with 1-21 in his four over spell.

Delhi started their chase well with Australian openers Mitchell Marsh and veteran David Warner.

Marsh was removed after a 12-ball 23 in the fourth over by South African quick Nandre Burger, who also removed Ricky Bhui (0) in the same over.

But that didn't stop Warner,

who took the team to 59-2 at the end of the powerplay.

He was removed in the 12th over after a well compiled 34-ball 49, falling to young India fast bowler Avesh Khan.

Delhi subsequently fell behind the run rate before a late innings counterattack by South African Tristan Stubbs who finished with an unbeaten 23-ball 44.

Avesh bowled a tight last over to seal a 12-run victory. Leg spinner Yuzvendra Chahal finished his three overs with 2-19 while Burger had 2-29. Losing captain

Pant said that he was "definitely disappointed". Pant, who hopes to make a comeback to the Indian team after his long injury layoff ahead of the T20 World Cup this summer, made 28 off 26 balls.

"The best thing to do from here is to learn from it," he added.

BRIEF SCORES

Rajasthan Royals 185 for 5
(Parag 84, Ashwin 29, Axar 1-21, Khaleel 1-24) beat **Delhi Capitals 173 for 5** (Warner 49, Stubbs 44*, Chahal 2-19, Burger 2-29)
by 12 runs

ANNOUNCEMENT

Stoinis and Agar lose Australia contracts

Agencies

Sydney

All-rounder Marcus Stoinis and spin bowler Ashton Agar have been dropped from Australia's contracts list for the 2024/25 season after falling out of favour with selectors.

Stoinis lost his spot in Australia's ODI team to Marnus Labuschagne during the World Cup in India and has not been seen in the team since, while left-arm spinner Agar has played only one international match in the past year.

The Western Australian duo were jettisoned from the 23-man central contracts list released yesterday along with Test opener Marcus Harris, paceman Michael Neser and the retiring David Warner.

The annual contracts list offers a snapshot of the pecking order in Australian cricket before the start of a new season, though players can be promoted into it based on performance during the season.

Queensland quick Xavier Bartlett is the sole new face on the list, rewarded after his impressive debut ODI series against West Indies and T20I debut against the Caribbean side in February.

Tasmania fast bowler Nathan Ellis, Western Australia all-rounder Aaron Hardie and white-ball batter Matt Short were retained after earning promotion during the last season.

"Matt, Aaron and Xavier have been extremely impressive in the early stages of their international careers," said chief selector George Bailey.

"The panel believes they have strong futures and are deserved of their contracts as they work towards striving to become regulars in the Australian setup," he added.

Bailey also indicated selectors were leaning towards naming another spinner in Australia's 15-player squad for this year's World Cup edition alongside the star leggie and off-spinning all-rounder Glenn Maxwell with pitches in the Caribbean traditionally slower with less bounce.

"The balance of the squad will probably lend itself to having that second spinner there," Bailey told reporters from Hobart.

"It still seems hard for everyone to get their head around the fact



Chief selector George Bailey

Glenn Maxwell's a pretty handy white-ball spinner and we don't necessarily consider him a part-time option, he's one that we consider a frontline option.

"So 'Zamps' will clearly be there, and I think there will be an opportunity potentially for one more. We will come together at the end of April to put a squad together for that and both 'Stoin' and Ash Agar will be firmly in the mix for the squad. There's not a great deal of T20 cricket next year in terms of how quickly we need to build towards the next World Cup (in India and Sri Lanka in 2026)," Bailey said.

"In one-day and T20 cricket it always moves more in cycles than Test cricket just given the nature of the buildup to those major tournaments.

"Going forward, I think performances both individually and as a team will dictate how quickly that team transitions," Bailey said.

"We've been pretty clear that Scott Boland, Michael Neser and Lance Morris have been the three that have been ready and waiting and unfortunately for them they haven't had an opportunity," Bailey said.

Australia, the ODI and Test world champions, will bid for a second T20 World Cup title in the United States and Caribbean at the tournament starting in June.

