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SPOTLIGHT

Goal machine Ali continues to shine for Qatar

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar are absolutely flying in Asian qualifying for FIFA World Cup 2026, thanks in no part to forward Almoez Ali. The 27-year-old has racked up a qualification high seven goals in just four games – including a four-goal haul against Afghanistan – which has seen the Maroons soar into the second round of qualifying in double-quick time.

Ali's natural position is at the focal point of the attack for both Qatar and club side Al Duhail, though his supreme speed and dribbling ability mean he is more than capable of playing out wide when needed. His excellent movement and physicality also help him stand out, but his key attribute is his cold-blooded nature in front of goal.

Since the start of 2023, he has netted 12 times for the national side, helping them to a second consecutive AFC Asian Cup title as well as a third round berth in World Cup qualifying.

Ali's breakthrough as one of his continent's finest came at the previous edition of the Asian Cup. There, he played a pivotal role in Qatar's maiden Asian title with nine goals, breaking the single-tournament record of eight set by Ali Daei in 1996.

Four years later, with Qatar hosting the 2023 edition, all eyes were on Ali, who needed just five goals to break Daei's tournament record of 14. He got off to a great



Since the start of 2023, forward Almoez Ali has netted 12 times for the national side.

start with a goal in the host's 3-0 win over Lebanon in the opening match, but he failed to find the target in the following four games, as team-mate Akram Afif assumed goalscoring responsibilities.

Ali would, however, pop up with an

82nd-minute winner in their semi-final against Iran, setting up a showpiece bout against Jordan. After the semi-final, he admitted that the pressure of living up to the fans' expectations at the tournament had weighed heavily on him.

He said: "I've been under a lot of pressure because I scored nine goals at the last tournament, but repeating that was never going to be easy."

Qatar would repeat their victory of 2019, though, as an Afif-inspired side defeated

Jordan 3-1 to become the first nation to maintain the title since Japan in 2004.

Ali's scoring heroics, which have seen him find the net more than 50 times for his country already, have stretched further than his home continent. After winning the Asian Cup in 2019, Qatar were invited to compete in the Copa America, where Ali netted in a draw with Uruguay as his side reached the semi-finals.

Two years later, Ali and his team-mates were packing their bags again, this time heading to the USA to compete in the Concacaf Gold Cup.

Qatar would once again make it to the semi-finals, before losing 1-0 to the hosts. Ali proved his brilliance once more, netting four goals to become the first player to score at three different continental competitions (the Asian Cup, Copa America and Gold Cup).

Ali's performances have caught eyes aplenty over the last five years, including those of legendary coach Jose Mourinho. After Qatar beat Saudi Arabia in the 2019 Asian Cup, the Portuguese said: "I wasn't surprised by his ability. I've watched his last two games, and he's such a fluid, fast player with an eye for goal. He's exciting to watch."

The next step for Ali to prove his goalscoring brilliance on the world stage. While he failed to find the net during Qatar's home World Cup in 2022, Ali's form since makes it hard to bet against him breaking his duck if The Maroons make it to back-to-back global finals.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Tottenham, Villa win in top 4 chase

Chelsea twice blew a lead to 10-man Burnley in a 2-2 draw

AFP
London

Son Heung-min's late winner fired Tottenham to a 2-1 win over Luton but Aston Villa beat Wolves 2-0 to retake fourth place in the Premier League from Spurs yesterday. Chelsea remain in the bottom half of the table after they twice blew a lead at home to 10-man Burnley in a 2-2 draw.

Spurs have now come from behind to win in four of their last five home games and needed another second-half turnaround to keep their challenge for a return to the Champions League next season on track. Tahith Chong's strike after just three minutes gave Luton a shock lead, but the Hatters ended the day in the relegation zone as their winless run extended to 10 games.

An Ange Postecoglou half-time substitution again made an impact for Tottenham as Brennan Johnson's cross was turned into his own net by Issa Kabore just six minutes after the Welsh international's introduction. Son had missed a number of chances earlier in the game but finally got some fortune when his deflected effort trickled past Thomas Kaminski for his 15th goal of the season.

"Until the end I was getting frustrated but I wanted to stay calm as captain," said Son. "We don't want it to always end like this, it could be nicer when we have it (won) earlier."

Tottenham's victory briefly took them into fourth, but Villa responded as goals from Moussa Diaby and Ezri Konsa gave them the bragging rights from a Midlands derby.

Chelsea boss Mauricio Pochettino was met with another backlash at Stamford Bridge after his side failed to make the most of an extra man for the entire second half against second-bottom Burnley. The Blues appeared on course to cruise to victory after Lorenz Assignin was harshly sent-off for pulling down Mykhailo Mudryk inside the area.

Burnley boss Vincent Kompany was also shown a red card for taking his protests too far. Cole Palmer coolly chipped in the resulting penalty, but the 10 men levelled two minutes into the second half thanks to Josh Cullen's super finish from outside the box.

Raheem Sterling had been booted off in Chelsea's FA Cup quarter-final win over Leicester a fortnight ago but thought he had set up the winner in style with a flick that Palmer stroked



Tottenham Hotspur's Son Heung-min celebrates after scoring against Luton during the Premier League match in London. (Reuters)

into the far corner. Chelsea, though, failed to hold out again as Dara O'Shea headed in a corner nine minutes from time.

"Today we didn't show the capacity, the energy, the hunger that is the minimum to compete in the Premier League," said Pochettino. "In the defensive phase we conceded too much. That is why I am so upset and disappointed."

