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need perfect
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CRICKET

Stokes rules himself
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MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah guns for W2RC lead at Rally-Raid Portugal

The Qatari rally legend is second in the Drivers' Championship – nine points behind Carlos Sainz

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's ace rally driver Nasser al-Attiyah is aiming to take the lead of the FIA World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC), when the third round begins today at the Rally-Raid Portugal.

Al-Attiyah is second in the Drivers' Championship – nine points behind Carlos Sainz. The participation of Sainz, driving for the X-Raid MINI JCW Team, adds even more interest to the fight for the W2RC title. The Spaniard's historic triumph with Audi at the Dakar in January gave him an early lead in the Drivers' Championship, even though he didn't participate in the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge, round two of the W2RC.

Last month, al-Attiyah put the Dakar disappointment firmly to the back of his mind when he teamed up with Frenchman Edouard Boulanger for the first time to secure a fourth career victory on the demanding Abu Dhabi terrain.

In so doing, the Qatari recorded his second victory at the wheel of his Nasser Racing by Prodrive Hunter and leapt into contention to challenge for both the W2RC Manufacturers' and Drivers' titles this year. In Portugal, al-Attiyah heads a team of three Prodrive Hunters representing Nasser Racing by Prodrive in the Manufacturers' Championship.

"It won't be an easy race for anyone and I'll try to be in the fight for victory," said al-Attiyah at a pre-event press conference yesterday. "It's a long race and with these rainy and muddy conditions it should be very tough. We will certainly have many spectators, as usual in Portugal, and I ask everyone to stay safe."

"The track is okay. We have good experience and will try to do our best. I will do my best to defend the title. We are very happy to be here. Thank you to the organisation and all the people who made it possible to put the World Cup here in Europe, it is very important to have a W2RC race here."

Four-time Dakar Rally winner Sainz has



Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah in action during a test round for the Rally-Raid Portugal, the third round of the FIA World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC).

teamed up with Alex Haro in an X-Raid Mini JCW Rally Plus and will give a tough fight to al-Attiyah. The Spaniard holds on the lead despite al-Attiyah's win in Abu Dhabi and both Guerlain Chicherit and Guillaume De Mevius retiring.

Chicherit teams up again with navigator Mathieu Baumel in Portugal and is third in the World Championship, 12 points behind Sainz and just ahead of Guillaume De Mevius, who shone at the last Dakar with second overall.

The Hilux T1+ machines of Yazeed al-Rajhi, Lucas Moraes, Seth Quintero and Juan Cruz Yacopini are also candidates for overall victory, with local expectations also to see how Tiago Reis and Joao Ramo – the first two classified in the Portuguese All-Terrain Championship – can perform in similar machines.

Al-Attiyah's victory at the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge has revitalised the Manufacturers' series. Toyota Gazoo Racing now leads the series by 31 points from Nasser Racing by Prodrive. The absent Team Audi Sport is a further point behind and the X-Raid Mini JCW Team is fourth on 35 points.

The bivouac for Rally-Raid Portugal will be based in the city of Granola in the



Nasser al-Attiyah poses with his fellow competitors after the press conference for the Rally-Raid Portugal in Granola yesterday.

Setubal province, situated around 100km south of Lisbon. Competitive action will be fought out over five selective sections and 1,008.87 competitive kilometres in a route of 1,758.41km through Alentejo and

Ribatejo in Portugal and the Spanish Estremadura region.

A five-kilometre Prologue will determine the starting order today and this precedes five timed stages, with the

third finishing across the border in the town of Badajoz in Spain and the fourth starting out of Badajoz and returning to Portugal. The event finishes with a 133km stage in Grandola on Sunday.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Calvert-Lewin earns point for Everton at Newcastle

Reuters
Newcastle, England

Dominic Calvert-Lewin ended a 23-game goal drought as he scored a late penalty yesterday to give struggling Everton a 1-1 Premier League draw at Newcastle United, who will rue several missed opportunities in a match they largely dominated.

Everton were awarded the spot-kick when Ashley Young was hauled to the floor by Newcastle defender Paul Dummett, who had only just come onto the pitch, and Calvert-Lewin netted as the visitors overcame a poor first half to equalise.

Alexander Isak had earlier scored for the fifth home game in a row for Newcastle after being played behind the Everton defence by Harvey Barnes, the Swede showing great composure to evade the challenges of James Tarkowski and Jarrad Branthwaite.

Everton, who are facing the potential of a second points deduction this season for a breach of Profit and Sustainability rules, stay in 16th place with 26 points from 30 games, four points above the relegation zone, while Newcastle are in eighth with 44 points from 30 games. Newcastle will be desperately disappointed not to claim the win and should have been out of sight by the time Calvert-Lewin converted his spot-kick, which in itself was a gift to the visitors.

Everton have now gone 13 Premier League games without a win since a 2-0 victory at Burnley in December, a side they face next at Goodison Park on Saturday in what will be a key relegation six-pointer. Visiting goalkeeper Jordan Pickford made an ex-



Everton's Dominic Calvert-Lewin (left) vies for the ball with Newcastle United's Dan Burn during Premier League match at St James' Park in Newcastle yesterday. (AFP)

cellent early save to deny Harvey Barnes, spreading himself well to thwart the Newcastle winger from close range, while at the other end Tarkowski headed over from a free kick.

