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CRICKET | Page 2

Buttler powers Rajasthan to record IPL chase of 224



FOCUS | Page 3

Pride and hype as F1 roars back to China after Covid absence

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SPORT

FOOTBALL
PSG and Borussia Dortmund reach Champions League semi-finals
Page 4

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar team looks forward to Paris Olympics qualification

By Sports Reporter
Doha

After opening their AFC U-23 Asian Cup campaign with a convincing 2-0 win over Indonesia on Monday, Qatar players are on a mission to secure a spot at the Paris Olympics, marking the nation's first appearance since 1992. With the tournament being held on home soil, the country's most promising players are ready to showcase their skills on their way to yet another historic success for Qatari football.

Most recently, Qatar's senior national side claimed their second AFC Asian Cup, making it two consecutive titles for Al Enabbi. Jassim Gaber, an up-and-coming defender, played with the national team and is now looking forward to replicating that success during these Olympic qualifiers. "It was an honour to be part of the national team that won back-to-back Asian Cup championships. I hope that we can do something equally historic during this tournament and reach the Olympics after a long absence for Qatar," said Gaber.

The top three teams at the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 will secure an automatic spot at the upcoming Paris Olympics, while the fourth-place team will contest for a place against an African team. Sixteen of the continent's most promising teams are competing in Qatar for the sixth edition of the tournament, with the com-



FROM LEFT: Qatar under-23 players Jassim Gaber, Yousef Abdulla, Mohamed Ayash and Tameem Mansour Muftah.

petition being played on FIFA World Cup stadiums for the first time.

For goalkeeper Yousef Abdulla, playing in front of a home crowd provides a huge impetus for the aspiring Olympians to reach the Paris games: "I know that as a goalkeeper, there is perhaps extra pressure on me when we are out on the pitch. But, with the support of our fans, I hope that we will be able to succeed in the tournament and qualify to the summer Olympics in Paris."

Next up for Al Annabi is a much-an-

anticipated meeting against Jordan on April 18 at 6:30pm, before rounding off the group stage against Australia on April 21 at 6:30pm. Both matches are set to take place at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Mohamed Ayash, who plays his club football for Qatar Stars League side Al Rayyan SC, wants to be part of a historic side that will see the return of Qatari football to the Olympic Games: "It's been a long time since Qatar took part in the Olympic games, and that is something that we really want to change this time around.

We want to make history!"

Qatar's last appearance at the Summer Olympics football tournament was during the 1992 games held in Barcelona. The team was made up of players from a renowned generation of players that achieved tremendous success for Qatari football. At the heart of the squad was legendary player Mansour Muftah. Thirty-two years later, Muftah's son Tameem is looking to follow in his father's glory.

"I hope that I can follow in my father's footsteps and bring glory to Qatar, just like

he did. With the home fans behind us, anything is possible, and I want to play a part in taking Qatar to the Olympics. I want to make all of Qatar proud," said Tameem Mansour Muftah.

Prices for group stage match tickets start at QR15 and can be purchased online through the Hayya to Qatar mobile app. Spectators from outside Qatar can also purchase tickets from the same platform. Disabled spectators can apply to purchase accessible tickets through accessibility@hayya.qa

AFC U-23 ASIAN CUP

Defending champions Saudi overcome spirited Tajikistan

Thailand got off to a dream start to their campaign after they produced a 2-0 victory against Iraq

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Saudi Arabia survived a scare before eventually running out comfortable 4-2 winners against Tajikistan in their AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 Group C clash at Khalifa International Stadium yesterday.

The defending champions showcased their array of attacking talents to lead the group ahead of a meeting with Thailand on Friday, with the Southeast Asian side also on maximum points after their impressive 2-0 win over Iraq earlier in the day.

Saad al-Shehri's side started on the front foot and found the breakthrough on 17 minutes. A quickly taken short corner kick routine gave Mohamed Waheed the opportunity to deliver a cross to the far post that was met with a thumping header by centre-back Rayan Hameed.

Tajikistan did not let their heads drop and were back on level terms six minutes later when Mehron Madaminov swung in a long cross that was nodded back by Amadoni Kamolov for Ruslan Khailov to smash into the top corner.

Saudi went ahead again in the eighth minute of first half added time with Abdullah Radif racing clear on the right hand side before squaring a perfect pass for the on-rushing Haitham Asiri to sweep home.

Saudi Arabia widened their lead 10 minutes into the second half as a surging Radif found Asiri who then laid the ball for Yahya to place an accurate shot into the bottom corner past Hasanov.

