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Kolkata cruise to win in Bengaluru despite Kohli's unbeaten 83



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'Perfect' Dimitrov stuns Alcaraz to book Zverev Miami semi-final

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PREMIER LEAGUE

Arteta puts friendship with Guardiola aside for title race

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SPOTLIGHT

Qatar enter FIBA 3x3 Asia Cup quarter-finals

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar reached the quarter-finals of the FIBA 3x3 Asia Cup, where they will take on Mongolia tomorrow. The seventh edition of continental event is being played at the famous Singapore Sports Hub OCBC Square. Yesterday, Qatar beat Malaysia 16-15 in their Pool D match, before going down to New Zealand 3-22. Qatar squad comprises of Mohamed Hashem, Omer Abdulmajeed Saad, Ahmed Saeed Mohamed, Faisal Abu Essa and Mahmoud Darwish. Qatar will have tough against Mongolia, who are the defending champions. Yesterday, Mongolia were pushed to the limit against Sri Lanka, who had been the surprise team in qualification with an unbeaten run. A new-look Mongolia, with only sharp-shooter Anand Ariunbold returning from last year's title-winning team, made a fast start with Temuulen Chingis on a heater. But as we've gotten used to, Sri Lanka fought back with Kande Mendis dominating on the glass. Rukshan Athapaththu hit two late baskets to send this wild game into OT, but Mongolia steadied with Ariunbold clinching their hard-fought win. In the women's, No 1 seed China made it through to the final eight and so too did the Philippines, Chinese Taipei and Mongolia.



Qatar beat Malaysia 16-15 in their Pool D opener before going down to New Zealand 3-22 at the Singapore Sports Hub OCBC Square.



EXPO STARS LEAGUE

Leonco secures key Muaither win

Al Shamal move to seventh place after a 2-1 victory over Al Ahli

By Sports Reproter
Doha

Tiago Leonco scored a brace to lead Muaither to an important 2-1 win over Umm Salal in the Expo Stars League yesterday. Victory at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium, helped second-bottom Muaither two points off the relegation zone with Qatar SC occupying the 10th spot with 16 points. Brazilian striker Leonco's strike came in the sixth and 55th minute. Umm Salal, who are ninth in the table, pulled a goal back through Ilyas Hamid but could not find an equaliser. In the other match yesterday, Al Shamal moved to seventh after a 2-1 win over Al Ahli, who dropped below their rivals. Mohamed Rafik opened the scoring in the 31st minute for Shamal before Ahli equalised through Sekou Yansane's strike in the 52nd minute. Ricardo Jorge then found the net in the 65th minute, which turned out to be the winner for Shamal. Today, Al Arabi face Al Gharafa at the Al Thumama Stadium, while Qatar SC host Al Wakrah at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium. Both matches kick off at 9:30pm. Arabi are currently in fifth place in the standings with 23 points, on the other hand Gharafa are second place with 37 points. Gharafa are looking to continue their good run to remain in contention for the title, while Arabi will be seeking the much-needed three points and to get into the top four. Meanwhile, Qatar SC and Al Wakrah encounter is expected to be exciting. Qatar SC are in 10th place with 16 points and coming from a victory over Al Markhiya, a victory that brought the team back to winning ways after stumbling in a number of previous rounds. As for Al Wakrah, they are in third place with 34 points and they would want to advance further in the ranking table as they continue their chase for the top spot.



Muaither's Tiago Leonco (right) scores against Umm Salal in the Expo Stars League at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium yesterday.

HORSE RACING

Wadi Bu Thaila wins Al Britha Cup



Soufiane Saadi rides Wadi Bu Thaila to Al Britha Cup win.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Wadi Bu Thaila, in the silks of Wathnan Racing, dominated over the home stretch to win the Al Britha Cup at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Racecourse on Thursday. In his third career start, Al-ban de Mieulle-trained and ridden by Soufiane Saadi, Wadi Bu Thaila, galloped his rivals into the ground to win by 10 lengths ahead of Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani-owned Madinat Bu Thaila in the Local thoroughbred graduation plate for the three-year-olds only. The three-year-old bay colt won the feature race in 1:36.07s and in the process completed a double in the evening for the trio of owner, trainer and the jockey, who marked their stamp on both the day's opener and finale.

It was second win in the three starts for the colt as he registered the first win in the local thoroughbred maiden plate (three-year-old only) (Class 6) on January 31 this year at the Al Uqda racecourse. The trio won the opening race of the evening, when Arman won the 1,500m contest for the local purebred Arabian Maiden plate for four-six-year-olds. In the penultimate race of the evening, jockey Faleh Bughanaim guided Abdulla bin Mohamed bin Abdulla al-Attiya-owned and Ahmed Kobeissi-trained Ilasad the victory in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (80-100) for four-year-old+. It was a double for Bughanaim on the day, who rode Al Shaqab Racing's Hemian to win the 1,750m Purebred Arabian Novice Plate for four-year-old+. Gassim Ghazali-trained Gold Fleece, in the colours of Nasser Saeed Al Eida, won the Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90) race.