After Isak had Newcastle in front inside 15 minutes, Pickford had to make another fine stop from Jacob Murphy as Everton were over-run in the midfield and struggled to contain their hosts. Newcastle thought they had doubled their advantage when Dan Burn had the ball in the back of the net in

the second half, but Isak was offside before he slipped the ball to the defender.

James Garner hit the post for Everton with a rare foray forward and Tarkowski did the same at the other end with a misplaced clearance that rebounded off his own goal-frame. Newcastle were denied again as Isak had the whole goal to aim at from six yards, but Vitaliy Mykolenko headed his shot off the line. The hosts were made to pay for not putting the game to bed as Dummett had his arms around the neck of Young as the

two jostled in the box and conceded a clear penalty to offer Everton a lifeline.

BURNLEY LOSE GROUND IN RELEGATION FIGHT

Burnley's hopes of Premier League survival were dealt another blow despite a brilliant strike by Jacob Bruun Larsen as Wolverhampton Wanderers fought back from a goal down to draw 1-1 at Turf Moor. Nottingham Forest's 3-1 over Fulham earlier in the evening means that they are in 17th place on 25 points, three ahead of Luton Town in 18th spot and six ahead of second-from-bottom Burnley, while Wolves are 10th on 42 points.

Burnley went ahead in the 37th minute through Bruun Larsen, who met a deep cross on the right from Dara O'Shea with a stunning volley with his instep that flew past the helpless Jose Sa in the Wolves goal. However, Wolves levelled in first-half stoppage time as Rayan Ait-Nouri was left completely unmarked in the box to send a powerful downward header from Pablo Sarabia's free kick bouncing into the net.

Earlier, Crystal Palace remained on the fringe of the relegation zone after sliding to a 1-0 defeat at rain-swept Bournemouth on Tuesday. A scrappy game was decided in the 80th minute by Justin Kluivert who finished well after good work by fellow substitute Antoine Semenyo.

After a fourth league game without a win, Palace are in 14th place with 30 points, eight ahead of 18th-placed Luton Town. While Palace should stay out of trouble, 11th-placed Bournemouth can already start planning for another top-flight campaign after moving to 41 points.

Hosts Kuwait announce new dates for Gulf Cup

Doha: Hosts Kuwait yesterday announced that it has changed the dates of the Gulf Cup Championship (Gulf 26). The hugely popular football tournament was to be held from Dec 13 to 26, 2024. However, the Kuwait Football Association (KFA) yesterday confirmed the event will now be held Dec 21, 2024 to Jan 3, 2025.

Eight teams will feature in the Gulf Cup tournament, headlined by Kuwait in addition to defending champions Iraq, former winners Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Yemen.

KFA said the draw of the tournament will be held later in the year. The match venues and training facilities will also be announced later, it said.

It will be the fifth time Kuwait will be hosting the competition following previous tournaments in 1974, 1990, 2003, and 2017.

Kuwait holds the record for Gulf Cup titles having won the championship 10 times.

After Kuwait, Iraq has won the title four times, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar have won it three times each.

In January last year, Iraq organised and won the 25th Gulf Cup, defeating Oman 3-2 in the final to lift the trophy for the first time since 1988.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Stokes not to play for England at T20 WC



England's Ben Stokes attempts a cut shot during the third One-Day International against New Zealand at The Oval in London in this September 13, 2023 file photo. (AFP)

AFP
London

England Test captain Ben Stokes has ruled himself out of the team's T20 World Cup title defence, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) announced yesterday. The 32-year-old will skip the tournament in the United States and the West Indies to make sure he is fit to be a fully-fledged all-rounder in Test cricket.

"Opting out of the IPL (Indian Premier League) and the (T20) World Cup will hopefully be a sacrifice that allows me to be the all-rounder I want to be for the foreseeable future," Stokes said in an ECB statement.

Stokes' withdrawal was something of a surprise given that, when asked last month if he would participate in the T20 World Cup in June, he said he had "not even

thought about that but I'm available".

It is understood Stokes has not suffered any setbacks after briefly returning to bowling last month during a Test tour of India, where England lost a five-match series 4-1.

There is no lingering discomfort in his left knee following surgery in November.

But although he has long been one of England's leading multi-format cricketers, Stokes has decided to prioritise his role as Test captain.

He hopes to be able to play a full role with both bat and ball during six Tests – three against the West Indies and three against Sri Lanka – in the upcoming home season.

The first Test against the West Indies at Lord's starts on July 10, less than two weeks after the June 29 T20 World Cup final in Barbados.

"I'm working hard and focus-

ing on building my bowling fitness back up to fulfil a full role as an all-rounder in all formats of cricket," Stokes said.

"The recent Test tour of India highlighted how far behind I was from a bowling point of view after my knee surgery and nine months without bowling.

"I'm looking forward to playing for Durham in the County Championship before the start of our Test summer."

ECB chief executive Richard Gould, speaking to reporters at The Oval yesterday, said: "It was great to see him (Stokes) bowl in India for a short spell, but that probably has just told him how much he still needs to do in terms of his body.

"I think it's great for English cricket he's got that ambition and he's had his knee sorted.

"Now he's going to make sure that he's back firing all cylinders because he's still a relatively young man in terms of cricket."

Stokes was a central figure as England won the 2022 T20 World Cup in Australia.

The left-handed batsman's 42 against Sri Lanka in Sydney took England into the knockout rounds, while his unbeaten 52 – his first fifty in international T20 cricket – secured victory over Pakistan in the final in Melbourne.