Newcastle closed to within one point of West Ham in seventh after a remarkable fightback to win 4-3 at St James' Park. Goals from Michail Antonio, Mohammed Kudus and Jarrod Bowen wiped out the advantage given to Newcastle by Aleksander Isak's early penalty. However, a second Isak spot-kick 13 minutes from time sparked the turnaround before substitute Harvey Barnes struck twice to send Eddie Howe scurrying down the touchline in celebration. "A

lot of emotions in that game, we were swinging all over the place," said Howe. "The last 10 minutes was amazing to be part of."

Everton's winless run stretched to 12 Premier League games after a 2-1 defeat at Bournemouth to leave the Toffees still perilously placed just three points above the relegation zone. Nottingham Forest edged out of the bottom three on goal difference as Chris Wood salvaged a 1-1 draw against Crystal Palace.

Bottom-of-the-table Sheffield United were denied just their fourth win of the season after conceding twice late on to draw 3-3 with Fulham. All of the three title challengers are in action today. Liverpool have the chance to go top when they host Brighton before Manchester City and Arsenal kick-off at the Etihad in a clash of huge significance in the title race.

EXPOSTARS LEAGUE

Alaaeldin strike helps Gharafa go level with Sadd



Al Gharafa's Ahmed Alaaeldin (right) celebrates with Yacine Brahimi after scoring against Al Arabi yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa went level with leaders Al Sadd in the Expo Stars League after Ahmed Alaaeldin's strike helped them beat Al Arabi 1-0 yesterday.

The Qatari striker struck in the 48th minute at the Al Thumama Stadium, which took Gharafa to 40 points, the same as Al Sadd – who are in action today against bottom-placed Al Markhiya. Arabi – were reduced to 10 men after Simo Keddari in the 75th minute – are fifth in the table.

In the other match last night, Al Wakrah are three points of the lead after a 5-1 rout of Qatar SC in the Expo Stars League yesterday. Yohan Boli had given Qatar SC lead in the 26th minute but Wakrah hit back in the second half in style. Ayoub Assal netted an equaliser

in the 52nd minute before a brace each from Gelson Dala (68th and 71st minute) and Mohamed Benyettou (77th and 88th minute) sealed an impressive win for Wakrah. Qatar are languishing 10th, two points off relegation zone.

Meanwhile, Al Rayyan and Al Duhail will be up against each other today at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. Duhail had achieved victory in the last round by defeating Al Shamal 3-1 after a series of disappointing results in the previous rounds, which led to a recent state of loss of confidence for some players.

On the other hand, Al Rayyan did not achieve victory in their last two matches as they drew 2-2 with Umm Salal. They also suffered a 0-3 loss to Al Gharafa.

Al Rayyan occupy fourth place in the standings with 32 points, while defending champion Al Duhail are in sixth place with 22 points.

CRICKET

Top-order blitz takes Sri Lanka to 314-4 on first day

'DROPPING CATCHES IS SOMETHING THAT'S GOING TO COST US'

AFP
Chittagong, Bangladesh

A top-order batting blitz took Sri Lanka to 314-4 and left the tourists firmly in command on the opening day of the second and final Test against Bangladesh yesterday.

Kusal Mendis top-scored with 93 in Chittagong, while openers Dimuth Karunaratne (86) and Nishan Madushka (57) also helped power the innings.

"Of course we are happy," Karunaratne said.

"That's a good score for day one. If we can put on a good total next day, we are in a commanding position," he added.

Dinesh Chandimal was batting on 34 alongside skipper Dhananjaya de Silva on 15 at stumps.

Bangladesh struggled to make an impact after being asked to bowl, with Sri Lanka batting through the morning session without losing a wicket.

Madushka was run out attempting a double shortly after lunch but Karunaratne and Mendis drove the tourists forward with a 114-run stand.

Debutant Hasan Mahmud sent back Karunaratne, who chopped a delivery into the stumps before the tea break.

Karunaratne struck eight fours and a six in his 129-ball innings, surviving a run-out scare on 18 after a mix-up with Madushka while taking a single off Hasan.

He said the wicket in Chittagong had been flat in previous years.

"But this year you see there are



Sri Lanka's Kusal Mendis plays a shot during the first day of the second Test against Bangladesh at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong yesterday. (AFP)

some turn and seam with the new ball as well," Karunaratne said.

"There are some advantages for the bowlers as well. So I think

it might turn later on, day three, four, five, maybe."

Shakib Al Hasan denied Mendis his 10th Test century, forcing an

edge to Mehidy Hasan at second slip.

Hasan picked up his second wicket when Mehidy caught Angelo Mathews (23) from the same spot in the first over after the second new ball.

Chandimal struck two sixes to move past his early shakiness before helping Sri Lanka pass the 300-run mark with a four off Hasan.

"We created chances in the morning, didn't capitalise on that," Bangladesh bowling coach Andre Adams said.

"It's the same story as the first Test match. Dropping catches is something that's going to cost us."

Sri Lanka lead the two-match series 1-0 after winning the opening Test by a resounding 328 runs.

Veteran all-rounder Shakib returned for Bangladesh after a long Test absence.

Sri Lanka brought Asitha Fernando in for injured Kasun Rajitha in their only change to the squad from the opening Test.