AUSTRALIA MEN'S CONTRACTS

2024-25: Sean Abbott, Xavier Bartlett, Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Pat Cummins, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Aaron Hardie, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Glenn Maxwell, Lance Morris, Todd Murphy, Jhye Richardson, Matt Short, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc and Adam Zampa

Sharfuddoula is first Bangladeshi on ICC elite umpire panel

Dhaka: Sharfuddoula Ibne Shahid said yesterday it was a "great honour" to be named the first Bangladeshi to join the International Cricket Council's Elite Panel of umpires.

Sharfuddoula, 47, who last year became the first umpire from Bangladesh to take charge of a World Cup match, had been on the international panel since 2006.

"It is a great honour to be named on the ICC Elite Panel," Sharfuddoula said in an ICC statement. "To be the first from my country on the panel makes it extra special and I look forward to justifying the faith shown in me," he added.

The elite umpire panel is responsible for officiating in the majority of men's Tests and one-day internationals, with the match referee panel also overseeing Twenty20 internationals as well.

Former off-spinner Sharfuddoula was forced to end his first-class career after just one season in 2001 due to a back injury, and joined the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) as its cricket operations manager. He quit the BCB job to become an umpire and has so far overseen 10 Tests, 63 one-day internationals, and 44 Twenty20 internationals.

On the panel, Sharfuddoula joins three umpires from England - Michael Gough, Richard Illingworth and Richard Kettleborough - as well as Australians Paul Reiffel and Rodney Tucker. Also on the panel are Kumar Dharmasena from Sri Lanka, Christopher Gaffaney from New Zealand, Adrian Holdstock from South Africa, Nitin Menon from India, Ahsan Raza from Pakistan and Joel Wilson from the West Indies.

SPOTLIGHT

England won't turn backs on 'Bazball': Crawley

AFP

London

Batsman Zak Crawley has insisted England have no intention of retreating into a "negative" approach after their recent 4-1 Test series loss in India but accepted they must "pick the right moments" to absorb pressure.

England lost their first series under the red-ball leadership duo of captain Ben Stokes and coach Brendon McCullum in convincing fashion earlier this month after winning the first Test in Hyderabad.

That reverse sparked a widespread debate over the merits of England's aggressive 'Bazball' style following several batting collapses, with even former New Zealand captain 'Baz' McCullum saying the team would have to "refine" their style.

"We always talk about absorbing pressure and putting pressure back on," 26-year-old opening batsman Crawley said yesterday.

"The last couple of years we've done the



putting pressure back on pretty well and we've spoken about maybe picking those moments to absorb at the right times as well. We can certainly refine that.

"That's not to say we're going to get more negative.

"We will still try to play the way we have and try to score quickly but yeah, picking those

moments where they're on top and we need to absorb."

McCullum and Stokes won 10 of their first 11 Tests in charge but have since lost seven of the last dozen.

Few disagree with the basic premises behind 'Bazball', an approach grounded on the idea of trying to free players from the fear of failure and taking the attack to the opposition.

But there were times when England appeared to get carried away, notably when star batsman Joe Root was dismissed off a high-risk reverse scoop during a third-Test collapse in Rajkot. That lack of a ruthless streak was also evident in the fourth Test in Ranchi where England, having made 353 in their first innings, reduced India to 177-7 in reply only to still suffer a five-wicket defeat.

"We should have won in Ranchi to make it 2-2 and then you never know how the last one goes," said Crawley speaking at an event for Swiss watch brand Rado, an England team sponsor.

Crawley topped England's batting averages in India with 407 runs at 40.7.

FOCUS

Backed by caring parents, Nicoll relishes her shot at double Olympic stardom

AFP

Paris

Adèle Nicoll has travelled a long way from the person who was "sad" and "rather lost" in 2020, to the extent she has a live chance of achieving the rare feat of competing in both a Summer and Winter Olympics.

In that relatively short space of time, the multi-talented 27-year-old has twice been crowned British shot put champion in 2022 and 2023, and in a polar opposite to that discipline competed in the world bobsleigh championships this year.