QREC Racing Manager, Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, presented the trophies to the connections of Wadi Bu Thaila. PICTURES: Juhaïm

Qatar players to participate in IHF Beach Handball Showcase in Paris

Doha: The International Handball Federation (IHF) has selected three players from Qatar to participate in the IHF Beach Handball Showcase in Paris ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympics. The three players are Mohsen Mohamed al-Yafai, Mohamed Zaky Hassan and Hani Marwan Kakhi. The IHF will hold competitions from July 27-29 in co-operation with the Paris 2024

Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the French Handball Federation and the International Olympic Committee. The competitions feature eight teams: three men's and three women's All-Star Teams, plus the French men's and women's national teams. The event will bring 64 of the world's best beach handball players from 18 countries, including players from Qatar, Argentina, Brazil,

Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iran, the Netherlands, Norway, China, Poland, Portugal, Spain, the United States of America, and Uruguay. **Guiding the All-Star Teams will be six coaches:** Khaled Hassan (Qatar), Leticia Brunati (Argentina), Mladen Paradzik (Croatia), Maria Karantoni (Greece), Tamas Neukum (Hungary) and Alexander Novakovic (Germany).

SPOTLIGHT

Future of C'wealth Games a big concern

AFP
Paris

The future of the Commonwealth Games has once again been plunged into doubt since Malaysia declined to host the 2026 edition last week, but according to former Olympic marketing guru Michael Payne “it would be wrong to write the event off just yet.”

Malaysia's decision came despite the offer of a £100mn (\$126mn) sweetener from the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) towards the costs of hosting the event.

Organisers are trying to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal last year of the Australian state of Victoria, who were announced as hosts in 2022.

The financial support is available to any prospective host.

The CGF hopes that the Games' perceived strengths of inclusivity and integration, with para sports mixed in seamlessly with able-bodied events, will secure a host just two years out from the multi-

sport event. Katie Sadleir, the CEO of the CGF, accepts time is pressing but says intensive efforts are under way.

“The process to determine a host for the 2026 Games is continuing at pace with interested Commonwealth Games Associations (CGAs),” she told AFP.

“While acutely aware of the incredibly tight timeframe, we have encouraged proposals that will re-set the Games.

“Alongside this process, we have accelerated work to refresh and re-frame the Games.

“This has included exploring innovative new concepts and event opportunities.”

Payne, who in nearly two decades at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was widely credited with overhauling the organisation's brand and finances through sponsorship, told AFP that in an increasingly competitive world, the Commonwealth Games had one searing question to answer.

“The challenge is relevance - balancing history with evolution and maintaining some form of



A South African player in action during a field hockey match at the 2022 Commonwealth Games held in Birmingham. (@thecgf)

relevance,” said the 66-year-old Irishman.

“With the passing of Queen Elizabeth II everything just got a lot harder.”

Terrence Burns, who since leaving his role as an IOC marketing executive has played a key part in five successful Olympic bid city campaigns, told AFP his “first thought is they (CGF) have a brand

problem.”

“This means two things in my world: one, a lack of differentiation of competitive products, and two, a lack of or declining relevancy for its core target audience.

“Without either of those core brand principles, no product or service has much hope of success or longevity.”

Burns said the Commonwealth

Games faced a huge challenge to keep its core audience and attract a new one.

“The event, sport, and entertainment space is multi-fold more competitive for consumers' attentions than even 10 years ago,” he said.

“The novelty of seeing all these nations come together in one place at one time has been muted by the internet and technology's ability for one to literally carry the world - and all human history in the world - in one's pocket.

“We tend to yawn at wonder now, which is a crying shame to me.”

Burns believes the Games “in their current format and form will continue to wither” but underlines that the IOC made significant reforms as a result of an intensive consultation process following the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

Payne says the main takeaways from that were “the need to start managing the brand, and after the problems in Atlanta - greater control over the Organising Committee.”

For Burns, progress can only be

made if the powers that be at the CGF take on board the responses from their ongoing consultation, regardless of how uncomfortable the answers might be.

“They need to understand the good, bad, and the ugly to have a place from which they can start,” he said.

“So, does it have a future? Let's start with the fact it does have a vibrant and glorious past - but that past only exists within a market segment that is forever limited by its very name - the Commonwealth Games.

“By definition, it is not meant for anyone else.”

For Payne, though, the Commonwealth Games are a bit like a boxer who no matter the pounding he takes always defies expectations and comes back off the ropes.

“As long as I can recall, more than half a century, people have been asking whether the Commonwealth Games were finished,” he said.

“Each time they have come back and staged successful editions, (like) 2022 Birmingham, and 2006 Melbourne.”

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Kolkata cruise to win in Bengaluru despite Kohli's 83

SECOND SUCCESSIVE VICTORY FOR KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS

AFP
Bengaluru

Virat Kohli batted out the innings for Royal Challengers Bengaluru with his second straight Indian Premier League half-century yesterday but Kolkata Knight Riders still cruised to a seven-wicket victory.

Chasing the home side's 182-6, Kolkata reached their target with 19 balls to spare when skipper Shreyas Iyer hit an unruffled six off Mayank Dagar.