Another quick break in the 61st minute saw Yahya get his second, the half-cleared ball fell kindly for the AFC U-23 Asian Cup 2022 Most Valuable Player on the edge of the box which the 22-year-old finished with a sumptuous strike.

Tajikistan responded almost immediately, pulling a goal back three minutes later after Kamolov went on a mazy run to fend off two Saudi markers before setting up substitute Rustam Soirov for a spectacular finish into the roof of the net from close range.

A misplaced pass from Waheed at the edge of his own goal with goalkeeper Saleem Al Absi out of position nearly set up a grandstand finish but Soirov's poor first



Saudi Arabia players celebrate after scoring a goal against Tajikistan during the Group C match of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 at Khalifa International Stadium yesterday.

touch after intercepting the pass saw the chance go to waste.

Soirov was in the thick of the action again in the 87th minute after referee Ko deemed that the Tajikistan player was brought down by al-Absi but the decision was overturned after a VAR review as Saudi Arabia saw out the win.

Earlier at the Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakrah, Thailand got off to a dream start to their campaign after they produced a 2-0 victory against Iraq. A clinical performance from Ithsara Sritharo's charges saw them net once in each half to secure a stunning result, which was also their first ever success against Iraq at U-23 level having lost three of their previous six encounters to date.

In the 26th minute, Erawan Garnier, the 18-year-old Olympique Lyonnais player who had been lively in his Thai age-group debut, popped up on the left to deliver a perfect cross that was met by right-back Waris Choolthong, who ghosted in to produce a calm first-time finish past Hasan.

Spurned opportunities again haunted

Iraq as they fell further behind in the 65th minute. Turning provider, Waris curled in a perfect corner from the right that was met by half-time substitute Teerasak Pochiphimai, who guided his header into the far left of the goal.

JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA OFF TO WINNING STARTS IN GROUP C

Earlier, Japan kicked off their campaign with a 1-0 win over China at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Group B despite playing most of the game with 10 men following Ryuya Nishio's early sending off.

Kuryu Matsui gave Go Oiwai's side an eighth minute lead only for Nishio to see red nine minutes later for violent conduct, but a stand-out performance in goal from Leo Kokubo ensured the 2016 champions started the tournament with a win.

Victory gives the Japanese the perfect start to their challenge for a second title and a place at a eighth consecutive Olympic Games in a challenging group that also features South Korea and the United Arab Emirates.



Japan's forward Kuryu Matsuki scores past China's Huang Zihao during the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Group B match at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha.



Substitute Lee Young-jun's (centre) header deep into added time saw South Korea snatch a 1-0 win over United Arab Emirates at the Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium.

Meanwhile, Substitute Lee Young-jun's header deep into added time saw South Korea snatch a 1-0 win over United Arab Emirates at the Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium. The last gasp win means South Korea share the Group B top spot with Japan. Korea dominated the early proceedings

but UAE's compact defence made it very hard for the 2020 winners to find a way through as they were limited to attempts from outside the box.

South Korea face China next on Friday, while UAE will look to bounce back against Japan on the same day.

PREVIEW

Babar back as captain as Pakistan face NZ

AFP
Karachi

Babar Azam makes his return as Pakistan captain in a five-match Twenty20 series starting tomorrow against an understrength New Zealand with the World Cup weeks away.

Babar regained the captaincy last month in a shock U-turn that ended the short-lived reign of Shaheen Shah Afridi, raising fears of a rift between the players.

The hosts hope that spending time together at a fitness camp at an army base will have been good for bonding.

Head coach Azhar Mahmood said yesterday that the T20 World Cup in June in the United States and West Indies is very much on their minds.

"I have full faith in the selected squad and the morale is very high in the team, so we will overcome all the shortcomings so that we can do our best in the World Cup," he said.

"You cannot take any team lightly in the T20 format and if

New Zealand is missing their key players then there is an opportunity for their young players."

Pakistan suffered major upheaval following their first-round exit from the one-day World Cup last year.

Babar stepped down as captain in all three formats and head coach Mickey Arthur left along with Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Zaka Ashraf.

Mohsin Naqvi, the country's interior minister, took up the board's top post and reorganised the selection committee, paving the way for batsman Azam's return.

Fast bowler Mohamed Amir and spinning all-rounder Imad Wasim also return to international cricket in this series after coming out of retirement.

New Zealand arrived in the country at the weekend, having sent a security team last month.