"I reflect on the progress from 2020 to now, and my life has completely changed," she said from Germany. "I remember aged nine writing down what I wanted to be by 2020 and putting it in an envelope. 'I opened it when I was sorting through my stuff at home

during the Covid lockdown and was very, very sad as the target had been to be a professional athlete."

"I realised I had failed my younger self and it gave me the kick up the bum to go on and fulfil my childhood dream."

She has already been to the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing - as a reserve brakewoman in the British bobsleigh team - and is targeting the 2026 edition in Italy.

An eighth-place finish at the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham showed she remains a competitive force in athletics but Nicoll admits that qualifying for the Paris Olympics this year could be a stretch - Los Angeles in 2028 is more realistic - because she has invested so much time into transitioning from a bobsleigh brakewoman to a driver.

"The 2026 Winter Games are my main priority, but if I qualify for Paris that will be a bonus," she said, admitting she has had "six months away from the shot."



This handout photo obtained shows British shot putter, discus thrower and bobsledder Adele Nicoll during the BMW IBSF World Cup bobsleigh and skeleton in Innsbruck, Austria, on December 16, 2023. (AFP)

If she does not make it, it will not be for want of trying as she has followed the advice her parents gave her at an early age - "always show up and never give up". 100 percent I have lived up to it," she said. "I look back and realise how pivotal the manner in which parents bring you

up is. They are the reason why my mindset is as it is and that I always show up regardless of how I feel. Perseverance is very hard to beat. If you are not willing to make it through when you are at rock bottom you are never going to deserve to be on top of the world."

Nicoll did battle through when things were none too rosy - and the catalyst was an unlikely one.

"From 2019 to 2021 I was having a hard time with everything to do with sport," said Nicoll, who finished ninth in the monobob and 11th in the two-woman bob at the world championships.

"I am not a quitter but I knew I was not enjoying it or getting results. I was really lost with life and where I wanted to go. The bobsleigh opportunity came at the perfect time, a message from (British bobsledder) Mica McNeill on Instagram saying: 'Have you ever tried bobsleigh? I saw your training video and you look very powerful!'"

She hopped on board but not before she had to shed almost 20 kilograms. It paid off as she and McNeill finished runners-up in a World Cup race on only her second outing - the first podium finish for British women in 13 years.

Her mental power is not in doubt as she has a degree in clinical neu-

roscence, a masters in psychology and wanted to do a doctorate in clinical psychology.

"I postponed it as most of them require you to work on site, and my bobsleigh takes priority, not least as I owe that to Mike Harris who funds me for the two-woman bob," she said. Harris is chairman of 15-time Welsh football champions The New Saints who train in Oswestry, the town where Nicoll coincidentally first trained aged nine.

It is her parents who have been the backbone to their only child's career - from father Paul being her 'taxi service' and training her when she was young to her mother Justine organising her travel and entries.

"Dad has kept me grounded all my life," said Nicoll. "When I won silver at the Europa Cup race in St Moritz in January he said if you polished your runners a bit more you would have won gold... the next day I did win gold with Kya (Placide). I must have given them a bit of an extra rub!" she added.

TENNIS

Sinner, Medvedev book Miami Open semi-final clash

'HE HAS AN INCREDIBLE TALENT. HE IS SUPER FAST'

AFP
Miami

World number three Jannik Sinner will face defending champion Daniil Medvedev in the semi-finals of the Miami Open – a rematch of the Australian Open final won by Sinner and last year's Miami title match.

Sinner moved into the last four in emphatic style on Wednesday, beating Czech Tomas Machac 6-4, 6-2 before Medvedev overcame a stern test against Chilean Nicolas Jarry before emerging with a 6-2, 7-6 (9/7) win.

Italy's Sinner, who rallied from two sets down to beat Medvedev and claim his first Grand Slam title at the Australian Open, will play in his fourth semi of the season after dealing with lively Machac in 91 minutes.

Sinner broke the opening game serve from the Czech but Machac responded immediately to make it 1-1.