Stokes delayed an operation on a longstanding left knee problem to play in last year's 50-over World Cup which was held in India, where reigning champions England suffered an embarrassing exit before the knockout stages after winning just three of their nine group games.

After undergoing surgery at the end of last year, Stokes was an ever-present in England's defeat in India.

Following the Test series at home to the West Indies, England will tour Pakistan and New Zealand.

FOCUS

Sri Lanka close on victory in the second Test

Bangladesh, 268-7 at stumps, still need another 243 runs for win

AFP
Chittagong

Prabath Jayasuriya, Lahiru Kumara and Kamindu Mendis each claimed two wickets as Sri Lanka came within grasp of another resounding victory in the second and final Test yesterday.

Bangladesh were 268-7 at stumps on the fourth day in Chittagong, still needing 243 runs for an improbable win.

Mehidy Hasan Miraz played an unbeaten knock of 44 to take the game into the fifth day with Taijul Islam accompanying him on 10.

Mominul Haque was the only other batsman to put up a fight, making 50 off 56 balls before he was dismissed by the spinner Jayasuriya in the last over before tea break.

Mominul denied that the team had lacked preparation.

"Playing domestic cricket and international Test matches is very different," he said.

Shakib Al Hasan and Liton Das put on 61 runs for the fifth wicket after Mominul's dismissal. Off-spinner Kamundu broke the stand as Nishan Madushka took a brilliant reflex catch at silly point to dismiss Shakib for 36.

Liton got the bottom edge in an attempt for a pull shot off Kumara to depart three overs later for 38.

Kamindu broke another promising partnership of 46 runs between Mehidy and Shahadat Hossain, trapping the latter leg before for 15.

Mahmudul Hasan (24), fellow opener Zakir Hasan (19), and skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto (20) were all sent back cheaply.

Jayasuriya bowled Mahmudul to break the 37-run opening stand.

Zakir gave a catch to Dhananjaya de Silva off Vishwa Fernando at slip, and Lahiru clipped the ball of Najmul's off-stump.

Sri Lanka coach Chris Silverwood praised Bangladesh's fighting spirit.

"I think Bangladesh played well today. They put the pressure back on the bowlers, they made life difficult for us," he said.

"I think we bowled well in patches – there were periods when we could have bowled better," he added. "I don't think we quite had the consistency in this innings as we showed in the first innings with the ball, but thankfully our



Sri Lanka's players walk off the field at the end of the fourth day of the second Test against Bangladesh in Chittagong yesterday. (AFP)

hard work has put us in a strong position". Resuming on 102-6, Sri Lanka batted for a little over an hour to add 55 runs to their overnight score before declaring at 157-7.

Sri Lanka, who have never lost a Test series to Bangladesh, thrashed the hosts by 328 runs in the first Test at Sylhet.

SCOREBOARD

Sri Lanka first innings	531
Bangladesh first innings	178
Sri Lanka second innings (102-6 overnight)	
N. Madushka c Mehidy b Hasan	34
D. Karunaratne b Hasan	4
Kusal Mendis b Khaled	2
A. Mathews b Shakib	56
D. Chandimal c Shahadat b Hasan	9
D. de Silva c Liton b Hasan	1
Kamindu Mendis c Liton b Khaled	9
P. Jayasuriya not out	28
V. Fernando not out	8
E. (b5, lb1)	6
Total (7 wickets decl; 40 overs)	157
Did not bat: A. Fernando, L. Kumara.	
Fall of wickets: 1-12 (Karunaratne), 2-15	

(Kusal), 3-60 (Madushka), 4-72 (Chandimal), 5-78 (Dhananjaya), 6-89 (Kamindu), 7-132 (Mathews)

Bowling: Khaled 11-2-34-2, Hasan 15-2-65-4, Shakib 10-1-39-1, Taijul 4-0-13-0

Bangladesh second innings

Mahmudul Hasan Joy b Jayasuriya	24
Zakir Hasan c de Silva b V. Fernando	19
Najmul Hossain b Kumara	20
Mominul Haque c Kumara b Jayasuriya	50
Shakib Al Hasan c Madushka b Kamindu	36
Liton Das c Kusal b Kumara	38
Shahadat Hossain lbw b Kamindu	15
Mehidy Hasan Miraz not out	44
Taijul Islam not out	10
Extras (b9, lb1, nb2)	12
Total (7 wickets; 67 overs)	268
To bat: Khaled Ahmed, Hasan Mahmud.	
Fall of wickets: 1-37 (Mahmudul), 2-51 (Zakir), 3-94 (Najmul), 4-132 (Mominul), 5-193 (Shakib), 6-197 (Liton), 7-243 (Shahadat)	
Bowling: V. Fernando 10-0-39-1, A. Fernando 12-1-52-0, Lahiru 11-2-41-2, Jayasuriya 20-1-79-2 (nb2), De Silva 7-1-25-0, Mendis 7-0-22-2	
Toss: Sri Lanka	

NEW SKIPPER PANDYA UNDER FIRE FROM ROHIT FANS AS MI SLUMP

New Delhi: All-rounder Hardik Pandya has been facing the wrath of jeering fans in the Indian Premier League this season, with the Mumbai Indians struggling since he took charge from the much-loved Rohit Sharma. Five-time winners Mumbai replaced Rohit, who leads India in all formats, as captain before the IPL season started last month after the India all-rounder Pandya returned from Gujarat.