SCOREBOARD

Sri Lanka first innings
N. Madushka *run out* 57
D. Karunaratne *b Hasan* 86
K. Mendis *c Mehidy b Shakib* 93
A. Mathews *c Mehidy b Hasan* 23
D. Chandimal *not out* 34
D. de Silva *not out* 15

Extras (b4, lb2) 6

Total (four wickets; 90 overs) 314

Fall of wickets: 1-96 (Madushka), 2-210 (Karunaratne), 3-263 (Kusal), 4-289 (Mathews)

Bowling: Khaled 10-1-41-0, Hasan 17-5-64-2, Shakib 18-2-60-1, Mehidy 28-4-95-0, Taijul 17-4-48-0.

CYCLING

Van der Poel 'under pressure' to win third Tour of Flanders

AFP
Paris

Around 750,000 fans will pack the cobbled hills and lanes of the Flemish Ardennes today where **Mathieu van der Poel** has been presented with an open invitation to win cycling's Tour of Flanders for a third time with three key rivals missing.

A mass fall in midweek took out the great Belgian hopes Wout Van Aert and Jasper Stuyven, while champion Tadej Pogacar opted for altitude training ahead of the Giro d'Italia in May. That leaves Van der Poel embarking on this epic 270km struggle over 17 hills and 18 cobbled sections as the overwhelming odds-on favourite.

The race is the second and most sacred of cycling's so-called 'Monuments'. First staged in 1913, it was designed to reflect the stoicism of the Flemish. The winner is often a tough, tactically-minded rider ready to give every last drop for victory.

Van der Poel, the 2020 and 2022 Flanders champion and twice runner-up was far from optimistic after the midweek crash at the similarly named Around Flanders race.

"This puts more pressure on my shoulders, and I prefer it when the best riders are racing," said the 29-year-old. "They had been preparing for months, nobody likes to see that."

Visma, cycling's most powerful team, will align the American Paris-Nice winner Matteo Jorgenson, chaperoned by Dylan Van Baarle.

After the 114km mark, there is a cobbled hill every 8km or so, constantly whittling down the field from 25 teams of seven.

Two-time Tour de France winner Pogacar said after last year's win he could retire happy after soloing home after a series of devastating attacks.

"My season is already a suc-

cess," he beamed. "I could still retire after this win and be super proud and happy even if I don't win the Tour this year."

Team UAE ace Pogacar opted not to defend his title to target an elusive Giro-Tour double last achieved by the late Marco Pantini in 1998.

Van der Poel warmed up for today's test finishing second to Mads Pedersen in last week's Gent-Wevelgem.

Pedersen was also caught in the midweek fall, but should be at the start line Sunday. He is holding up until the last minute in the team hotel. He and Van der Poel are the men to beat in the lush green Flemish plains with low-hanging grey skies and claustrophobic crowds.

Six riders have managed to crack Flanders three times - Belgians Achiel Buysse, Eric Leeman, Johan Museeuw and Tom Boonen, Italian Fiorenzo Magni and Swiss Fabian Cancellara.

Van der Poel has his eyes set on joining this elite band and there will be quite a party if he does. There are five ultra-long one-day bike races known as the Monuments, and the Tour of Flanders is considered the greatest because of the constant steep, narrow climbs coupled with crowds that even a 100 years ago began to tip over half a million.

The other four Monuments are Milan-San Remo, which calls for patience, the mudfest of Paris-Roubaix with its perilous rough-hewn cobbles, Liege-Bastogne-Liege through the winding forested lanes of the Ardennes, and the Tour of Lombardy which is a climbers' classic.

Shuttle buses and extra trains have been laid on throughout Flanders for what is regarded by many as an unofficial world championship.

Each hillside in the latter part of the race is turned into a giant makeshift party pub, with food caravans before an after-party that goes on into the night.



CRAWLEY CALLS FOR REFINEMENT TO 'BAZBALL' AFTER INDIA DEFEAT

England need to remain positive and make some adjustments to their aggressive style of play in test cricket following their 4-1 series defeat in India this month, opener Zak Crawley said. India won the series despite losing the first Test, with their dominance in the series subjecting the visitors' much-hyped "Bazball" approach to significant scrutiny. Former England captains including Nasser Hussain and Michael Atherton urged the team

to temper their strategy laid out for the side by skipper Ben Stokes and head coach Brendon 'Baz' McCullum. Asked about England's approach, Crawley, who scored 407 runs in the series, told reporters: "It just needs a bit of refinement. We always talk about absorbing pressure and putting pressure back on. The last couple of years we've done the putting 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 just pick those moments where they're on top. We need to make sure we stay positive and don't let a tough result get in the way of what we've done really well over the last couple of years." England next return to test action in July against the West Indies, after this year's T20 World Cup.

SPOTLIGHT

Yadav turns 'story of the night' in Lucknow's first IPL 2024 win

AFP
Lucknow

IPL debutant Mayank Yadav turned an unlikely hero with his express pace and three wickets to help Lucknow Super Giants to their first season win yesterday.

Lucknow beat Punjab Kings by 21 runs at their home ground after they posted 199-8 following Quinton de Kock's fifty and a quick-fire 42 by stand-in skipper Nicholas Pooran. In reply, Punjab finished on 178-5 despite a 102-run opening stand between skipper Shikhar Dhawan (70) and Jonny Bairstow (42). Yadav, who sent down this season's fastest delivery of 156km/h, broke the stand with his maiden wicket of Bairstow and returned figures of 3-27 to swing back the momentum in Lucknow's favour.

"Mayank's was the story of the night," said Pooran of his man-of-the-match performer.