Their chase was off to a roaring start with Phil Salt (30) and all-rounder Sunil Narine (47) putting on 86 for the visitors, earning fulsome praise from Bengaluru captain Faf du Plessis.

“I just thought they were excellent,” he said. “Really broke the game in the first six overs.”

Narine hit five sixes in his 22-ball knock before Dagar bowled him in the seventh, with Salt following in the next over when he was caught at deep square leg.

Venkatesh Iyer made 50 to keep up the momentum before he was caught by Kohli while Shreyas saw out the innings with his 39.

“On that pitch it was very tough,” Shreyas said. “It was important to assess the pitch and wait for those loose deliveries,” Iyer said.

Kohli notched up 83 and made his 50 off 36 balls, throwing a thumbs-up to the jubilant home crowd, and his knock made him the leading tournament run-scorer since the season began last week. But a lack of able partners left Bengaluru's innings a one-man show.



Kolkata Knight Riders' Sunil Narine plays a shot during the Indian Premier League Twenty20 match against Royal Challengers Bengaluru at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru yesterday. (AFP)

Right-handed Du Plessis was dismissed after scoring only eight runs at the end of the second over when he scooped a perplexing delivery from Harshit Rana straight into the arms of fast bowler Mitchell Starc.

Cameron Green was the next top-scorer at 33 but was sent back after when he missed a lightning delivery from Andre Russell crashed off his back pad and into the stumps.

Glenn Maxwell survived two easy catches fumbled by Ramandeep Singh and Narine in consecutive overs.

But Narine had his revenge soon afterwards when he sent a bouncer to Maxwell that was powered to deep point and into the arms of Rinku Singh, who kissed the ball in triumph.

Maxwell finished with 28 from 19 balls while Kohli survived a close run out later that over when

a replay showed his sliding dive had put him over the crease in time. Dinesh Karthik made 20 before being run out by Salt on the last ball with Andre Russell pick of the Kolkata bowlers at 2-29.

BRIEF SCORES
Kolkata Knight Riders 186 for 3 (Venkatesh 50, Narine 47) beat **Royal Challengers Bengaluru 182 for 6** (Kohli 83*, Russell 2-29, Rana 2-39) **by 7 wickets**

INTERVIEW

Ahmed unconcerned over prospect of getting home Test debut

AFP
London

Teenage leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed has no intention of putting himself under extra pressure to make a home Test debut after continuing his fledgling England career with a promising return during the recent tour of India.

The now 19-year-old Leicestershire bowler became England's youngest men's Test cricketer in 2022 when he took five wickets on debut against Pakistan in Karachi.

But with England rarely selecting more than one specialist spinner in home conditions, Ahmed had to wait a further 14 months for his next Test series.

He responded in encouraging fashion against a powerful India batting line-up with 11 wickets in three Tests during a 4-1 series loss.

Now the upcoming T20 World Cup in the Caribbean and the United States is starting to come into view, before England play home Test series against the West Indies and Sri Lanka.

Ahmed, however, said yesterday his immediate priority was to bowl well for Leicestershire in the first-class County Championship, which starts next week, rather than adding to his tally of four Test appearances.

“I'm not really fussed about what I'm trying to achieve this

year,” Ahmed said when asked about the prospect of an England debut in the forthcoming season.

“I've tried to do as much as I can within myself. So whether that's me getting my overs in, me getting as many runs as I can, because I love my batting and I've underperformed. I want to bat better,” he said.

“I'll be playing county cricket straight away. Leicester comes first when I'm not playing for England.

“I didn't know if I wanted to play because I wanted a break, but I've had two weeks off and I just want to play again.”

Ahmed was a member of a three-strong spin attack in India alongside fellow fledgling Test bowlers Tom Hartley and Shoaib Bashir, but there are concerns over the number of overs the trio will be able to get through in the opening months of an English season, where conditions generally favour seamers.

“Bowling in matches is something I've lacked a bit,” Ahmed said.

“I've bowled a lot in white-ball, not heaps of overs in red-ball plus it's April, going to be nipping round corners.

“I don't expect to bowl loads of overs because if the seamers are getting wickets, they are getting wickets and the team comes first, but I'll be bowling loads in training.”



England spinner Rehan Ahmed signs autographs for young kids at his county club in Leicestershire. (@leicscucc)

PREVIEW

Bangladesh pin hopes on return of veteran all-rounder Shakib for Test lift



Bangladesh's Shakib Al Hasan plays football during a practice session at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong ahead of second Test against Sri Lanka. (AFP)

AFP
Chittagong, Bangladesh

Bangladesh were counting on the return of veteran all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan for a much-needed energy lift ahead of the second and final Test against Sri Lanka, stand-in coach Nic Pothas said yesterday.

Sri Lanka thrashed Bangladesh by 328 runs in the first match of the series, with the hosts failing to post 200 in either innings.

Shakib is returning to the Test squad for the Chittagong match starting today after more than a year's absence, and after being elected to the Bangladeshi parliament in January.

“I think any team that has Shakib in

it is very fortunate. We welcome him back,” Pothas told reporters.

“It is always great to have him in the change room. His energy is very infectious,” he said.