The crowd were on their feet to appreciate some brilliant defensive play from Sinner who eventually took charge of the set, breaking to go 4-3 up and then closing out.

The second set was more straightforward with Sinner breaking in the third game and never looking back.

Despite the comfortable margin of the win, Sinner said Machac deserved praise for his energetic and aggressive performance.

"He has an incredible talent. He is super fast, also physically he is in great shape," said the world number three.

"I didn't know exactly what to expect today. The first games I was looking a little bit at what kind of tactics could work or not," he added.



Jannik Sinner of Italy blows on his hand between points against Tomas Machac of Czech Republic (not pictured) on day 10 of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (USA TODAY Sports)

"I played good, especially in the important moments of the match, which makes it... the scoreboard, you see the score, but it's sometimes lying. Today was a little bit like that," said Sinner.

Good atmosphere
Medvedev ran away with the first set against Jarry, who was slow out of the blocks.

But the second set was a different story with the Chilean, roared on by heavily Latin American crowd, finding his big serve.

The pair were inseparable, with plenty of entertaining rallies, until the tiebreaker.

Medvedev missed a chance to win the match at 6-5 up when he came to the net for a routine conversion on match point but found the net – prompting a huge roar

from the Chilean fans. A thumping ace from Jarry made it 7-7 but it was followed with a poor effort which flew long and then on the third match point Medvedev wrapped up the win.

"In the first set I feel like I was playing good level, but nothing extra and it was enough to win, so I was happy about it," said Medvedev.

Then he managed to play much better. It was tough rallies, tough points, he served better and yeah, it was a matter of a few points on the tiebreak like it is sometimes in tennis," he told reporters.

The Russian appeared to enjoy the extra spice provided by the Chilean fans in the stadium.

"To be honest I was ready for it and I was expecting worse, when I

say worse (I mean) more cheering fans supporting him.

"It was a pretty good atmosphere, you know even many times the referee was saying like players are ready, but I was like I don't care, it's actually not too bad, I've seen worse," he said.

Medvedev said he is looking forward to resuming battle with Sinner after his five-set loss in Melbourne.

"I won the first two sets – which would be enough in Miami," he quipped.

"But for sure this match is going to be different. I am sure he will adapt again and I am going to talk to my team and see what I can do better.

"I'm going to go out there, 100 percent ready to win and to make his life tough," said the Russian.

FORMULA ONE

Williams will have two cars but still no spare in Japan

Reuters
London

Williams are confident they will be back up to strength with two cars at next week's Japanese Grand Prix, after having only one in Australia last Sunday due to crash damage, but will still have no spare.

Logan Sargeant had to sit out the race in Melbourne after more experienced teammate Alex Albon, the effective number one driver, wrecked his car in practice and was then given the American's due to the lack of a third chassis.

Team principal James Vowles said in a brief posted on the www.williamsf1.com website that both drivers would be racing at Suzuka.

"I'm confident we'll be able to fix the (damaged) chassis," he said.

"We put measures in place to make sure the chassis was back here (at the factory in England) pretty early on Monday morning, I think it arrived at around 2am."

Vowles said it was then immediately stripped down and repairs carried out.

"In Suzuka we'll have two cars without too many issues," he added.



"We won't have a spare chassis in Japan. The original plan before the season started was to have three chassis as you would expect at round one and that gently slipped towards round three as items became more and more delayed."

"Since then, and especially with the work we're doing now on chassis number two, there is again going to be a small amount of delay. That said, we will have a (third) chassis soon."

Vowles said building a chassis was thousands of hours of work in the composites department and one of the biggest jobs within a Formula One team.

Williams, seventh overall in 2023 with Albon taking 27 of their 28 points, have yet to score in three races so far this season.

Vowles expected the bottom five teams to be in a tight battle through the season, with the top five filling most of the points places.

He said prioritising Albon over Sargeant in Melbourne had been by far his hardest decision in Formula One but the correct one on performance.

"The whole world has seen where we are in reality and how far behind we are and what work we have to do to move forward," he added of the Melbourne situation.