In 2021 the Black Caps pulled out of a tour of Pakistan at the 11th hour over security fears, but returned twice in 2023.

New Zealand are missing nine top players including skipper Kane Williamson because of the Indian



Pakistan's captain Babar Azam (centre) warms up along with teammates during a practice session in Rawalpindi yesterday. Babar makes his return as Pakistan captain in a five-match Twenty20 series starting tomorrow against an understrength New Zealand with the World Cup weeks away. (AFP)

Premier League. Stand-in skipper Michael Bracewell yesterday said it is a chance for the younger New Zealand players.

"I think the group of young

players have come through and have played a lot of T20 cricket growing up," said Bracewell, who has returned after a year-long injury lay-off.

"They have fresh ideas on how the game should be played and as a group we will just try to play our game."

Ace pacer Tim Southee, the

world's top wicket-taker in Twenty20 internationals with 157, is rested.

The experienced duo of Adam Milne and Finn Allen suffered injuries a day before the team's departure.

All-rounder Zac Foulkes, hard-hitting batsman Tim Robinson and seamer Will O'Rourke are uncapped in T20s.

The first three games of the series are in Rawalpindi, with Lahore hosting the last two.

Teams (from):

Pakistan: Babar Azam (captain), Abrar Ahmed, Azam Khan, Fakhar Zaman, Iftikhar Ahmed, Imad Wasim, Abbas Afridi, Mohamed Rizwan, Mohamed Amir, Irfan Niazi, Naseem Shah, Saim Ayub, Shadab Khan, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Usama Mir, Usman Khan, Zaman Khan
New Zealand: Michael Bracewell (captain), Mark Chapman, Josh Clarkson, Jacob Duffy, Dean Foxcroft, Ben Lister, Cole McCoinchie, Jimmy Neesham, Will O'Rourke, Tim Robinson, Ben Sears, Tim Seifert, Ish Sodhi, Zac Foulkes, Tom Blundell.

CRICKET

Brilliant Buttler powers Royals in 2-wicket victory

The RR opener overshadows superb ton by KKR's Sunil Narine

AFP
Kolkata

Jos Buttler smashed an unbeaten 107 to trump Sunil Narine's first T20 century as Rajasthan Royals pulled off a joint record IPL chase against Kolkata Knight Riders off the final ball yesterday.

Chasing 224 for victory, Rajasthan looked in trouble at 121-6 in the 13th over but Buttler moved through the gears in his 60-ball blitz to achieve the target with two wickets to spare at Kolkata's Eden Gardens.

Rajasthan equalled their own record from 2020 when they chased down 224 against Kings XI Punjab in Sharjah.

Buttler, who came in as an impact substitute, reached his second ton of the season in 55 balls with a six off Varun Chakravarthy at the start of the last over.

Buttler, struggling with cramp, then played out three dot balls before a two and a single on the final delivery ensured Rajasthan held on to top spot in the table with six wins in seven matches.

England's Buttler, who hit nine fours and six sixes, moved ahead of Chris Gayle with seven IPL tons and is only behind Virat Kohli's eight in the T20 tournament. Buttler built key partnerships including 50 runs with Riyan Parag (34), 57 with Rowman Powell (26) and then an unbeaten 38-run stand with Avesh Khan (0 not out).
Spinners Narine, Chakravarthy



Rajasthan Royals' Jos Buttler watches the ball after playing a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Kolkata Knight Riders at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday. (AFP)

and fast bowler Harshit Rana took two wickets each for KKR.

Narine hammered 109 off 56 balls to guide Kolkata, who stay second in the 10-team standings, to 223-6.

Narine put on 85 runs for the second wicket with Angkrish Raghuvanshi, who hit 30, and got together for a 51-run stand with Andre Russell.
Narine, playing his 504th T20

match, reached his ton from 49 balls with a six and a four off Yuzvendra Chahal for Kolkata's third hundred in the IPL as he jumped for joy. He was finally bowled by a Trent Boult yorker before he returned to a standing ovation.

Narine moved into the top three in the batting charts led by Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Kohli (361) with 276 runs.
Rinku Singh finished off the in-

nings on a high with his unbeaten nine-ball 20 including a four and two sixes.

BRIEF SCORES
Rajasthan Royals 224/8 in 20 overs (Buttler 107*, Parag 34, Narine 2-30, Varun 2-36, Rana 2-45) **beat Kolkata Knight Riders 223 for 6** (Narine 109, Raghuvanshi 30, Avh 2-35, Sen 2-46) **by 2 wickets.**

FOCUS

Bangladesh announce Mushtaq as spin coach

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh named former Pakistan leg-spinner and World Cup winner Mushtaq Ahmed yesterday as the spin-bowling coach for the men's national cricket team.