The homecoming has been tough for Pandya, who has been booed incessantly as his side slumped to three consecutive defeats, the latest at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium on Monday. Pandya's reception could not have been more different. After being traded from Gujarat back to Mumbai for \$1.8mn, his immediate elevation as captain went down badly with the legions of Rohit fans.

Rohit, 36, remains an icon in Mumbai after leading the team to five IPL titles since taking over from Australia's Ricky Ponting in 2013. Mumbai's winless record with Pandya in charge this season has done nothing to win over the fans in the cricket-mad country. The 30-year-old had another forgettable evening on Monday against Rajasthan Royals, even being jeered at the toss by home fans, prompting presenter Sanjay



Manjrekar to call on them to "behave". But the crowd kept up their hostility towards Pandya throughout, with Rohit gesturing to the fans to stop at one point. Pandya, who was once regarded as a possible successor to the ageing Rohit to captain India's T20 team, admitted it was a "tough night". The tattooed star with his love for watches is still searching for a first win in charge at Mumbai, who are rooted to the foot of the 10-team table. Veteran commentator Harsha Bhogle drew a comparison with football. "What is happening with the IPL...is that the 'clannishness' has grown," Bhogle told Indian website *Cricbuzz*. "The more the rivalries are built up, the more people have something in it."

COMMENT

ECB chief slams county 'conspiracy theory'

England and Wales Cricket Board chief executive Richard Gould has dismissed suggestions the governing body wants to cut any of the 18 first-class counties adrift as a "totally mad conspiracy theory".

With the global growth of lucrative franchise leagues and their knock-on effects on the domestic schedule, fears have been raised that the ECB would prefer a streamlined and more cost-effective county set-up.

But Gould, speaking at the ECB's domestic season launch at The Oval yesterday, said there were no plans to reduce the number of first-class counties, which has stood at 18 since Durham joined the County Championship in 1992.

"It's a totally mad conspiracy theory," said Gould, who con-

trasted how English football and rugby union had seen clubs go out of business in recent years with the relative stability of county cricket.

"I've been in the game 20-odd years and that conversation has always been around, but we're the one professional sport that hasn't lost a club," he said.

"You look at rugby and football, we've done extremely well as a sport to maintain that 100 percent record and that's where our intent lies."

The majority of the first-class counties are member-owned club.

But former Surrey chief executive Gould said: "They are not comments that I would recognise or agree with. The depth of our talent pool, both in terms of men and women, is our superpower at the moment."

BOTTOMLINE

Young fast bowler Yadav hits 156.7km/h as Lucknow beat Bengaluru in IPL



Lucknow Super Giants' Mayank Yadav celebrates after taking the wicket of Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Cameron Green (left) during the Indian Premier League match in Bengaluru yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Bengaluru

Speedster Mayank Yadav bowled the quickest ball of the new IPL season at 156.7km/h (97.4mph) in a fiery spell to power Lucknow Super Giants to a 28-run win over Royal Challengers Bengaluru yesterday.

Lucknow rode Quinton De Kock's 56-ball 81 and an unbeaten 40 by Nicholas Pooran to post 181-5 at Bengaluru's M Chinnaswamy Stadium.

New pace sensation Yadav then turned up the heat with his thunderbolts to return figures of 3-14, which included removing Glenn Maxwell for a duck and bowling Cameron Green for nine.

Bengaluru were bowled out for 153 and suffered their third loss in four

matches this season. Lucknow won their second straight match after an opening defeat.

The 21-year-old Yadav surpassed his previous top speed, having sent down a ball at 155.8km/h on his IPL debut in Lucknow's first win of the season on Saturday.

Shaun Tait bowled IPL's fastest ever ball in 2011 at 157.71km/h.

Bengaluru lost the wickets of Virat Kohli, skipper Faf du Plessis and Maxwell in the space of nine deliveries and three runs.

Left-arm spinner Manimaran Siddharth, who came in as impact substitute in place of De Kock, got Kohli as his debut wicket as the star batsman miscued a shot to backward point and walked back after his 22 off 16 balls. Du Plessis was run out in the next over off a direct throw and three balls later Yadav had Maxwell out

caught at mid-on with his searing pace. Wickets kept tumbling and despite cameos from Rajat Patidar, who made 29, and Mahipal Lomror, who hit 33 off 13, the chase ended tamely.

De Kock set up victory at the top of the order with an attacking knock featuring eight fours and five sixes, and put on a key 56-run stand with Marcus Stoinis, who hit 24 off 15 balls.

Bengaluru slowed the surge with disciplined bowling in the middle overs before Pooran, who was dropped on two, hit back with three sixes off Reece Topley.

BRIEF SCORES

Lucknow Super Giants 181 for 5 (De Kock 81, Pooran 40*, Maxwell 2-23) **beat Royal Challengers Bengaluru 153** (Lomror 33, Mayank 3-14, Naveen 2-25) **by 28 runs**

SPOTLIGHT

CAS rejects IBA's appeal in new decision

Reuters
Lausanne

The International Boxing Association (IBA)'s appeal against a decision to withdraw recognition of it being the sport's international federation was dismissed yesterday by global sport's top court.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) in June decided to strip the IBA of recognition over its failure to complete reforms on governance, finance and ethical issues.