GOLF

Scheffler back in action, eyes third straight win

Reuters
Houston, Texas

Scottie Scheffler apparently isn't one for superstition.

Scheffler was growing out a thick beard while he won the Arnold Palmer Invitational and The Players Championship in consecutive weeks. But as he arrived at Memorial Park Golf Course for the Texas Children's Houston Open, it was revealed to the golfing world that the beard was shorn.

"It was nice because I didn't have to think about it, but then my beard got so long that it became work," Scheffler said.

Golf hasn't looked like work for Scheffler lately. He comes to his home state of Texas trying to become the first since Dustin Johnson in 2017 to win three straight starts on the PGA Tour.

"I like trying to support as many events as I can in my home state," Scheffler said. "Like you said, I definitely am proud Texan and so I like to do what I can to support the events here at home. Yeah, it's good to be back."

The Houston Open is back in the spring after being held in the fall for a number of years. It was not played during the 2023 calendar year in anticipation of being moved back to the springtime amid the tour's schedule changes.

Scheffler tied for second at the Houston Open in the fall of 2021 and tied for ninth in November 2022. He shot a tournament-record 62 in the second round in 2021, which Tony Finau equalled the following year.

Finau won the 2022-23 event and hopes to get his season on the right track this week. He's had only one top-10 finish in eight starts.

"Quite a different title defence as it's not playing at the same time of the year and 16 months later, but I am happy to be back and looking forward to playing some good golf this week," Finau said.

Scheffler took off last week when the PGA Tour finished its Florida swing at the

Valspar Championship, where Peter Malnati won his first tournament since 2015 and qualified for his first Masters.

The Houston Open could allow another player not already qualified for the Masters to book his trip to Augusta with a win. There's also the matter of the Aon Swing 5 standings, which will help a lucky few qualify for the next non-major Signature Event, the RBC Heritage.

Malnati, who was tearful after winning the Valspar, said Wednesday he isn't focused on any of the monetary outcomes associated with his victory.

"I think people are just sick of the narrative in golf being about, you know, con-

tracts on LIV, purses on the tour, guaranteed comp on the tour," Malnati said. "I think people are so sick of that. They want to see sport, they want to see people who are the best in the world at what they do, do it at a high level and celebrate that. Celebrate the athleticism, celebrate the achievement."

Other notable names in the field include World No. 4 Wyndham Clark, Australia's Jason Day, Will Zalatoris and Si Woo Kim of South Korea. Clark finished second or tied for second in both of Scheffler's wins this month; he said he hurt a back muscle earlier in the week but believes he will be ready for his first tee time.



Scottie Scheffler of the US hits a tee shot on the fifth hole during the first round of the Texas Children's Houston Open at Memorial Park Golf Course in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

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Collins and Alexandrova fight into Miami semis

Miami: Danielle Collins and Ekaterina Alexandrova will meet in the semi-finals of the WTA Miami Open after victories in the last eight.

Collins powered into the last four with an emphatic 6-3, 6-2 win over France's Caroline Garcia before Alexandrova emerged triumphant from a near two-hour three set battle with American fifth seed Jessica Pegula.

Fans will see the opening semi-final with three-time Miami winner Victoria Azarenka up against fourth-seeded Elena Rybakina, the highest ranked player left in the tournament.

Garcia went into the match against Collins on the back of an upset win over third-seeded American Coco Gauff but was unable to get a foothold against the Floridian.

Garcia still appeared to be troubled by an injury to her right shoulder and received some treatment early in the second set.

Collins broke to go 5-3 up in the first set and then held serve for the set, then in the second set broke in the third game and never looked back as she wrapped up the win in one hour and 19 minutes.

Collins reached the semi-finals of Miami six years ago as a qualifier and at 53rd is the lowest ranked semi-finalist in the tournament. The 30-year-old American is now 4-0 against Garcia and has yet to lose a set to the Frenchwoman but said the numbers didn't tell the true story. "I think against someone like Caro, it forces me to be more concentrated. I know I don't want to give her an inch or she can get in there," Collins said.