Mushtaq will join the side before a preparation camp for next month's five-match Twenty20 international series against Zimbabwe and will work with the Bangladesh team until the end of the T20 World Cup in the West Indies and the United States.

Bangladesh has been in the hunt for a spin-bowling coach since Sri Lankan Rangana Herath left in November. Local coach Sohel Islam filled in during the recent series against Sri Lanka.

Mushtaq was spin coach with England from 2008-14, the West Indies in 2018-19 and Pakistan from 2020-2022. He was also Pakistan's bowling consultant between 2014 and 2016.

"It is a great honour for me to be a part of the Bangladesh cricket team as a spin-bowling coach," 53-year-old Mushtaq said. "I am looking forward to the role and want to pass my experience to the players because they are very coachable and I always believe that they are one of the most dangerous teams around. They can beat anyone because they have the capability, the resources and the talent. I will try to instil that belief into them," he said.

Bangladesh will host Zimbabwe for five T20s from May 3-12 before travelling to the United States for a three-match series against the hosts and the T20 World Cup.

SPOTLIGHT

Slater collapses after being refused bail

AFP
Sydney

Former Test cricketer Michael Slater reportedly collapsed in an Australian court yesterday after being refused bail on more than a dozen charges, including some relating to stalking.

The 54-year-old had to be helped to his feet by court staff after falling to the floor when a Queensland magistrate turned down his bail application, local media reported.

The television commentator and former batsman is accused of domestic violence offences as well as common assault and unlawful stalking.

Among the allegations against him, police said Slater sent unwanted text messages and made intimidating phone calls over the last six months.
He is due to appear in court

again at the end of May. The court heard Slater has mental health conditions that can result in "impulsive and reckless" behaviour, ABC News reported.

Slater played 74 Test matches from 1993-2001, chalking up more than 5,000 runs for Australia including 14 centuries.

He also played 42 one-day internationals before retiring from all cricket in 2004.

Meanwhile Australia captain Pat Cummins was named the Leading Cricketer in the World by Wisden to coincide with the publication of the 161st edition of the sport's "bible".

Cummins was recognised by Wisden for a stellar 2023 in which the fast bowler led Australia to a World Test Championship (WTC) final win over India.

His side retained the Ashes before he captained them to a 50-over World Cup final win against tournament hosts India in Ahmedabad.

TENNIS

Fit-again Nadal beats Cobolli on his injury comeback at Barcelona Open

AFP
Barcelona

Rafael Nadal made light work of Flavio Cobolli on a triumphant return from injury at the Barcelona Open yesterday.

The 22-time Grand Slam champion had not played an ATP Tour match since January but dispatched the Italian 6-2, 6-3 in one hour and 25 minutes to reach the second round.

Nadal, 37, was able to play on clay for the first time since winning the French Open in 2022 and showed flashes of his usual brilliance in a solid display.

"It was a good start - when you return you can't get rid of the doubts in one day, above all, on a physical level," Nadal told TVE.

"Within what it could be, it was

a good first round. He made mistakes and I think I played the game that I had to play."

Nadal who has triumphed at Roland Garros a record 14 times, is hoping to play there in May in what he expects to be the final year of his professional career.

The clay court king, who missed most of 2023 injured, will face Alex de Minaur today after breezing past Cobolli.

"It will be at a speed that I don't know if I will be able to keep up with, but I'll try," Nadal said of facing the 11th-ranked De Minaur.

After a double fault to fall 30-0 behind Nadal found his rhythm, with Cobolli intimidated by the fervent support for the Spaniard on the court named after him.

Nadal converted his third break point in the fourth game for a 3-1 lead, with Cobolli surviving four more to hold at 4-2 down.

The 12-time Barcelona Open winner broke again to claim the set in 43 minutes, clenching his fist in celebration.

Cobolli handed Nadal a break for 2-0 in the second set with two more unforced errors but finally put some pressure on Nadal's serve in the third game to break back.

However Nadal broke again for 3-1 after Cobolli's third double fault and served it out to triumph.

The Spaniard did not produce any aces and his serve was effective but not explosive.

"I've gone months without being able to serve, (and) although I've got a lot of excitement to play here and do the best I can, I'm not going to go crazy with the serve," added Nadal. "I have to serve with caution that the moment I'm in dictates...there are moments in which I feel more liberated and others in which I'm more careful."