“He has a lot of experience for the guys to learn from, and whenever Shakib is back, he's a giver.

“So we really enjoy having him around the group.”

Pothas also defended Bangladesh's under-fire batsmen, saying the team was in the middle of a generational change.

“We have a very young and inexperienced group. There was a very elite group before this. Now we have to build,” he said.

“The only thing that we request is that people be patient. These are very good young players, but they are young, and they're playing against an experienced

team, and it will take time.” Sri Lanka captain Dhananjaya de Silva said he expected his side's top order batters to come good in Chittagong after failing to shine in the first Test.

“They had been performing well in the last few matches. I have no doubt that they will definitely perform in this match,” he told reporters.

Sri Lanka were untroubled in Sylhet despite losing Nishan Madushka for two and 10.

De Silva and fellow middle-order batsman Kamindu Mendis scored a century in each innings of the game, becoming only the third pair from the same country to do so in a Test.

Brothers Greg and Ian Chappell of Australia and Pakistan's Misbah-ul-Haq and Azhar Ali were the other two duos to make the feat.

TENNIS

Dimitrov stuns Alcaraz to book Zverev semi date

‘He made me feel like I’m 13 years old. You know, it was crazy’

AFP
Miami

World number two Carlos Alcaraz was knocked out of the Miami Open quarter-finals, beaten 6-2, 6-4 by Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov.

Dimitrov played sparkling and energetic tennis to beat the Spanish top seed and will now face Germany’s Alexander Zverev for a place in the final.

Germany’s Zverev held off rising Hungarian Fabian Marozsan 6-3, 7-5 to book his place in the semis.

Jannik Sinner and Daniil Medvedev will play in the other semi-final - a rematch of the Australian Open final won by Sinner in January.

Alcaraz came into Miami on the back of his title in Indian Wells and with his sights set on the “Sunshine Double”.

But from the outset, Dimitrov, who also beat Alcaraz in the fourth round in Shanghai, showed no fear as he attacked Alcaraz and broke early to take a 3-0 lead.

The Bulgarian pounced on every opportunity, coming to the net frequently and moving Alcaraz around the court.

He looked to be on his way to a comfortable two-set victory after he broke the Spaniard in the fourth game and then held for a 4-1 lead.

But Alcaraz was not about to roll over, breaking back to go 4-3 after smashing a cross-court winner at the end of an entertaining rally.

With the match back on serve, a tie-break seemed inevitable. But with Alcaraz serving to stay in the match, Dimitrov broke him when the Spaniard went wide and Dimitrov’s arms went high in the air in celebration.

“In order to win against him, you have to play at your best. That’s just how it is,” said Dimitrov.



Grigor Dimitrov of Bulgaria celebrates after defeating Carlos Alcaraz of Spain during their match on Day 11 of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

“I came into the match very focused and I think extremely clear on what I had to do. Sometimes simplicity is genius. It’s very, very hard to do it, especially when you play against an opponent like that. But I was able to really dictate the game. Honestly, it was a very, very great match on my end. And I’m just happy I finished it straight sets for once,” he joked.

Alcaraz conceded he just had no answer to Dimitrov’s brilliant performance.

“I have a lot of frustrations right now, because he made me feel like I’m 13 years old. You know, it was crazy,” Alcaraz said.

“I was talking to my team saying that I don’t know what I have to do. I don’t know, you know, his weakness. I don’t know anything. That’s why I have frustration right now.”

Alcaraz said that he thought he had played better than in his loss to the Bulgarian in Shanghai in October.

“In China I made more mistakes, in the first, second ball, than today. I think he played even better today. He played great. I couldn’t find solutions in today’s match. His game was perfect,” he said.

World number five Zverev knew he had to be wary of Marozsan, ranked 57th but heading into the top 40 having claimed two top-10 victories in this tournament beating Holger Rune and Alex de Minaur.

But the Hungarian struggled to cope with Zverev’s big serve in the opening set and couldn’t find his rhythm.

There was little to choose between the pair in the second set, with the Hungarian keeping the pressure on Zverev.

But Marozsan missed some crucial points late in the set when going to the net and in the end was broken in his final service game.

Zverev was delighted to have

the chance to return to the final. “I mean, I love Miami, I always said that, obviously I’m happy to be back at these kind of late stages of these tournaments, playing the best players in the world. I think there’s only those left and I’m looking forward to the challenge,” he said.

The German was full of praise for his opponent, predicting he will continue to climb higher in the rankings.

“If he continues playing like that, he’s going to rise up the rankings very quickly and he’s going to be one of those guys himself,” he said.

“He always rushes us good players. All the top players, when they’re in control, they feel like they can manage the match, manipulate the match a little bit in their own favour and against him that’s not possible.

“So I think that’s why he has such a great top-10 record. He’s an unbelievable player.”