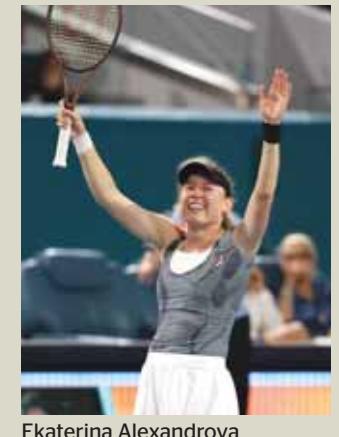
Garcia said she had felt the pace of back-to-back tournaments.

"It's been a long two weeks for the body for me, between the back at the beginning and then the shoulder which came back," she told reporters, adding that the shoulder issue was a recurrence of a previous injury.

"I think it's nothing too serious but (shoulder) is always quite problematic for a tennis player," she said, before adding that Collins had played "an amazing match".

Collins intends to retire at the end of the year but while she agreed she had a relaxed look to her play, she rejected the idea that it was a result of her impending departure from the sport.

"I think I feel pretty relaxed, but that could be due to a number of things. I've got a new hobby. I'm playing some more golf, running more, Pilates, all of these differ-



Ekaterina Alexandrova celebrates match point against Jessica Pegula during their Miami Open match at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

ent things," she said. "My dog is here. I'm feeling relaxed because I get to be with him at night. I don't know," she said with a smile.

Home favourite

Alexandrova beat home favourite Pegula 3-6, 6-4, 6-4, showing plenty of grit in a third set where both players showed signs of fatigue. Pegula broke to go 4-3 up in the first and broke again to clinch the set but the Russian fought back, breaking in the first game of the second set.

Again 14th seed Alexandrova broke early in the third but she let Pegula back into the set when she double-faulted on break point to leave the set balanced at 3-3. The pair produced a fantastic rally in the subsequent game which Pegula was able to hold, but at 4-4, Alexandrova struck the decisive blow with Pegula going long on a back-hand return on the second break point.

The Russian held to grab the win and fell to her knees in joy at the result.

Alexandrova, who upset world number one Iga Swiatek in the previous round, said it was tough to break down Pegula's gritty defence. "I couldn't understand how it was possible to return that ball it was always back. She was everywhere so I needed to do something," she said. "I tried to wait and use any opportunities that I got."

The win was Alexandrova's third against a top five player this year and she said her success was the result of developing patience.

"You have to wait and wait and something is going to come – and then you have to use it," she said.

AL BIDDA BEAT AL SHAHANIA ON PENALTIES TO CLINCH QFA CUP



Al Bidda clinched the third edition of the QFA Cup after a 5-3 penalty shootout win over Al Shahania in the final on Wednesday. Both teams were locked at 1-1 at full time at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium. Mohamed Khalifa al-Suwaidi, Vice-President of the Qatar Football Association, crowned the winners. Mansour al-Ansari, QFA Secretary-General, was also present at the ceremony. Shahania took the lead early after Francesco Antonucci converted a free kick in the 6th minute. But Al Bidda equalised through a wonderful goal by Yamin Hameed in the 67th minute. Al Bidda were more attacking but wasted several chances to score, especially as the match approached its end. In the penalty shootout, Akram El Hamdawi, Abdeljalil Manser, Bright Enobakari and Mohamed Omar Suleiman scored for Al Bidda while Christian Dal Bello missed. For Shahania, Ali Ahmed al-Omari, Mohamed Ismail and Mustafa Jalal scored, while players Niall Mason and al-Hassan Koroma shot wide. For Al Bidda, this is their second title in the club's history - after previously winning the second division cup for 2022-23 season, also at the expense of Al Shahania.

SPOTLIGHT

Pochettino taken aback by Chilwell's starts for England

Chelsea currently have nine players ruled out due to injury

AFP
London

Chelsea manager Mauricio Pochettino said yesterday he was surprised Ben Chilwell started two games for England during the international break after the defender only recently returned from a knee injury.