Spain's Rafael Nadal returns the ball to Italy's Flavio Cobolli during the ATP Barcelona Open at the Real Club de Tenis in Barcelona, yesterday. (AFP)

Expo Stars League: Al Markhiya beat Al Gharafa 3-2



Al Markhiya (left) and Al Gharafa players jump to head the ball during their Expo Stars League match at Grand Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday. Al Markhiya won 3-2 draw. **Right:** Action from Expo Stars League match between Al Wakrah and Al Shamal at Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor yesterday. The match ended in a goalless draw.



MOTORSPORT

Pride and hype as F1 roars back to China after 2 years

Tickets for the action-packed Formula One weekend sold out within minutes of going on sale in January

AFP
Shanghai

Two years ago the Shanghai International Circuit hosted a Covid hospital, but this weekend it will stage Formula One once more as the sport returns to China for the first time since the pandemic.

Adding to the excitement of fans, they will see Shanghai native Zhou Guanyu drive at his home track in Formula One for the first time.

"I'm extremely excited, in these 5,000 years of (Chinese) history there has only been one Zhou Guanyu," said fan Wang Xiaotian.

Shanghai last witnessed an F1 race in 2019, before Covid and China's travel restrictions put a halt to almost all major international sport in the country.

Tickets for the action-packed Formula One weekend - which begins with Friday morning practice, sees a sprint race on Saturday and ends with the grand prix on Sunday - sold out within minutes of going on sale in January.

Ma Qinghua, the first Chinese to drive an F1 car when he took part in a 2012 practice session, said the sport's return will have a "very good impact", especially on younger fans who did not have the chance to see their heroes in the flesh during the pandemic.

"This group of people are very



Formula 1 Kick Sauber's Chinese driver Zhou Guanyu (left) and Managing Director of Sauber Group and representative of the Alfa Romeo F1 Team, Alessandro Alunni (centre) attend the world premier of the docu-film *The First One*, in Shanghai, yesterday. (AFP)

much anticipating the chance to witness a race personally," Ma, a pioneer of China's motorsport industry, told AFP. It was almost exactly two years ago, at the height of the city's lockdown, that the Shanghai circuit became the site of a makeshift 13,000-bed Covid hospital.

That was just a few weeks after Zhou had his first Grand Prix drive in Bahrain, finishing 10th to score a point, but the pandemic delayed until this week. Even though he is unlikely to challenge for the podium, Zhou is desperate to put on a Shanghai show.

"I can't wait to give it my all, share the passion with our entire

team trackside and at home, and start a new chapter of Chinese motorsport together with the crowd," Zhou said yesterday. "It's an opportunity to inspire and pave the path for future generations being interested in the sport."

"My country loves racing and has been waiting for this moment for years." His excitement is echoed by fans in the city. "As China's first F1 driver, we are extremely proud of him," Hu Yanqin, 29, said at a recent fan event screening the Japanese Grand Prix - complete with large banners bearing Zhou's photo.

Underlining the hype surrounding Zhou, who is in his third F1 sea-



This general view shows spectators watching the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai on April 14, 2019. Two years ago the Shanghai International Circuit hosted a Covid hospital, but this weekend it will stage Formula One once more as the sport returns to China for the first time since the pandemic. (AFP)

son, fans greeted him at the airport when he arrived last week and a documentary about the racer, "*The First One*", will hit Chinese cinemas this weekend to coincide with the race. China is relatively new to motor racing, with cars a rare sight even in major cities as recently as the 1980s.

Shanghai staged the country's first F1 Grand Prix in 2004 and, prior to the pandemic, the sport's decision-makers had talked about the possibility of a second Grand Prix each year in China.

Ma, who was the first Chinese driver to take part in a Formula One practice session at the 2012 Italian Grand Prix, has witnessed the growth in motorsport first hand.

"It is a lot more popular now," said Ma, adding that, when he started, "I didn't even know where I could do a test or that there was such a thing as a racing licence."

Ma's F1 adventure did not go any further with the now-disbanded HRT team because of contract issues, he said, but he drove in other classes such as Formula E and the

World Touring Car Championship. Now 36, he runs a go-kart venue in Shanghai where aspiring speed demons zoom down a looping two-storey track tucked into the basement of a mall.

During Formula One's five-year absence, China continued to put resources into motor sport.

In 2022 the island province of Hainan poured five billion yuan (\$691mn) into an electric vehicle racing circuit and Formula E is returning to China next month, with Shanghai hosting for the first time.