"It was an inspiring performance. Every person in the team is happy he got a chance and performed tonight. Was wonderful watching him from mid-off."

Delhi-born Yadav went to Lucknow for \$24,000 last year but failed to turn up after an injury cost him the entire 2023 season. Yadav came back from a 10-run first over to get Bairstow out with a short ball after the batsman miscued it to deep mid-wicket.

The 21-year-old got two more wickets to flatten the opposition chase. "Plan was to not be under too much pressure and to bowl at the stumps and use the pace as much as possible," said Yadav. "There was the thought to mix up the pace initially but the wicket helped and the skipper told me to bowl gas." He said Bairstow's debut wicket was his "favourite".

Fellow quick Mohsin Khan took two wickets including Dhawan and Sam Curran, out for a duck, on successive balls as Punjab fell to their second straight loss after an opening win.

The batters set up victory with De Kock's fifty and a rapid 42 by Pooran helping Lucknow to 199-8.

West Indies star Pooran smashed three fours and three sixes in his 21-ball blitz after regular skipper KL Rahul opted to play only as an opener at his home



Lucknow Super Giants' Mayank Yadav bowls during the IPL match against Punjab Kings at the Ekana Cricket Stadium in Lucknow yesterday. (AFP)

ground. De Kock hit 54 to lay the foundations for Lucknow's total with an attacking start despite losing Rahul in the fourth over. Rahul, who returned to competitive cricket in the IPL after an injury, led Lucknow in the team's first loss but took a backseat on home turf and was replaced in the second innings by impact substitute Naveen-ul-Haq. De Kock put on 47 runs off 27 balls with fellow left-hander Pooran, who took on the opposition attack with hits all around. De Kock reached his 21st IPL fifty in 34 balls with a boundary off seam bowler Harshal Patel but soon fell to Arshdeep Singh's left-arm medium-pace.

Lucknow lost regular wickets but Krunal Pandya hit an unbeaten 43 off 22 balls in a late assault, which fired the hosts to match the best total at the venue - Lucknow's 199-6 against Delhi Capitals last year.

BRIEF SCORES: Lucknow Super Giants 199 for 8 (de Kock 54, Krunal 43*, Curran 3-28) **beat Punjab Kings 178 for 5** (Dhawan 70, Mayank 3-27, Mohsin 2-34) **by 21 runs.**

FASTEST BALLS OF IPL 2024

Speed	Bowler	Match
155.8 kph	Mayank Yadav	LSG vs PBKS
153.9 kph	Mayank Yadav	LSG vs PBKS
153.4 kph	Mayank Yadav	LSG vs PBKS
153 kph	Nandre Burger	RR vs DC
152.3 kph	Gerald Coetzee	MI vs SRH
151.2 kph	Aizzari Joseph	RCB vs KKR
150.9 kph	Matheesha Pathirana	CSK vs GT

MOTORSPORT

Rovanpera steers clear of trouble to maintain Kenya Rally lead

AFP
Nairobi

Kalle Rovanpera seamlessly steered his Toyota over unforgiving terrain to maintain his grip on the Safari Rally Kenya yesterday as his Welsh teammate Elfyn Evans had a day to forget.

Three punctures cost Evans dear, and he dropped from second overnight to fourth, over three and a half minutes from Rovanpera.

The 23-year-old Finn goes into Sunday's closing five stages with a 2min 17.7sec cushion over another Toyota contender, Japan's Takamoto Katsuta.

"The lead is now quite good, so of course we took it carefully," reflected the two-time world champion.

"It's not so enjoyable when you have a big lead and in a stage like (Sleeping Warrior) you just go around every rock, it's scary. Tomorrow is still a tough day and we will try to finish the job."

Rovanpera followed up Friday's clean sweep of six stages with just one more on the penultimate day.

Rovanpera, who has elected not to compete in all the rallies on the 2024 calendar, is on target for his first win of the season after skipping the season-opening monte Carlo and retiring from the Rally of Sweden.

Evans, placed second overnight, was left frustrated by three punctures in stages nine, 10 and 13.

Hyundai's championship leader Thierry Neuville briefly moved up



Toyota Gazoo Racing WRT's Finnish driver Kalle Rovanpera steers his Toyota GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid with Finnish co-driver Jonne Halttunen during the World Rally Championship Safari Rally Kenya Special Stage 8 in Gilgil, Kenya, yesterday. (AFP)

to second but then had his hopes of Kenya glory on Sunday dented with a mechanical issue.

That dropped him to fifth, more than 11 minutes off the pace.

STANDINGS

1. Kalle Rovanpera/Jonne Halttunen (FIN/Toyota) 2hr 28min 22.4sec, 2. Takamoto Katsuta/Aaron Johnston (JPN-IRL/Toyota) at 2:17.7, 3. Adrien Fourmaux/Alexandre Coria (FRA/M-Sport Ford) 2:52.4, Elfyn

Evans/Scott Martin (GBR/Toyota) 3:35.1, 5. Thierry Neuville/Martijn Wydaeghe (BEL/Hyundai) 11:07.5
Main retirements: Esapekka Lappi/Janne Ferm (FIN/Hyundai), Ott Tänak/Martin Jarveoja (EST/Hyundai)

Special stage winners: Kalle Rovanpera (SS2, SS3, SS4, SS5, SS6, SS7, SS10), Thierry Neuville (SS1, SS9), Takamoto Tatsuta (SS8, SS11), Elfyn Evans (SS12), Ott Tanak (SS13).