RYBAKINA SURVIVES AZARENKA TEST TO REACH MIAMI OPEN FINAL



Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan waves to the fans after her match against Victoria Azarenka on day 11 of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (USA TODAY Sports)

Miami: Fourth seed Elena Rybakina overcame a second-set meltdown to beat Belarusian Victoria Azarenka 6-4 0-6 7-6(2) on Thursday and secure a return trip to the Miami Open final. In today’s title clash, Rybakina will face off against American Danielle Collins, who beat Russian 14th seed Ekaterina Alexandrova 6-3 6-2 in the other semi-final. Rybakina, the highest seed remaining in the women’s draw, won nearly 82% of her first-serve points but converted only two of her 11 break-point chances en route to securing victory in two hours 33 minutes.

“It was such a tough battle,” Rybakina, a Moscow-born Kazakh, said during her on-court interview after reaching her fourth final of the year.

“I didn’t serve that well and also Vika, from the second set, she was hitting the serve very well. It was difficult but I knew was going to fight until the end and actually that’s what I did.”

In the opening set, Rybakina squandered her first five break-point chances before solving Azarenka’s serve to grab a 4-3 lead and she leaned on her astonishing power before closing out the 51-minute set with a hold to love.

Azarenka refused to go quietly, however, conjuring up a flawless display in the second set in which she limited Rybakina to five points and broke her serve three times to force a decider.

Rybakina, after a change of outfits, opened the third set moving much better and broke at the fifth

attempt in the fifth game to move 3-2 up when Azarenka splashed a backhand into the net.

Rybakina crumbled in her first chance to serve out the match, however, as Azarenka got a break to get to 5-5 after she chased down a drop shot before her opponent sent a backhand volley into the net.

Rybakina, serving to stay in the match, held to love to force a tiebreak and she won the first three points of it before closing out the win.

The 24-year-old, who is seeking her third title this year after wins in Brisbane and Abu Dhabi, will fancy her chances against Collins in the final, having beaten the American in their last three meetings.

Collins marched into her maiden final in Miami with a clinical display against Alexandrova, firing off 21 winners to wrap up the match in just over an hour.

“This feels like a really big accomplishment,” Collins said. “I think all of us want to make finals of 1000-level tournaments. These are our biggest tournaments of the year, aside from the Grand Slams. This is just so special. I can’t stress it enough about being in my home state and having my dog here, friends, family. It’s really special.”

“It’s special to do this in my home state,” said Collins, who will now bid for the third WTA title of her career ahead of her retirement at the end of the season.

“I’ve had a lot of tough battles with Rybakina, but I did get a win on her in San Jose a while ago. I’ll have to do my homework on her.”

ANNOUNCEMENT

Murray pulls out of Monte Carlo, Munich due to ankle injury

Reuters
London

Andy Murray will miss the Monte Carlo Masters and Munich Open next month as he recovers from a severe ankle injury sustained during his exit from the Miami Open, the Briton’s team announced yesterday.

The 36-year-old rolled his ankle in the deciding set of his 5-7 7-5 7-6(5) defeat by Czech Tomas Machac in southern Florida last Sunday and had said that he would be out for an “extended period” on the sidelines with ruptured

ligaments. “Following consultation with his team and medical experts, Andy Murray has taken the decision to miss the Rolex Monte Carlo Masters and BMW Open Munich,” a statement from his team read yesterday.

“At this stage, it is still not clear how long Andy will be out of action, and he is continuing to review options with his medical team.

“Obviously this is disappointing news for Andy and he has reiterated his desire to get back on court as soon as possible.”

Former world number one and three-times Grand Slam champion Murray, who returned after hip resurfacing surgery in 2019,

had previously said he did not plan to “play much past this summer” but hoped to compete at another Olympics.

He had also said he hoped to play at the French Open, which starts at Roland Garros on May 26.

Wimbledon, where Murray has twice been champion, will begin on July 1 and the Paris Games get underway later that month. He is a two-time Olympic Games gold winner. The Monte Carlo Masters will be held April 7-14, and the Munich Open April 15-21.

Who knows who’s next, says Djokovic in new coach search
Novak Djokovic said yesterday he

was unsure who would be his new coach or even if there would be one, a day after ending a five-year association with former Wimbledon winner Goran Ivanisevic.

Djokovic brought Croatia’s 2001 Wimbledon champion on board as a member of his team ahead of the grass court Grand Slam in 2019 and under his guidance won 12 of his 24 career major titles.

“Concerning my following stage about a coach for me I don’t have any clear idea who that might be and if anyone will be,” Djokovic said at a press conference in Belgrade.

“I have always had coaches by my side, since I was young.

“I am trying to feel what is good for me in this moment,” Djokovic said.

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

The 36-year-old then lost to Sinner’s unheralded compatriot Luca Nardi in the third round at Indian Wells, prompting him to withdraw from the ongoing Miami Open.

He is due to return to the tour at the Monte Carlo Masters next month in the build-up to the season’s second Grand Slam of the year at the French Open.



GOLF



Scottie Scheffler of the US hits a chip shot on the first green at the Texas Children’s Houston Open golf tournament. (USA TODAY Sports)

Scheffler is one off lead of Moore, Furr in Houston

AFP
Los Angeles

World number one Scottie Scheffler started limbering up for the Masters with a bogey-free five-under-par 65 that put him one off the first-round lead shared by Taylor Moore and Wilson Furr at the Houston Open on Thursday.