"The IOC Session took its decision based on the recommendation issued by the IOC Executive Board on 7 June 2023 following a long process, initiated shortly after the Olympic Games Rio 2016," the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) said in a statement.

"During (the process) the IOC requested the IBA to undertake various measures to address serious concerns related to its governance and financial stability," the statement added.

It added that the IBA had not complied with the conditions set down by the IOC.

"The IBA had not increased its financial transparency and sustainability including through diversification of revenues (nor) changed its process relating to referees and



judges to ensure its integrity," CAS said.

The sports court added that the IBA had not implemented all the measures proposed by the "Governance Reform Group" established by the IOC, including a change of culture.

"The Panel determined that these three elements justified the IOC Session's decision to withdraw recognition of the IBA," the statement added.

"(It also) emphasised that the IOC's right to control the circumstances in and the conditions on which it confers recognition outweighed the IBA's personality rights."

Rival body World Boxing said last month it will seek recognition from Olympic organisers to replace the IBA and keep the troubled sport on the programme for the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

Russia accuses IOC chief of 'conspiracy' to exclude its athletes

Russia accused International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach yesterday of taking part in a "conspiracy" with Ukraine to exclude its strongest athletes from this year's Paris Games.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova made the allegation after

two Russian pranksters known as Vovan and Lexus published a recording of a conversation with Bach in which he was falsely led to believe he was speaking to an African sports official.

Bach said in the call that the IOC had established a special panel to monitor the media and the internet and ensure that Russian athletes who had made political statements in support of their government could not take part in the Olympics.

"We have also offered to the Ukrainian side - not only offered, but asked them - to provide us with their knowledge of the behaviour of such (Russian) athletes or of-

ficials," Bach could be heard saying in English on the recording. Zakharova posted on Telegram that Bach had "entered into a political-administrative and, apparently, criminal conspiracy with one specific party" - meaning Ukraine - "to exclude strong sports competitors from international competitions".

She added: "The relationship of IOC President Bach with the National Olympic Committee of Ukraine and its officials, and the admissions of a 'request to monitor Russian athletes' should be the subject of a thorough investigation."

Relations between Russia and the IOC have worsened sharply in the run-up to the Olympics, at which Russian and Belarusian athletes will compete as neutrals, without their flags and anthems, because of the war in Ukraine.

They have also been banned from taking part in the opening parade.

Pre-empting the publication of the prank call, the IOC said last month that Bach had been the victim of a hoax.

The IOC has publicly announced the establishment of a review panel to evaluate the eligibility of every Russian or Belarusian athlete who qualifies for Paris.

In order to be cleared to compete, athletes must not have actively supported the war in Ukraine and must not be contracted to any military or security agency.

GOLF

Olympic spot an extra driver for Smith at Masters

'I have to play well to get there. I guess it is more pressure'

Reuters
Sydney

If Cameron Smith needed any extra motivation to perform well at the Masters later this month, his desperation to get to the Olympics in Paris in August will provide it.

The 2022 British Open champion tied for 10th at the Tokyo Olympics three years ago but, as world number 62, he has four other Australians ahead of him in the world rankings, which will determine which two players go to Paris.

Smith's defection to the LIV Tour means he earns no rankings points from most of his events so doing well at Augusta as well as May's PGA Championship and the US Open in June is essential if he is to play at Le Golf National from Aug 1-4.

"It's desperately a place that I want to get to and represent Australia," the former world number two told reporters from Florida yesterday.

"I have to play well to get there, I know I have to play well, and I'm probably only going to get three or four shots at it before they make the selection. I guess it is more pressure."

Smith has finished in the top five at Augusta three times in seven visits and getting his hands on the famous green jacket remains another major ambition.

"It's just such a cool place...I desperately want to get it and it



Australia's Cameron Smith finds himself among the trees on the 10th during the final round of the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club, Augusta, Georgia, in this April 10, 2022 file photo. (Reuters)

would be awesome if I did," he added.

"We've just had three weeks off and I've been out on the course focusing on shot-shaping and controlling flight, which I think is pretty crucial for playing good around there."

The 30-year-old is getting used to having more time off with the much-touted unification be-

tween LIV and the US PGA Tour still looking a long way off.

Smith is not complaining.

"I've probably got another four or five weeks off every year in the last couple of years and been able to spend more time in Australia," he said. "I don't know if I'm willing to sacrifice being away from my family and stuff as much as I had in the past."

Smith's team posted a picture on social media of him shorn of his mullet on Monday but it turned out to be an April Fool's prank and the famous hairstyle will be on show at the LIV event in Adelaide later this month.

"It was probably a unanimous decision on the whole tour that that was the best event that we had (last year)," he said.

RORY MCILROY: SPLIT BETWEEN PGA, LIV 'NOT SUSTAINABLE'

New York: The rift between the PGA Tour and LIV Golf is not sustainable and will not benefit anyone in the long term, **Rory McIlroy** told *Golf Magazine* yesterday.

"There needs to be a correction. I think what's happening is not sustainable right now, so something needs to happen to try to bring it all back together so we can all move forward so we don't have this division that's sort of ongoing," McIlroy said.

"They keep going down those different paths and I just don't see how that benefits anyone in the long run."

"I think (it's) a shame for the overall game of golf," McIlroy added in his interview.

A potential merger between the two tours reportedly is ongoing, although the four-time major winner does not see that coming to fruition any time soon.