ATHLETICS / WORLD CROSS-COUNTRY CHAMPIONSHIPS

Kiplimo and Chebet win back-to-back titles



Uganda's Jacob Kiplimo and Kenya's Beatrice Chebet (right) celebrate after winning World Cross Country Championships men's and women's titles respectively in Belgrade yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Belgrade

Uganda's Jacob Kiplimo and Kenya's Beatrice Chebet successfully defended their World Cross-Country Championships titles in Belgrade yesterday.

It's just the fifth time in history that both the senior men's and women's champions have retained their titles at the championships - the first since Ethiopian duo Kenenisa Bekele and Tirunesh

Dibaba did in (2005/06). Kiplimo, 23, made it three successive world crowns for Uganda - Joshua Cheptegei winning the 2019 edition - timing 28 minutes 09 seconds over the 10,000km trip. Kiplimo joins legends Bekele and Paul Tergat in defending the title, although he has still to go some way to equal their achievements of winning five in a row.

"It actually feels more exciting to successfully defend my title than to win the first one," said Kiplimo.

"But it was also tougher. I came

here expecting I could win again, but the field was really strong. "The course was fine, a little challenging with the obstacles. It was a little tough running in the heat, but that wasn't a major issue."

Kiplimo said the title was a perfect boost for his morale after missing the outdoor World Athletics Championships last year due to a hamstring injury.

"I was hungry for medals after missing Budapest last year," said Kiplimo, who is the world half marathon record holder.

"I was in good shape, but then

the injury happened and I had to get treatment, but I am back now.

"My goal this year is to do what Joshua Cheptegei did and win an Olympic gold. "My main focus is the 10,000m, but I'm not sure yet if I want to double."

The 5,000m and 10,000m Commonwealth titleholder finished three seconds clear of Berihu Aregawi of Ethiopia, who also took silver last year in Bathurst, Australia. Kenya's Benson Kiplangat took bronze, two seconds adrift of Aregawi - Cheptegei finished a disappointing sixth, 15 seconds

off his compatriot's winning time. Chebet had earlier become the first female runner since Ethiopian great Dibaba (2005/06) to successfully defend her title leading home a Kenyan medals clean-sweep.

The 24-year-old was only fourth in the Kenyan trials for the championships but she came home three seconds clear of Lilian Rengeruk. Margaret Kipkemboi took bronze, a second adrift of Rengeruk and two other Kenyans filled fourth and fifth spots. Chebet's victory was the ninth

successive win for Kenya in the women's race.

"We won the team title, that showed very strong teamwork," said Chebet.

"After trials we trained together, we eat the same food. We were a team and being together helped us achieve the best result here.

"It is not easy to come to a world championship and defend your title, there is a lot of pressure.

"My target was to be on the podium.

"I felt I was stronger with about 500m to go."

TENNIS / MIAMI OPEN

Sizzling Sinner faces giant killer Dimitrov in final

'Now I'm a different player. I will handle it hopefully a little bit better'

AFP
Miami

World number three Jannik Sinner looks to clinch his third title of the year when he takes on giant-killer Grigor Dimitrov in the final of the Miami Open today.

Sinner, who won his first Grand Slam title at the Australian Open in January and then clinched the Rotterdam Indoor in February, went on a run of 19 straight match wins before losing to Carlos Alcaraz in Indian Wells earlier this month.

But any notion that the loss in California would derail his season has been swept aside by Sinner's run to the final in Miami.

His 6-1, 6-2 demolition of defending Miami champion Daniil Medvedev in the semi-finals at Hard Rock stadium was an emphatic statement victory.

The Italian will be appearing in his third Miami final in four years having lost to Hubert Hurkacz in 2021 and then Medvedev last year.

But as calm and modest as Sinner is, he is well aware that he is a very different player to the one who suffered those disappointments in South Florida.

"The first time I came here I made the final and I couldn't sleep the night before," said Sinner.

"The second time, which was last year, I was relaxed because I went through periods where I already had (these) experiences.

"Now I'm a different player,



Jannik Sinner of Italy celebrates his win against Daniil Medvedev during their Miami Open semi-final. (AFP)

different person. I will handle it hopefully a little bit better again," he said.

The 22-year-old, said his nerves before his first final came from the sense that he might never get another chance to play for a title.

"I couldn't sleep because, you know, I was not sure if I could get back in this position again," he said.

"I was, like, who knows if I can

be again in a final? Now I'm more sure that I can make it. It doesn't mean that I have to make it, but it's a different feeling. I just take it very relaxed," he added.

If Sinner has matured in terms of his mental strength and confidence, he has also improved in the past 12 months in other ways, as Medvedev noted after his loss on Friday. "He misses less, he chooses his shots more wisely. He serves

10 times better. You know, Jannik was always serving well, but now he serves like big, big," he said.

"I wonder actually how he made it, because serve is not that easy, it's not that easy shot to work on, and now, yeah, his serve is a big improvement for him," added the Russian.

But however strong Sinner is, Dimitrov has proven in Miami that he fears no one.

The Bulgarian came into Miami ranked 12th in the world but has beaten three top 10 opponents on his way to the final Hurkacz, world number two Alcaraz and in the semi-final Alexander Zverev.

Those results mean the 32-year-old will next week move back into the top 10 for the first time since November 2018.

Dimitrov's win in Brisbane this year was his first title since 2017 and he is looking for his second Masters 1000 title, after winning in Cincinnati seven years ago.