BOTTOMLINE

World Athletics' offer of prize money at Paris Games goes against Olympic spirit: UCI chief



Rowing Olympic gold medalist Stephanos Ntoskos holds the Olympic torch following the flame lighting ceremony for the Paris 2024 Games at the Ancient Olympia archeological site in Greece yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Ancient Olympia

The decision by World Athletics to award prize money at the Paris 2024 Games goes against the Olympic spirit and solidarity among international federations, the head of cycling's global governing body (UCI) said yesterday.

Athletics became the first sport to offer prize money to Olympic champions when WA President Sebastian Coe announced last week that gold medallists in Paris will each earn \$50,000.

The decision took other international federations by surprise. "We really believe that this is not the Olympic spirit," UCI President David Lappartient told reporters on the sidelines of the Paris Olympics torch lighting ceremony. "The proposal (by World Athletics) was not discussed. It was (announced) on the day of our mother organisation's meeting. It should have been on the agenda," he added. "The Olympic spirit is to share revenues and have more athletes compete worldwide. Not only put all the money on the top athletes but spread the money. "If we concentrate money on top athletes, a lot of opportunities will disappear for athletes all over the world."

The announcement by WA was met with a positive reaction from the world's leading athletes, with the \$2.4mn prize pot to be split among the 48 gold medallists in Paris.

A total of \$540mn was allocated to the 28 sports at the previous Games in Tokyo with World Athletics receiving the most at \$40mn.

"We need to ensure we will have athletes tomorrow," said Jean-Christophe Rolland, who heads World Rowing.

"I fully respect the WA decision as long it concerns athletes from their sport but at the Olympic Games it is not about your sport but all sports," he said.

"I would appreciate if we had the discussion between us. This decision impacts not only athletes. It has other implications."

QATAR NATIONAL ARABIAN PENINSULA HORSE SHOW



Team Sabha Al Khor (bred by the Al Khor Stud and owned by Al Dawasir Stud) claimed the top Fillies 2 Years Old (Class 2C) and the Team Reem Al Jumail (owned & bred by Al Jumail Stud) won the Fillies 3 Years Old (Class 3A) on the second day of the four-day long Qatar National Arabian Peninsula Horse Show at Al Shaqab yesterday.



ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS WORLD CUP

Olympic berths, World Cup glory up for grabs in Doha

The end of a long Olympic qualification for apparatus specialists is in sight at this weekend's Artistic Gymnastics World Cup in Doha, which will determine 20 newly-minted Olympians heading for Paris Games 2024.

Throughout the series, which has included stops in Cairo, Cottbus, and Baku, hopefuls not yet qualified for Paris have earned Olympic qualification ranking points based on their placements on each apparatus. The two gymnasts with the highest points score on each apparatus book a ticket to the Games, with the best three rankings points scores counting toward the final total. A maximum of one place per apparatus can be secured by the same nation.

It is that last detail – room for a gymnast to drop their worst performance – that changes the Olympic qualification dynamic and makes Doha leg such a pivotal competition. Seven gymnasts, including Tokyo Olympic Uneven Bars champion Nina Derwael (Belgium) and 2019 Junior World Floor Exercise champion Ryu Sung-hyun (South Korea), have mathematically secured their Olympic tickets. At the end of the weekend, 13 more will join them – and competition for each place is stiff. Heading into a monumental weekend for Gymnastics, here is how things stand.

MEN'S FLOOR EXERCISE

Five men are contending for the second spot in Doha. The leader among them is Yavor Sharamkou (Belarus), which is astonishing considering that his 50 points come from two World Cups only. After winning Floor Exercise in Baku, another high quality performance will put him over the top, though Benjamin Osberger (France), Aurel Benovic (Croatia), Yuri Guimaraes (Brazil), and Diorges Escobar (Cuba) are all still in the race too.



Athletes train at the Aspire Dome yesterday, on the eve of the Artistic Gymnastics World Cup in Doha.

POMMEL HORSE

Two men who are registered for Doha are still swinging in what has been one of the most closely-fought contests for Olympic qualification. Two-time World medallist and Cairo champion Ahmad Abu al-Soud (Jordan) is guaranteed a ticket to Paris, but the second berth is still up in the air between Nariman Kurbanov (Kazakhstan) and Tokyo 2020 silver medallist Lee Chih-Kai (Chinese Taipei).