Moore shook off an opening bogey with an eagle and five birdies in his six-under-par 64 at Memorial Park Golf Course.

He was joined atop the board by 276th-ranked Furr, who played his last five holes in four-under with an eagle at the fifth and birdies at the eighth and ninth to close his round.

Scheffler, trying to become the first player since Dustin Johnson in 2017 to win three consecutive PGA Tour starts, had set the pace for much of the day as he shook off “a little rust” from his week off last week.

Scheffler missed the green at his first three holes but got up and down for par at each before rolling in a 12-foot birdie putt at the 13th.

He added birdies at the 17th, second, third

and fifth holes, and while he hit just 11 of 18 greens in regulation he needed just 25 putts.

“I had a solid round,” Scheffler said. “Bogey-free is always nice, especially around a golf course like this. It’s nice to be able to keep the card clean.” It Scheffler’s 28th consecutive round under par to start the year, the most on record since 1983 according to the PGA Tour.

Perhaps more importantly Scheffler, who needed treatment on his neck on his way to victory at the Players Championship, said he was feeling good in his final tune-up for the Masters.

Scheffler’s win at TPC Sawgrass followed a five-stroke triumph at Bay Hill - his first victory in nearly a year. He’s rounding into form with the first major of the year approaching in two weeks at Augusta National, where Scheffler won in 2022. Scheffler was tied for third with fellow Americans Davis Riley and Joe Highsmith. Riley had six birdies and an eagle to overcome a bogey and a double-bogey while Highsmith had six birdies and a bogey.

Moore, who came up short in his title defence at the Valspar Championship last week, shook off an opening bogey with a chip-in eagle at the third.

PAJAREE ANANNARUKARN JUMPS IN FRONT AT FORD CHAMPIONSHIP

A string of five consecutive birdies led Thailand’s Pajaree Anannarukarn to the first-round lead at the inaugural Ford Championship on Thursday in Gilbert, Arizona.

Anannarukarn shot a 9-under-par 63 at Seville Golf and Country Club, leaving her with a one-stroke advantage.

American Lilia Vu, Germany’s Isi Gabsa, Australian Gabriela Ruffels and Spaniards Azahara Munoz and Carlota Ciganda share second place at 8 under.

South Korea’s Kyo Joo Kim and France’s Céline Boutier are tied for seventh at 7 under.

Eleven players, including world No 1 Nelly Korda, are at 6 under, tied for ninth.

Anannarukarn began on the back nine and was enjoying an impressive round through 13 holes: four birdies and nine pars. Then she closed with birdies at No 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 to conclude her day.

“It was a great day out there,” she said. “I actually was in the zone. I didn’t realise that I holed my fifth birdie in a row on the ninth green, but it was a great day,” she said.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arteta puts friendship with Guardiola aside for title race

Two sides face off tomorrow with just one point separating third-placed City from leaders Arsenal

AFP
London

Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta said his relationship with Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola “had to change” with the two clubs battling for the Premier League title.

The two sides face off at the Etihad tomorrow with just one point separating third-placed City from leaders Arsenal. Arteta served as Guardiola’s assistant for three-and-a-half years at City before taking his first managerial job at the Emirates in 2019.

Under Arteta, Arsenal have risen back into contention for major honours, but have still not won the Premier League since 2004. “It had to change,” said Arteta at his pre-match press conference on how his relationship with Guardiola has evolved.

“My admiration and what I feel for him certainly hasn’t. In my opinion he’s the best coach in the world by a mile and he’s one of the nicest people that I’ve met in football. Certainly he’s one of the ones that I’ve had the most fun and laughter working with. That’s going to stay there forever. At the moment the rules are what they are and you’re going to have to adapt to it.”

In contrast to Arsenal’s lack of success over the past two decades, City are aiming to rewrite the record books once more under Guardiola by becoming the first side to ever win four consecutive English top-flight titles. City have won the Premier League in five of the last six years and remain on course to repeat the treble they won last season.

“They have raised the bar in this league and football in general to levels that haven’t been seen before,” added Arteta. “That’s the beauty of this sport because it makes you better and challenges you more. You have to keep up with that pace and that’s what we’re trying to do. It’s a mas-



Mike Arteta (left) served as Pep Guardiola’s assistant for three-and-a-half years at Manchester City before taking his first managerial job at Arsenal in 2019. (AFP)

sive game for both teams. It will give us a huge boost again if we go there and win it.”

City will be without the key defensive duo of John Stones and Kyle Walker after they picked up injuries on international duty with England. Arsenal’s Bukayo Saka, Gabriel Martinelli and Gabriel Magalhaes all pulled out of their international call-ups but Arteta is hoping all three will be fit

to feature tomorrow. “There is a chance,” said Arteta. “They haven’t trained but tomorrow we have another session so there is a chance that they can be available.”

Walker and Stones were injured on international duty with England. Walker was replaced early during a 1-0 defeat to Brazil with a hamstring problem, while Stones limped off in Tuesday’s 2-2 draw with

Belgium due to an adductor issue. The absence of the key defensive duo is also a worry for City with the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final away to Real Madrid on April 9. “Kyle’s (injury) is more tough than John’s but they will be out - I don’t know for how many games,” said Guardiola yesterday.