A high energy, inventive player, Dimitrov says he is most pleased by the way he has been able to string together his big wins in the same tournament.

"I think the consistency of beating top players, that to me is way bigger success than anything else," he said.

"If you do that, you get the ranking. If you do that, things are just getting better for you. But in order to do, it (you need) the discipline, the hard work, all the dedication," he said.

He'll need all of that and probably a little more if he is to pull off another giant-killing today.

HOUSTON OPEN

Defending champion Finau seizes lead, Scheffler streak ends

AFP
Los Angeles

Defending champion Tony Finau made four birdies and an eagle in his last seven holes to grab a two-stroke lead at the Houston Open on Friday as world number one Scottie Scheffler's streak of under-par rounds came to an end.

Finau fired an eight-under par 62 to finish 36 holes at Memorial Park on nine-under 131, two clear of Argentina's Alejandro Tosti, who shot three-under-par 67 to reach the halfway stage at seven under. "I've played some nice golf the first couple days and the game's in a good place," Finau said. "Just don't overthink it, get some rest, be properly prepared, properly rested for the weekend."

Finau started on the back nine and made a 10-foot birdie putt at 13, a birdie at the par-5 16th after reaching the green in two and a 13-foot birdie putt at 18, followed by his lone bogey of the day at the first. Finau barely missed on a 31-foot eagle putt at the par-5 third and tapped in for birdie, then sank a 27-foot birdie putt at the fourth.

He added 30-foot birdie putts at the sixth and par-3 seventh then holed out from just inside 40 feet to eagle the par-5 eighth and at the par-3 ninth rolled a 16-foot birdie putt past the hole to miss out on 61.

"I knew what it was for - 61 would have been my lowest on the tour and the course record," Finau said. "I knew I was going to give it a run. I wasn't going to leave it short. I hit a good putt and it was barely too low. I thought I hit it hard enough for it to stay on the line."

Finau fired a second-round 62 to win the 2022 Houston Open, when the event was played in November. The tournament went unplayed last year due to the PGA shift to a calendar-year season, giving Finau a chance to defend this week and compare

his 62s. "I think my 62 in the fall was actually better," Finau said. "The golf course can yield some birdies from the rough because the rough is so much shorter."

"When I (first) shot 62, I hit 14 out of 14 fairways and that was quite impressive. But 62 is good anytime of the year and I'll take the one today."

Argentina's Tosti rolled in a 30-foot birdie putt on his final hole to edge into second place ahead of Belgium's Thomas Detry, who shot a six-under-par 64 for a six under 36-hole aggregate of 134.

Scheffler, meanwhile, was left in a group of six players tied for fourth on five under after three-putting from six feet for a double-bogey six on the 18th that saw him card a level-par 70.

The final hole stumbled ended Scheffler's sequence of 28 consecutive under par rounds to start the year, a run that had been the longest on record since 1983 according to the PGA Tour. "I'm obviously a touch frustrated with how I finished, but overall I'm still in the middle of the tournament," Scheffler said afterward.

The American said it wouldn't take him too long to rebound mentally after his disappointing finish. "It was the last hole of the day so I'm just going to go get some rest, get some recovery, head home," he said.

Leading second-round scores (USA unless noted, par-70)

- 131 - Tony Finau 69-62
- 133 - Alejandro Tosti (ARG) 66-67
- 134 - Thomas Detry (BEL) 70-64
- 135 - Joe Highsmith 65-70
- Akshay Bhatia 67-68, Scottie Scheffler 65-70, Taylor Moore 64-71, Stephan Jaeger (GER) 69-66, Chad Ramey 69-66
- 136 - David Skins (ENG) 67-69, Max Greyserman 67-69, Aaron Rai (ENG) 66-70, Davis Riley 65-71
- 137 - Mark Hubbard 69-68, Kevin Dougherty 68-69, Tyson Alexander 70-67, J.J. Spaun 68-69, Tom Hoge 71-66, Matti Schmid (GER) 68-69.



Tony Finau of the United States hits a tee shot during the second round of the Houston Open at Memorial Park Golf Course in Houston. (AFP)

BOPANNA AND EBDEN WIN DOUBLES TITLE



Matthew Ebden of Australia and Rohan Bopanna of India hold the trophy after winning the doubles final in Miami yesterday. (AFP)

India's Rohan Bopanna and Australia's Matthew Ebden clinched the Miami Open men's doubles title after defeating Croatia's Ivan Dodig and American Austin Krajicek, 6-7(3), 6-3, 10-6 yesterday. This is the pair's second title in 2024, after winning their first grand slam together at the Australian Open in January. They teamed up at the start of last year when they won Doha and Indian Wells. "It's been magical, especially to win here, in the Magic City. It's been beautiful. I have to thank Matthew, who has been such a great partner for what

he does on the court, with the communication, with the way we handle pressure situations," commented Bopanna. At 44 years old, Bopanna is now 26-37 in tour-level doubles finals, winning his 6th ATP Masters 1000 title (6-8). Ebden is 36 years old and 11-12 in tour-level doubles finals. Besides the two titles with Bopanna, another important trophy he won was in 2022 at Wimbledon with Australian Max Purcell. "I think that is what everyone plays for, they want to be at the highest level and want to play at the top. When you win

a tournament and you reach the top of the rankings, you're the best in the world. It's a beautiful moment and you know, those 20-30 years of hard work you have put into is the reason why I am enjoying it right now and I'm really happy. Without hard work. I don't think anything for anyone in any field is possible," added Bopanna. Bopanna is the first Miami Open Indian champion since Leander Paes in 2012 (with Czech Radek Stepanek), while Ebden is the first Australian champion since Mark Woodforde and Todd Woodbridge in 2000.