"It's certainly divided and I think what the framework and June 6 tried to do was unify the game which ultimately needs to happen," McIlroy said.

"We're not there yet."

We're probably still quite a long ways from it, but I would hope that in the future that we can get there, unify the game and get the best players back together again," he said.

It is unclear when or whether the tour and the PIF will finalize their "framework agreement" from last June after a self-imposed Dec. 31 deadline came and went.

In the meantime, LIV Golf has attracted the likes of Spaniard Jon Rahm.

Kim battled injuries, 'very dark demons' during absence

Anthony Kim admitted to battling significant injuries, an addictive personality and "very dark demons" during his near-12-year absence hiatus from professional golf before returning to LIV Golf in late February.

Kim, 38, shed light on all that he has overcome in an interview with David Feherty that was published on *LIV Golf Plus* yesterday.

"Golf is important to me and not important to me at the same time," Kim said. "I've had some very dark moments. I've had some very low moments. I've felt very alone, even when there's a million people around. I needed to get my mind straight and figure out what my purpose was on this planet."

Kim turned pro in 2006 and recorded PGA Tour victories at the 2008 Wachovia Championship, 2008 AT&T National and 2010 Houston Open. He climbed as high as No. 6 in the world rankings in September 2008.

An Achilles injury in 2012 led to surgery, and many others followed. Kim also acknowledged other issues that weighed on him as he dealt with an admitted "addictive personality."

"I was around some bad people," Kim said. "People that took advantage of me - scam artists. And when you're 24 or 25, even 30 years old, you don't realize the snakes that are living under your roof. But through the grace of God, I'm here. I'm able to tell my story, hopefully inspire other people."



Berrettini returns with a win in Marrakesh

Marrakesh, Morocco: Italy's **Matteo Berrettini**, runner-up at Wimbledon in 2021, won his first match on the main ATP circuit yesterday after an injury-plagued seven months.

The former world number six, who has slipped to 135th, dispatched 56th-ranked Kazakh Alexander Shevchenko 6-2, 6-1 on the clay in Morocco.

The Italian will next play Spaniard Jaume Munar in the second round. "Seven months without playing is a long time," said Berrettini. "I missed it and that's why I have so much energy."

The 27-year-old limped out of the US Open last August after rupturing right ankle ligaments and was forced to pull out of the Australian Open on the eve of his return with a foot injury.

Berrettini reached the final of a Challenger event in Phoenix in March but lost in the first round of the Masters 1000 in Miami to Andy Murray later that same month.

A former US Open and Australian Open semi-finalist, the Italian has been beset by injuries over the past

few years with hand surgery in 2022 and abdominal problems the following year.

Meanwhile former US Open champion Dominic Thiem is hoping his approach of cutting down the intensity of his practice will help him avert a recurring wrist injury as he looks to climb back up the world rankings after a turbulent few years. The 30-year-old former world number three has struggled to get back to top form after suffering a wrist injury in 2021, which sidelined him for months and saw him slip down the rankings.

On Monday, the twice French Open finalist claimed his first win on the ATP Tour in 2024 by beating German Maximilian Marterer 6-1 6-7(3) 6-4 in the first round of the Estoril Open.

"(I'm going) to listen a bit to my body," Thiem said after his win.

"To really take care that there is nothing coming up, no problems for the wrist. I cut down the intensity of my practice a little bit, but I've had enough practice in my life. I can handle it if it's a little bit less."

Thiem next faces veteran Frenchman Richard Gasquet today.



MOTORSPORT

Istanbul Park circuit gets new operators to bring back F1: report

Reuters
Ankara

The Istanbul Park circuit, the former home of the Turkish Grand Prix, has new operators tasked with bringing Formula One back to Turkey by 2026, media reported yesterday.

Turkiye returned to the sport in 2020 and 2021 after nearly a decade away, but it fell off from 2022 onwards partly due to the tens of millions of dollars needed to secure the contract that competitors were able to finance.

Turkey has since aimed to bring it back with President Tayyip Erdogan meeting the head of gov-

erning body FIA Mohamed Ben Sulayem in March to discuss the return of both F1 and the World Rally Championship.

Can Bilim Egitim Kurumlari AS, part owned by Lale Cander, chairman of F1 tire provider Pirelli's Turkish branch, won the tender to operate the circuit for the next 30 years for some \$117.8m, broadcaster Haberturk and *Motorsport.com's* Turkish channel reported yesterday.

It was the sole entrant as former operators Intercity did not bid and other expected bidders appeared to pull out, according to the reports.

Neither Can Bilim Egitim Kurumlari nor Intercity could be immediately reached by Reuters

for comment. Tourism Minister Mehmet Nuri Ersoy said last month that the tender would be awarded to the bidder who would be able to bring the sport back to Turkey by 2026.

Istanbul Park had been popular among the drivers and saw increased attendance in 2020 and 2021 compared to the 2005-2011 run.

The new operators are tasked with reaching an agreement within a month to bring F1 back to Turkey and for every year from 2026 that the circuit does not host a Grand Prix, the operators will have to pay 25% of the F1-hosting contract fee to the administration, according to the tender conditions.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal may need perfect run-in to win title: Arteta

Second-placed Gunners are just two points behind Liverpool

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta said yesterday that Arsenal may have to win all of their nine remaining Premier League games if they are to be crowned champions as he prepares for the "most beautiful part of the season".