However, there was more positive news

for Guardiola as Ederson, Manuel Akanji, Jack Grealish and Kevin De Bruyne all look set to return from injury. De Bruyne, who sat out City’s 2-0 FA Cup quarter-final win over Newcastle before the international break, has suffered an injury-plagued season after missing the first five months of the campaign with a hamstring tear.

However, the 32-year-old has provided 12 assists and scored twice in 12 appearances for City this season when fit. “Kevin is so important,” added Guardiola. “It has been a tough season for him with injuries. He has been out for a long time but he trained really well yesterday. We will see what he does in the next days.”

De Bruyne scored twice in City’s 4-1 win over Arsenal at the Etihad last season that proved a telling blow to the Gunners’ title aspirations. Guardiola’s men also remain on course to repeat their treble triumph of last season. The winners of City’s Champions League tie against Madrid will play either Arsenal or Bayern Munich in the last four. City also face Chelsea in the FA Cup semi-finals next month.

“This season has been really good,” said Guardiola. “To be in contention for the three important titles now, we’ve done incredible work. Now it’s the last 10 games of Premier League, we start an important time. We play the leaders of the Premier League and I’m sure the people (City’s fans) will give us what we need to perform at our best.”

FIXTURES

Today (1500 GMT unless stated):
Newcastle v West Ham (1230), Bournemouth v Everton, Chelsea v Burnley, Nottingham Forest v Crystal Palace, Sheffield United v Fulham, Tottenham v Luton, Aston Villa v Wolves (1730), Brentford v Manchester United (2000)
Sunday: Liverpool v Brighton (1300), Manchester City v Arsenal (1530)

SPOTLIGHT

Alonso says staying as Leverkusen coach

AFP
Munich

Xabi Alonso, who was seen by many as Liverpool’s top target to replace Jurgen Klopp as their manager, said yesterday he is staying at Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen next season. The 42-year-old Spaniard has Leverkusen on course for a trophy treble, including their first ever German league crown.

“It’s been a season of speculation regarding my future,” Alonso told a press conference. “Up till now we have been busy and focused on the season and I wanted to reflect during the international break and take a decision. Last week I had a meeting when I informed (Leverkusen’s directors) of my decision to continue being coach of Bayer Leverkusen.”

Alonso said he was still developing as a coach and he felt Leverkusen, his first senior team coaching post, is the best place for him to continue growing. “At the moment this is the right place for me to develop as a coach, I am a young coach,” he said. “Right now this is the right place. I have to thank the management. The club had been supportive and I feel respected by all departments.”

Alonso has a contract until 2026 but had been linked with moves to Liverpool, Real Madrid and Bayern Munich, all clubs where he spent time as a player, having done a stunning job at runaway Bundesliga leaders Leverkusen.

Leverkusen are unbeaten this term with 34 victories and four draws and are 10 points clear of Bayern Munich and on track for their first ever Bundesliga title with eight games remaining this season. The former Spain midfielder, who was a member of the side that won the Euro in 2008 and 2012 as well as the 2010 World Cup, is aiming to complete a treble.

Aside from topping the table they are in the final four of the German Cup and the quarter-finals of the Europa League and could poten-



tially meet Liverpool in the final. Alonso’s coaching experience was limited to the Real Sociedad B team when he was appointed Leverkusen coach in October 2022, but he showed he had natural talent as a coach as he saved them from relegation.

With Alonso out of the race to replace Klopp the frontrunners are believed to be Sporting Lisbon head coach Ruben Amorim and Brighton’s Italian manager Roberto De Zerbi.

De Zerbi can further impress his potential employers on Sunday as he takes his side to Liverpool and is yet to come off second best against Klopp in four meetings. Speaking in Liverpool after Alonso had made his announcement, Klopp said he understood his decision.

“He is doing an incredible job there. Leverkusen has a good team and they will probably keep the team together,” Klopp said. “That’s a possibility and not all years it is like that. So I understand that he wants to do that.”

Klopp shocked the football world when he announced in January he would be standing down from the Liverpool job after a hugely

successful nine-year stay. In 2020 he delivered their first league title since 1990, a year after landing the 2019 Champions League.

Alonso preferred not to comment directly about the Liverpool vacancy or indeed Bayern Munich, who were hoping to attract him to replace Thomas Tuchel, who is leaving at the end of the season. Tuchel’s departure is a consequence of Alonso’s success – should Leverkusen hold their nerve and lift the Bundesliga trophy it will bring to an end Bayern’s run of 11 successive league crowns.

“I think it wouldn’t be correct of me to talk about other clubs when they are in this situation,” said Alonso, who remains a devoted Liverpool fan and encouraged his son to be one as well. “For sure there are clubs I have a strong link, I play there. So I respect them. But it’s not correct for me to talk about them right now. It’s more that the conviction I am in the right place at Bayer Leverkusen and I want to keep growing with the club, growing with the players. I am at this stage in my young career. I had to feel the decision was in a natural way and that’s why I have taken it.”