JUMAA AND AL-SHAHWANI IMPRESS AT 11TH ROUND OF HATHAB



Saeed Hamad Jumaa took the Medium Tour honours during the 11th round of the Qatar Equestrian Tour - Hathab on Friday night. Jumaa clocked 51.28 seconds to finish ahead of Hamad Nasser al-Qadi and Saeed Nasser al-Qadi, who finished second and third respectively at the outdoor arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation. The Medium Tour team event was won by Salam Stores, with NK Cafe finishing second and Al Fardan took third. Haya al-Nuaimi, Vice-President of the Hathab Championship Sports Committee, crowned the winners. Meanwhile, Hadi Mansour al-Shahwani bagged the amateur round astride Cornet in 25.14 seconds. Mohamed Ibrahim al-Hor was second in 25.41 seconds on Obelix, while Mariam Abdulkarim Abed came in third place in 25.99 seconds on Wadi Rum. Awad al-Qahtani, Technical Director of Future Knights School, honoured the winners.

BUNDESLIGA

Leverkusen go 13 points clear after Bayern lose

Leverkusen continue their record of wins in the dying moments

AFP
Leverkusen, Germany

Bayern Munich lost 2-0 to Borussia Dortmund yesterday, their first home "Der Klassiker" loss in a decade, allowing Bayer Leverkusen, who came back to win 2-1 over Hoffenheim, to go 13 points clear with seven games remaining.

Leverkusen's victory put the onus on Bayern in yesterday's late match, but the German champions lost at home with Dortmund scoring goals in each half through Munich-born Karim Adeyemi and defender Julian Ryerson. Harry Kane had the ball in the net in the dying stages to give Bayern hope of a comeback, but the England captain's goal was struck off for offside. Dortmund's first league win in Munich since 2014, when Jurgen Klopp was in the dugout, took them three points clear of RB Leipzig in fourth place in the battle for the Champions League.

Earlier yesterday, Leverkusen were 1-0 down at home heading into the final five minutes, with this season's unbeaten record in serious danger a day after Xabi Alonso pledged to stay on as coach for another year. But as they have done regularly this season, Leverkusen fought back late as Andrich levelled in the 88th minute before an injury-time Schick volley sealed another remarkable comeback win. Leverkusen's late win continued their record of victories in the dying moments this season. Alonso's side have scored late to beat Augsburg, Leipzig, Stuttgart in the German Cup and Qarabag twice against in the Europa League. "I was always optimistic," Alonso told reporters. "We said at half-time that one goal is important. Everything can change in one moment. We have a winner's mentality - we built that for ourselves this season."

"We kept fighting and kept believing until the end," Leverkusen goalscorer Andrich said. "I had no doubt we'd score at least one today. I knew eventually one of our shots had to go in."

The midfielder, who stood alongside his coach as the team celebrated in front of the home fans after the match, said Alonso told the players on Friday he would stay beyond the season.

"He said he wasn't going anywhere - he said he'd stay here. The timing he chose was very



Bayern Munich's Harry Kane (left) goes for a header as Borussia Dortmund's Alexander Meyer makes a block during the Bundesliga match in Munich. (Reuters)

good. Now we can keep pushing and hopefully achieve something great this season."

Dortmund's win meant RB Leipzig's bid for a Champions League spot took a hit, after the German Cup holders played out a scoreless draw at home against lowly Mainz despite dominating possession and territory.

The home side were twice denied in the opening half, with an eighth-minute handball penalty overturned by VAR and a Lois Openda goal chalked off for offside. "I can't hear another word about expected goals - we just didn't take our chances," lamented Leipzig's David Raum.

Champions League regulars for the past decade, RB and Dortmund face off in the league Leipzig in late April. New Wolfsburg manager Ralph Hasenhuettl, the former Southampton

coach, claimed victory in his first match in charge, 2-0 at Werder Bremen.

Bremen were reduced to 10 men just before half time following a last-man foul from Anthony Jung. Maxence Lacroix put the Wolves in front shortly afterwards.

Lacroix was sent off in the second half, but Wolfsburg's Lovro Majer sealed the win.

Freiburg took a step towards European qualification in long-serving coach Christian Streich's final season at the club with a 3-0 win at Borussia Moenchengladbach.

The Black Forest side were in full control against struggling Gladbach, Michael Gregoritsch, Merlin Roehl and Ritsu Doan all scoring goals. Union Berlin held Eintracht Frankfurt to a 0-0 away draw, picking up a valuable point to go nine clear of the relegation spots.

Departing Mbappe 'can still change his mind', says PSG coach Enrique

Paris: Star striker Kylian Mbappe "can still change his mind" about leaving Paris Saint-Germain this summer, coach Luis Enrique said yesterday. "I'm still hoping that Kylian will change his mind. He hasn't said anything yet. He can still change his mind," the 53-year-old Spaniard said. "Let's imagine that we win four titles this season and Kylian makes his choice at the last moment and decides that his place is in Paris. Why not?"

After much debate about the future of the France captain, Mbappe told PSG in February that he would leave the Parc des Princes at the end of his contract this summer. Spanish giants Real Madrid are the favourites to

secure the signature of the 2018 World Cup winner.