Chilwell last started for Chelsea on March 2 against Brentford and has played just a few minutes for the London club since then, as a late substitute in the FA Cup against Leicester. Nevertheless, the 27-year-old featured for the whole of England's 2-2 draw with Belgium at Wembley on Tuesday, three days after spending 67 minutes on the field in a defeat by Brazil.

Chelsea currently have nine players ruled out of tomorrow's Premier League match with Burnley at Stamford Bridge, with several others to be assessed following international duty, including Chilwell - who suffered a blow to his knee against Belgium.

"He didn't play after Brentford, then he played only a few minutes against Leicester," said Pochettino. "(Then) he started two games (for England). It's a surprise for us. It's bad luck because he got a dead leg in the last moment against Belgium. Now we need to assess if he can be available."

Enzo Fernandez, who played twice for Argentina in the United States during the break, will also have his fitness monitored ahead of this weekend's match. Chelsea confirmed earlier this week that Romeo Lavia would be out for the rest of the season. The 20-year-old midfielder who joined Chelsea from Southampton in pre-season for an initial £53mn (£62mn euros), has managed just 32 minutes of first-team action this term following ankle and thigh problems.

"It's a difficult situation for him," said Pochettino. "He's sad. He only played 30 minutes, for a new player at the club. When we signed him, he arrived with problems. He couldn't train with us for the first months."



Ben Chilwell last started for Chelsea on March 2 against Brentford and has played just a few minutes for the London club since then.

Then when he was ready he suffered a problem in his feet. He recovered, he played 30 minutes then got injured in December. Then he didn't have the possibility to train. It's really sad news."

But leading scorer Cole Palmer could face Burnley, with the 21-year-old having not featured in either of England's recent games. "I talked with him," said Pochettino. "He's a little bit disappointed because he couldn't play with the national team. The first game he had

a small problem," the Argentinian added. "He thought maybe he'd play the second game. Now he's OK, is training well. The plan is he will be available for Saturday."

Chelsea are 11th in the table, with Burnley in the relegation zone. Pochettino said Chelsea would not underestimate Burnley. "It's not just about points because you can see the potential of their team," he said. "It's going to be difficult. They are a team that play with freedom and are very physical."

Former China coach pleads guilty to taking over \$10mn in bribes

Beijing: Former China football coach and ex-Everton midfielder Li Tie pleaded guilty yesterday to accepting over \$10mn in bribes, a court said, part of a broader crackdown on corruption in Chinese football. His former boss, the discredited Chinese Football Association chairman Chen Xuyuan, was jailed for life this week for taking bribes worth \$11mn.

China's legal system is tightly controlled by the ruling Communist Party and courts have a near-100 percent conviction rate in criminal cases. Local journalists gathered in front of the court in central Hubei province where 46-year-old Li's case was heard.

Li, who was China coach from January 2020 until December 2021, is accused of giving and taking bribes, as well as participating in match fixing, the Hubei court said in a statement.

Li accepted more than 77mn yuan

(\$10.7mn) in bribes from 2017 to 2021, including during his time working as coach for the Wuhan Zall club, the court said.

"Li Tie made his final statement, pleaded guilty and expressed remorse," the court said, adding that a sentence would be announced at a later date. Li, who played in the Premier League 34 times between 2002 and 2004, featured in a documentary aired by state broadcaster CCTV in January about widespread corruption in Chinese football.

CCTV regularly airs confessions by criminal suspects before they have appeared in court, a practice widely condemned by rights groups. In the programme, Li said he had arranged nearly \$421,000 in bribes to secure the head coach position, and helped to fix matches when he was a club coach in the Chinese Super League.

Li played nearly 100 games for China.

FOREST'S DOUBLE EUROPEAN CUP WINNER LLOYD DIES

Larry Lloyd, twice a European Cup winner with Nottingham Forest, has died aged 75, the English Premier League club announced. Lloyd, who also won the old First Division title and UEFA Cup with Liverpool in the early 1970s, was a key member of the Forest side that won successive European Cups under celebrated manager Brian Clough.

The defender won four England caps and later managed Wigan and Notts County after the end of a trophy-laden career as a player.