BUNDESLIGA

Bayern boosted by Kane, Coman return against Dortmund

Munich
Reuters

Bayern Munich have been handed a timely boost with the return of forwards Harry Kane and Kingsley Coman for their Bundesliga clash against rivals Borussia Dortmund, but goalkeeper Manuel Neuer remains sidelined with injury, manager Thomas Tuchel said.

England captain Kane missed his country’s friendly matches against Brazil and Belgium after sustaining an ankle injury during Bayern’s 5-2 win at Darmstadt, while Frenchman Coman has been out for two months with a ligament tear in his left knee.

Bayern captain Neuer, meanwhile, picked up a muscle strain in his left adductor while training with the German national team last week and has been ruled out of the game.

Reigning champions Bayern, 10 points adrift of Bundesliga leaders Bayer Leverkusen, host fourth-placed Dortmund today before visiting Heidenheim on April 6. They travel to Arsenal in the Champions League quarter-final first leg on April 9.

“Harry trained fully with the team yesterday, has stepped things up each day. It’s all fine, he’ll play,” Tuchel told reporters yesterday. “King (Coman) is a huge factor for us and will be back in the match-day squad. Serge Gnabry is also back. Both are hugely important for us. Our options up front are getting bigger and the competition for places should hopefully improve quality. Neuer is out. Aleks Pavlovic is unfortunately not available. Raphael Guerreiro also isn’t back yet. And Sacha Boey got injured during the week. Those four are out.”

Tuchel was hopeful Neuer would return against Heidenheim. “It’s nothing to do with risk. The pain is simply too great. We hope a week is enough and he’ll be in goal against Heidenheim,” the German said.

Tuchel, who managed Dortmund from 2015-2017, said he expects a tough contest between Bayern and his former side. “It’s an emotional game, an important game in the Bundesliga with a big



rivalry and history,” he said. “I’m expecting an opponent that wants to win. Dortmund are very good in attack, very flexible up front. They want to have the ball. It’ll be an open game. There’s a good mood and atmosphere. We were very good in attack in recent games. We want to win.”

Dortmund have suffered a blow with Dutch forward Donnyell Malen out of the clash after picking up a thigh injury during international duty, the club said. Goalkeeper Gregor Kobel will also miss the trip to Munich due to illness. Sebastian Haller is fit after recovering from an ankle injury, Dortmund added.

FIXTURES (1430 GMT UNLESS STATED)

Saturday: Borussia Moenchengladbach v Freiburg, Eintracht Frankfurt v Union Berlin, Bayer Leverkusen v Hoffenheim, Werder Bremen v Wolfsburg, RB Leipzig v Mainz, Bayern Munich v Borussia Dortmund (1730)
Sunday: Augsburg v Cologne, Stuttgart v Heidenheim (1630), Bochum v Darmstadt (1830)

Barca starlets Yamal, Cubarsi ‘can define era of world football’: Xavi

Barcelona: Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez said teenage stars Lamine Yamal and Pau Cubarsi could go on to ‘define an era’ of world football. Yamal dazzled against Brazil in a friendly for Spain on Tuesday while Cubarsi made his debut for La Roja last week against Colombia and also featured against the five-time World Cup winners.

Both have become key pillars in a revived Barcelona side back in the Champions League quarter-finals for the first time in four years and still holding some faint hopes of defending their La Liga title.

Yamal, 16, is Spain’s youngest ever player and goalscorer, with 17-year-old Cubarsi the youngest ever defender to play for his country. “They have to maintain their level - Barca is the highest rung of world football,” Xavi told a news conference ahead of today’s clash with Las Palmas in La Liga. “Many have arrived (at

elite level), but maintaining it is very difficult, but they can, they have everything, the mentality, the capacity. I think we’re looking at two players who can define an era at the club, and even in world football.”

Xavi said winger Yamal was ‘very calm’ and mature for his age, despite exploding into the limelight. “On a mental level I see him as a happy kid, a joker, he’s enjoying it more and more, I see he is happy,” added Xavi.

Barcelona, second, are eight points behind leaders Real Madrid in the top flight, but can cut the gap to five before Los Blancos face Athletic Bilbao tomorrow.

MILAN’S PIOLI EXPECTS EMOTIONAL NIGHT AGAINST FIORENTINA

AC Milan take on Fiorentina in Serie A this weekend and they expect a special night in Florence as home fans will be paying tribute to

their club’s recently deceased GM Joe Barone, manager Stefano Pioli said.

Today’s fixture will be Fiorentina’s first game since Barone died on March 19. The Stadio Franchi is soldout, emotions will run high, and it is a situation Pioli has already experienced.

Pioli was Fiorentina manager in 2018 when their captain Davide Astori died, and the Milan boss knows all too well what to expect in Florence.

“Unfortunately, this is not the first situation of this kind that has happened to Fiorentina,” Pioli told a press conference. “Florence and the Viola fans are fantastic when it comes to uniting and coming together to overcome these moments, when these bereavements hit, they become one big family. A special environment awaits us at the beginning for Joe Barone who did so much for Fiorentina, but then there will be a game to play.”