STILL RINGS

Eight years after breaking his leg vaulting during qualification at the Rio 2016 Olympics, Samir Ait Said (France) is this

close to heading to his home Games. He has been the most consistent through the qualification events, but he needs another big performance if he is going to get across the finish line in the top two. The biggest threats come from Nikita Simonov (Azərbayjan), Vahagn Davtyan (Armenia), and Arthur Avetisyan (Armenia). Cairo champion Ryong Jong-il (North Korea) started the series strong and faded, but he too could get a spot if he were to win and others did not improve their positions.

MEN'S VAULT

Among the tightest of the Olympic races, six men are vying for the two places.

Only two of them – leader Mahdi Olfati (Iran) and Shek Wei Hung (Hong Kong) – have achieved the maximum 30 ranking points, and Shek has done it twice. Both will be looking over their shoulders in Doha at Tseng Wei-Sheng (Chinese Taipei), who has only done two World Cups but had excellent results at both, and James Bacueti (Australia) who stands the best chance of grabbing a spot should either of the top two fold. Benovic and Trinh Hai Khang (Vietnam) are still in the running as well.

PARALLEL BARS

World Junior Parallel Bars champion Angel Barajas (Colombia) is ahead of seasoned teammate Jossimar Calvo (Colombia), but only one of the Colombians can go through. That's good news for Rasuljon Abdurakhimov (Uzbekistan) and Cameron-Lie Bernard (France), both of whom are within striking distance of the top two.

HORIZONTAL BAR

Tang Chia-Hung (Chinese Taipei) won in Cairo and Cottbus with his new routine that put him over the top. Right behind him is Robert Tvorogal (Lithuania), determined to avenge his disappointment from Tokyo. Trailing at a distance are Barajas and 2019 World champion Arthur Mariano (Brazil).

WOMEN'S VAULT

This one at least is simple: An Chang Ok (North Korea) and Valentina Georgieva (Bulgaria) have mathematically gathered enough points to qualify to the Olympics.

UNEVEN BARS

Eleven gymnasts could mathematically qualify for the Uneven Bars places. Among those with the most to gain is Georgia-Rose Brown (New Zealand), who leads with 50 points despite not having scored in

Baku. Jennifer Williams (Sweden), who left Cottbus without Olympic qualification points, is presently tied with Vanesa Masova (Czech Republic) with 48 points, just two shy of Brown's 50. Nathalie Westlund (Sweden) also stands to make big gains.

BALANCE BEAM

With Derwael having gathered the maximum of 90 points with her three World Cup victories, there is one spot left on Balance Beam and eight gymnasts could grab it. Competition is tight between Williams, Ting Hua-Tien (Chinese Taipei) and Laura Casabuena (Spain), all of whom are within 13 points of each other.

WOMEN'S FLOOR EXERCISE

Topping the Floor Exercise ranking after three events, Charliz Moerz (Austria) already has mathematically secured her spot. This leaves the second space between Casabuena, Emma Malabuyo (Philippines) and Sevgi Kayisoglu (Turkey). Malabuyo leads in the standings, but her 69 points is based on three competitions; Casabuena's and Kayisoglu's totals are based only on two.

READY TO HOST THE EVENT, SAYS AL-HITMI

Ali al-Hitmi, Chairman of the Championship Organising Committee, said all things are in place for the tournament start: "We are happy to host the major tournament for the 16th time in a row, and there is great work from all the committees participating in the organisation to produce the current version in the best possible way."

He added: "During this championship and the championships previously hosted by Qatar, we seek to spread the culture of gymnastics, and this is the goal that the federation has been working toward since its establishment in 2001."

FOOTBALL

PSG punish Barca to reach semis

Araujo's 29th-minute red card turns the tide in PSG's favour

AFP
Barcelona

Kylian Mbappe struck twice as Paris Saint-Germain battled back to beat 10-man Barcelona 4-1 and book a place in the Champions League semi-finals with a 6-4 aggregate triumph yesterday.

Raphinha fired Barcelona ahead early on but Ronald Araujo's 29th-minute red card turned the tide in PSG's favour, despite the Spanish champions leading by two goals following a 3-2 quarter-final first-leg win. Ousmane Dembele and Vitinha levelled the tie for PSG and the deadly Mbappe hit a brace to put them into the final four for the first time since 2021.

The French champions have never won the trophy despite huge investment but demonstrated they have the attacking weapons in their squad to do so. Five-time winners Barcelona were dreaming of a first semi-final return since 2019 but Araujo's red card for pulling down the relentless Bradley Barcola undermined their grip on the tie.