Luis Enrique mentioned the possibility of Mbappe staying at PSG when asked if the fact that the 25-year-old was playing his last Ligue 1 match against rivals Marseille today would influence the coach's decision to play him or not. Enrique was cryptic when addressing the question of Mbappe's presence on the pitch at the Velodrome. "Anything is possible in life. Our aim is to win this match," said the coach. "I need to have a general view of the team. There will be people who don't agree," he said, adding he was "aware" of the importance of the derby for PSG fans.

SERIE A

Last-gasp Marusic heads Lazio to win over Juventus

AFP
Milan

Adam Marusic fired Lazio to late victory over Juventus with his stoppage-time header in yesterday's 1-0 win in Rome, as a 3-0 home humbling at the hands of Atalanta left Napoli's Champions League hopes hanging by a thread.

Marusic thumped home Matteo Guendouzi's perfect inswinging cross in the third minute of added time at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome to ensure victory in Igor Tudor's first match as Lazio coach. The Montenegro defender's first goal of the season pushed Lazio up to seventh, a point above Napoli and eight away from the last Champions League spot currently held by Bologna.

Juve, in third, are stuck firmly in a rut after defeat in the Italian capital left them four matches without a win and sliding back towards a battle for a Champions League spot.

Massimiliano Allegri's side have picked up just seven points from their last nine matches and yesterday's performance was another in a growing list of underwhelming outings.

Juve were without suspended Dusan Vlahovic and fellow attackers Arkadiusz Milik and Filip Kostic, and lacked inspiration throughout a scrappy contest in Rome. Lazio made life tough for

Juve in Tudor's debut in the dugout after taking over from Maurizio Sarri as permanent boss at the Roman outfit.

And he pumped his fists on the touchline when Marusic decided the contest to give him the perfect start to life at Lazio.

Tudor, who won Serie A and B titles over nine years as a Juventus player, will be encouraged by the solid display put on by his team. The former Croatia defender has a tough opening week at Lazio as his side face Juve again on Tuesday, in Turin for the first leg of their Italian Cup semi-final, before the Rome derby next weekend.

First-half goals from Aleksei Miranchuk and Gianluca Scamacca and a late Teun Koopmeiners strike boosted sixth-placed Atalanta's chances of a spot in Europe's top club competition.

Napoli stay seventh, nine points behind Bologna who host rock-bottom Salernitana on Easter Monday.

Francesco Calzona's side are also six points behind fifth-placed Roma with the capital club at Lecce and Italy in a good position to get an extra spot in next season's revamped Champions League.

Both Roma and Bologna have to travel south for matches at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona before the end of the campaign, while Atalanta lurk a point behind Roma with a game in hand and the wind in their sails after a hugely impressive win.

Japan handed 3-0 win after North Korea call off World Cup qualifier

Tokyo: Japan have been awarded a 3-0 victory after North Korea called off a World Cup qualifier between the sides that was scheduled to be held in Pyongyang earlier this month, Japan's Football Association (JFA) said yesterday.

The JFA said FIFA's Disciplinary Committee had informed them that the match had been forfeited, which means Japan are guaranteed a top-two finish in their group which also includes Syria and Myanmar. With 12 points after four games, Japan have qualified for the third round of World Cup qualifiers as well as the 2027 Asian Cup. Japan beaten North Korea 1-0 in another qualifying match in Tokyo this month.

North Korea, which has no formal diplomatic relations with Tokyo, decided not to stage the match in Pyongyang over worries about infectious diseases in Japan and had asked for the game to be moved to a neutral venue. FIFA said the game would not be

rescheduled due to the lack of dates on the fixture calendar.

QUICK-FIRE MONACO BREEZE PAST METZ TO GO SECOND IN LIGUE 1

Monaco flew out of the traps at Metz, scoring three goals in the opening quarter-hour as they moved up to second in Ligue 1. Adi Huetter's side brushed aside lowly Metz 5-2, courtesy of three goals in quick succession from Takumi Minamoto, Maghnes Aklouché and Vanderson before Folarin Balogun added a second-half brace either side of Pape Amadou Diallo and Ibou Sane strikes for the hosts.

The win lifts Monaco to second place with 49 points, 10 behind leaders Paris Saint-Germain who travel to Marseille for Le Classique today. Japanese international Minamoto gave Monaco the perfect start after four minutes when he turned on Eliesse Ben Seghir's pass near the six-yard box and rifled a shot past

Alexandre Oukidja in the Metz goal.

Aklouché doubled the lead on 10 minutes, pouncing on Kevin Van Den Kerkhof's lax touch in the centre circle before driving through the middle of the pitch and rolling a composed left-footed finish past the 'keeper.

The tie was effectively over just six minutes later when Vanderson guided a stretching volley into the far corner from an Aleksandr Golovin cross. Metz goalkeeper Oukidja gifted Monaco a fourth goal on 76 minutes when he tried a backheel past Balogun, but the striker blocked it with his leg and into the open goal.

Two minutes later, Diallo snatched a goal for 17th-placed Metz to give them hope and Sane tapped home on 84 minutes.

But Balogun settled any potential nerves for Monaco, converting from a corner to send the principality side two points ahead of third-place Brest, who play at Brittany rivals Lorient today.



Lazio's Adam Marusic (left) vies for the ball with Juventus' Mattia De Sciglio during the Serie A match in Rome. (Reuters)