Lloyd began his career with local side Bristol Rovers before being signed by legendary Liverpool manager Bill Shankly for £50,000 in 1969. Liverpool won the league and UEFA Cup double in 1973, with Lloyd, impressively, playing in every game of that successful season.

FOCUS

Tonali charged by FA over alleged breaches of betting rules

Reuters
London

Newcastle United midfielder Sandro Tonali was charged by England's FA yesterday over alleged betting breaches following his move to the Premier League club as he continues to serve a ban for betting on matches in Italy.

The 23-year-old is serving a 10-month ban after being sanctioned by the Italian football federation (FIGC) last October over betting breaches committed when he was playing for Serie A side AC Milan. The FA said in a statement: "It's alleged that the Newcastle United midfielder breached FA Rule E8 50 times by placing bets on football matches between 12 August 2023 and 12 October 2023."

The FA added that Tonali has until April 5 to respond to the misconduct charge. Newcastle signed Tonali in July last year for a reported fee of 70mn euros (\$75.57mn) - making him the most expensive Italian player in history.

But Tonali was told on Oct. 12 that he was involved in an investigation by prosecutors in Italy. He was banned two weeks later, effectively ending his debut season with Newcastle after he made eight league appearances.

Tonali was the highest-profile player caught up in a betting scandal that shook Italian football last year. His agent had said



he was suffering from a gambling addiction. "Sandro continues to fully comply with relevant investigations and he retains the club's full support," Newcastle said in a statement.

Newcastle have struggled without his creativity in midfield and the club, who were in the Champions League group stage earlier this season, sit a lowly 10th in the standings. They host West Ham United tomorrow.

Tonali was the second major player last year to receive a ban for betting on matches after England international Ivan Toney. The Brentford striker was banned for eight months

and fined 50,000 pounds (\$63,165) after admitting to 232 breaches of the FA's betting rules. He returned to action in January and earned a call-up to the England squad earlier this month, scoring on his international return against Belgium on Tuesday.

FIFA, UEFA seek answers amid corruption probe into Spanish federation

Madrid: World football governing body FIFA and its European counterpart UEFA have written to the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) requesting a detailed update after arrests were made in a corruption probe last week in Spain. FIFA Secretary-General Mattias Grafstrom and UEFA General Secretary Theodore Theodoridis sent a joint letter to Pedro Rocha, the president of the RFEF's management committee, expressing their concern and seeking more information.

In the letter, seen by Reuters, both FIFA and UEFA have asked the RFEF about the nature of the allegations as well as who is being investigated. The RFEF fired two executives last week it said were linked to a multimillion-euro corruption probe.

Police searched the RFEF headquarters and an apartment belonging to its former president Luis Rubiales, while seven people were arrested in a corruption probe over a multimillion-euro deal to relocate the Spanish Super Cup to Saudi Arabia. Rubiales has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing. FIFA and UEFA also sought information on the next steps in the investigation and what action is expected. Spain are one of the co-hosts for the 2030 World Cup, along with Portugal and Morocco, but the RFEF has been forced

to deal with a string of off-field issues recently.

In September, Rubiales resigned as RFEF president and a month later he was banned by FIFA from all football activities for three years for allegedly kissing player Jenni Hermoso on the lips without consent after Spain's women's World Cup triumph. Rubiales argued it was consensual and denied any wrongdoing but a prosecutor at Spain's High Court is seeking a prison sentence of 2 1/2 years for the 46-year-old.

Rubiales had his appeal against the three-year ban dismissed by FIFA in January. Rocha was also asked when the management committee would convene an Extraordinary General Assembly to elect a new president for the remainder of the presidential term of office.

Rubiales was re-elected unopposed in September 2020 for a four-year term. On Wednesday, the RFEF said it would submit to the Management Committee's calls for the implementation of a forensic audit on "any type of contract that may be under suspicion" due to Rubiales's actions. Rocha said it was "essential to separate and disassociate the institution from the alleged criminal conduct of individuals. We will stop at nothing to purge any existing questionable conduct."