The second-placed Gunners are two points behind leaders Liverpool ahead of a busy April schedule following Sunday's gritty goalless draw at title rivals Manchester City. Arteta, who is also preparing Arsenal for a Champions League quarter-final against Bayern Munich, urged his side to embrace the challenge, starting with today's game at home to relegation-threatened Luton.

"It's going to have to be really close to that," he told a pre-match press conference when asked if Arsenal need a 100 percent record from now on to finish top of the table. "When you see the level and the consistency of the other teams and historically what is needed to win in this league, it's not going to be very far from that."

The Spaniard added: "This is where we want to be and now we want to take this opportunity and make it happen. We worked every single day with that enthusiasm and passion to make it happen and enjoying the moment as well. I see the team really flowing and they are really excited about playing each game and that has to drive this energy until the end. I am full of energy and it's the most beautiful part of the season."

Arsenal's fixture against Luton is the first of eight matches this month, including the two clashes with Bayern. Although they will be huge favourites to beat Luton, they needed an injury-time winner to leave Kenilworth Road with a dramatic 4-3 victory in early December.

Asked about his memories of that game, Arteta said: "Especially how tough it was to win there, how difficult they have made it for every team... They deserve more credit than any other team in this league, how they've done it, what they transmit as a team and what they generated and it's going to be a really tough match."

Arteta said the success of Arsenal's women's team, who won League Cup final against Chelsea on Sunday, was a source of pride in their



Arsenal defenders Gabriel Magalhães (left) and William Saliba at training session yesterday.

own pursuit of silverware. "We are on track as a club. What the women's team did at the weekend makes us so proud and it's so important as well," Arteta said. "There are a lot of good things happening, but we need to aim for much more than that... This is where we want to be. Now we want to take this opportunity and make it happen."

Arsenal have a tough run-in in their bid for a first league title since 2004, with matches still to come against rivals Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea, Aston Villa and Manchester United,

but the Spaniard is optimistic. The manager confirmed that forward Bukayo Saka was "fine" after he was forced off the pitch against Manchester City on Sunday and defender Jurrien Timber, a long-term injury absentee, has a "good chance" of returning before the end of the season.

When asked about the possibility of rotating his team selection, the manager said: "It is related to what they do in training as well. We will look at all these things and try and find the right team to win."

SPOTLIGHT

PSG coach Enrique 'very happy' with Mbappe ahead of French Cup semi

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique said yesterday he was "very happy" with star attacker Kylian Mbappe during a press conference on the eve of his side's French Cup semi-final clash with Rennes, as he downplayed rumours of a rift.

Following Mbappe's announcement to the club in February that he would leave Paris at the end of his contract this summer, the Frenchman has seen his playing minutes reduced and he looked visibly unhappy when substituted off with half an hour to play in PSG's 2-0 win at Marseille on Sunday.

Asked about Mbappe's attitude when leaving the pitch at the Velodrome, PSG's Spanish coach Luis Enrique said: "What's curious is everything that's being said based on a piece of false news. Someone has invented an insult (based on a lipreading of a video showing Mbappe as he made his way off the pitch) and then from that comes all kinds of speculations."

After the match, Mbappe posted a photo on Instagram of himself walking off the field under the rain, holding the captain's armband in his hand - in the absence of Brazilian defender Marquinhos,

the attacker was PSG's captain on the night. "I'm taking it all in my stride. I'm very happy with all my players, Kylian included, he's always behaved admirably," said Luis Enrique at a press conference.

Ahead of PSG's fixture with arch-rivals Marseille, the Spaniard said Saturday in an interview with Prime Video that Mbappe "can still change his mind" about leaving. Although heavily linked to Spanish giants Real Madrid, Mbappe has still not announced where he will play football next season after his current contract expires with PSG.

Still in contention for three titles - the French league, French cup and Champions League - PSG now enter a crucial phase of their season. Today, they will welcome Rennes to the Parc des Princes where they are favourites to book a place in the French Cup final on May 25 in Lille.

The following Wednesday, Luis Enrique's former side Barcelona visit PSG for the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final tie. "We're all in the same boat, sailing and seeking success," said Luis Enrique of his side's treble quest. "I'd love this to end well for PSG, for Kylian, for everyone."

Lyon host second-division Valenciennes in the first semi-final of the French Cup with the winners facing either PSG or Rennes in May's showpiece final.



Paris Saint-Germain's coach Luis Enrique (right) reacts next to forward Kylian Mbappe during the French Ligue match on Sunday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Brighton coach De Zerbi not distracted by job speculation

Reuters
London

Brighton & Hove Albion manager Roberto De Zerbi is fully focused on matters on the pitch amid speculation about his future, he said. The 44-year-old Italian, who replaced Graham Potter at Brighton in 2022, has been linked with soon-to-be-vacant jobs at top European clubs including Bayern Munich, Barcelona and Liverpool.

Bayern's Thomas Tuchel, Barca's Xavi Hernandez and Liverpool's Jurgen Klopp are set to leave step down at the end of the season.

"I am still proud to be coach at Brighton," De Zerbi told reporters. "I know I am really lucky to work with these players, to work with this club. I'd like to compete with a full squad but I try to play with the players available and I think they are enough."

De Zerbi's contract with Brighton expires in 2026. The former coach of Ukrainian team Shakhtar Donetsk and Serie A's Sassuolo said last week that he would speak to Brighton's owners before making a decision.

"It's (future) not a problem, it's a part of my work. At the moment I want to be focused and to keep my eyes on the target we have. I have the contract at the moment. The focus is on the pitch," he said. "I'm very relaxed. The problems are the injured players and the preparations for the next game. These are the problems not the contract or my future."

Brighton, ninth in the Premier League with nine games left, visit 15-placed Brentford today.

BRIGHTON POST PREMIER LEAGUE RECORD PROFIT OF £122.8MN

Meanwhile, Brighton posted a Premier League record £122.8mn (\$155mn) profit after tax last season thanks to the club's best ever season on the pitch and a series of lucrative player sales. The Seagulls qualified for Europe for the first time by finishing sixth in the Premier League and also reached the FA Cup semi-finals to help revenue rise to £204.5mn.

That was despite losing manager Graham Potter to Chelsea, who also signed Marc Cucurella from Brighton for a reported £60mn. Yves Bissouma's move to Tottenham and Alexis Mac Allister's transfer to Liverpool contributed to Brighton's £144mn gain on player sales. The figures for the 12 months to June 30, 2023 do not



include Moises Caicedo's British transfer record £115mn move to Chelsea as it came after the accounting period.

The club also announced highly-rated chief executive Paul Barber has signed a new contract until 2030. "These accounts will of course catch the eye, because of the headline number," Barber said in a club statement. "In a season when we made history on the pitch we took a huge step forward in terms of the club's long-held aim of becoming more sustainable and less reliant on (owner) Tony Bloom's incredibly generous levels of investment."

The interest free loan owed to boyhood Brighton fan and professional gambler Bloom, who also owns Belgian side Union Saint-Gilloise, has been reduced £406.5mn to £373.3mn.

Brighton boss Roberto De Zerbi has been linked with taking over at Liverpool and Bayern Munich next season. But Barber said Brighton remain ambitious to get back into Europe and winning the club's first ever major trophy. "The dream is to be regularly challenging for a European place and for silverware. We are very proud of Roberto, the work he and his staff have done, and of course the performance levels of our squad," he said.

SERIE A

Inter beat Empoli to close in on title

Reuters
Milan

Runaway leaders Inter Milan continued their seemingly unstoppable march to the Serie A title after an early goal from Federico Dimarco and a late effort from Alexis Sanchez secured a 2-0 win at home against Empoli on Monday.

Inter are top of the table with 79 points, 14 ahead of city rivals AC Milan in second place with eight matches left to play. Their sizeable lead means that Inter could potentially clinch the Scudetto during the city derby against Milan on April 22. The result pushed 18th-placed Empoli into the relegation zone, level on 25 points with Frosinone in 17th and one point ahead of 19th-placed Sassuolo.

Inter manager Simone Inzaghi, who celebrated his 100th victory with the club, lost his voice during the match, with assistant coach Massimiliano Farris taking over the post-match duties. "The tactics are working very well, the mobility of our defenders, but also the ability of the midfielders to cover the spaces when the defenders go forward, that is all teamwork," Farris said. "We did better in the second half and the substitutions gave us a big hand to bring home the result, confirming the



Inter Milan's Alexis Sanchez (right) scores against Empoli during the Serie A match at the San Siro in Milan on Monday night. (Reuters)

strength in depth of this squad."

Dimarco broke the deadlock for Inter in the sixth minute when he fired the ball left-footed into the bottom corner from the edge of the box.

The rest of the first half ebbed and flowed, with Inter pressing to extend their lead, and Empoli goalkeeper Elia Caprile standing firm to deny them. Yet Empoli gained momentum towards the end of the half, creating chances that were narrowly off target.

Inter came back with renewed vig-

or after the break and Nicolo Barella was inches away from scoring after beating three Empoli defenders. Substitute Sanchez was left unmarked to tap home Denzel Dumfries' cross and double Inter's lead in the 81st minute after a flowing passing move from the hosts. Davide Frattesi almost grabbed a third for Inter with the last kick of the match, but the ball slipped just past the post. Inter will next play Udinese away on Monday while Empoli host Torino on Saturday.

Saul takes Atletico fourth with late Villarreal winner

Villarreal, Spain: Saul Niguez slotted home an 87th minute winner to help Atletico Madrid to a 2-1 win over Villarreal on Monday, taking his team fourth in La Liga. Diego Simeone's side capitalised on Athletic Bilbao's defeat by La Liga leaders Real Madrid on Sunday to move back into the Champions League qualification places, even if they left it late.

Axel Witsel nodded Atletico ahead after nine minutes but Alexander Sorloth pegged back the visitors soon after half-time of an entertain-

ing clash. Substitute Saul decided an even game in the final stages less than five minutes after coming on.

Atletico moved two points clear of Athletic with eight matches remaining, still trailing third-place Girona by seven points. "(Saul) entered the game well and scored a great goal," Simeone said. "I've put him on a bunch of times because I believe in him and I hope he can give us a lot."

Simeone said his team still needed to improve to lock down Champions League qualification for next season.

"Athletic are having a very good season, Girona aren't giving up, and we have to improve," said the coach. "Pace of play and intensity decide things and we have to improve in that regard."

Witsel drew first blood with a fine header from Rodrigo Riquelme's corner, twisting his body to meet the ball at the near post and direct it looping home at the far. The 35-year-old Belgian had only scored once before for Atletico, also against Villarreal last November.