PSG coach Luis Enrique, who led Barca to the 2015 Champions League, said he believed his team would turn things around despite never having managed to after a first-leg defeat, and so it proved. The visitors started with determination and penned Barcelona back in their own territory, but it was the hosts who took the lead.

Explosive 16-year-old starlet Lamine Yamal ripped past Nuno Mendes and crossed to the near post where Raphinha turned home despite pressure from Achraf Hakimi.

It was the Brazilian winger's third goal of the tie after his brace in Paris.

Robert Lewandowski fired another chance over the top for Barcelona before Barcola tilted the tie in PSG's favour. The winger was a nightmare for his French compatriot Jules



Paris Saint-Germain's Kylian Mbappe (left) celebrates after scoring against Barcelona during the Champions League quarter-final second leg match in Barcelona yesterday. (AFP)

Kounde to handle.

Barcola teed up Mbappe but Barcelona goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen denied him well, before Araujo was sent off for bringing him down. The Uruguayan centre-back pulled Barcola back as he burst into the area, leaving Barca with 10 men.

DORTMUND SINK ATLETICO TO REACH SEMI-FINALS

Meanwhile, Borussia Dortmund fought back to beat Atletico Madrid 4-2 in their quarter-final second leg, securing a 5-4 aggregate victory and a first Champions League semi-final since 2013. Trailing 2-1 from the first leg, goals from Julian Brandt and Ian Maatsen had Dortmund 2-0 up at half-time.

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Visiting coach Diego Simeone made three changes at half-time including bringing on Angel Correa and his energy told immediately, Mats Hummels conceding a poor own goal before the Argentine netted to put Atletico back ahead in the tie. But those goals brought a sluggish Dortmund back to life, with Niclas Füllkrug and Marcel Sabitzer each scoring in a three-minute period to send the Bundesliga club through.

Former winners Dortmund, fifth in the German top flight and struggling to qualify for next season's Champions League, will next face Paris Saint-Germain for a place in the final at Wembley on June 1.

PREVIEW

Arteta urges Arsenal to seize chance at Bayern Munich



Arsenal coach Mike Arteta talks to his players before a training session in Munich yesterday.

AFP
Munich

Mikel Arteta has urged Arsenal to shake off a blow to their Premier League title challenge and seize the chance to reach the Champions League semi-finals for the first time in 15 years today.

The Gunners travel to face Bayern Munich with the quarter-final tie finely poised at 2-2 after the first leg in London last week. Since then Arsenal tasted defeat in the Premier League for the first time in 2024 as Aston Villa won 2-0 at the Emirates to leave Arteta's men trailing Manchester City by two points with six games to go.

However, the Spaniard said his players could not wallow in that disappointment and waste the hard work put in to reach this stage in their first Champions League campaign for seven years. "A performance that puts us in the Champions League semi-final," said Arteta when asked what reaction he wants from his side.

"The prep has been to achieve that. We have earned it for 10 months and everything we did last season. Tomorrow we have an unbelievable opportunity to make it happen. If we make it happen tomorrow it will be a really high emotional state. Something as a club we haven't achieved for the last 15 years and that's the opportunity. Most of our players have not experienced this, they are super-motivated and confident."

Arsenal had been flying since the turn of the year, taking 31 from a possible 33 points in the Premier League by scoring 35 goals in 11 games. However, they have stumbled over the past week as an out-of-sorts Bayern, who have been deposed as German champions for the first time in 12 years, exposed chinks in their armour before Villa's shock victory.

And there are fitness concerns over two of Arsenal's best players ahead of the second leg as Bukayo Saka and captain Martin Odegaard picked up knocks towards the end of the Villa game. "Hopefully they will be available," added Arteta. "Obviously we had only less than 48 hours to recover for the game and we've done very little training. So we'll assess them tomorrow and see how they are."

BAYERN BOSS TUCHEL HOPING TO ECHO CHELSEA RUN

Bayern Munich manager Thomas Tuchel said he will seek to echo the spirit of 2021's Champions League-winning run with Chelsea against Arsenal. With Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen already in possession of the Bundesliga trophy, the Champions League is now the only focus for Tuchel's Bayern.

Being able to concentrate only on Europe is a luxury few of the teams remaining in the Champions League have, particularly Arsenal who are in the midst of a tense Premier League title race. Tuchel was free to make his focus on Europe obvious, making seven changes in Saturday's hard-fought 2-0 home win over struggling Cologne.

Left out of the squad completely for the Cologne clash, captain Manuel Neuer and winger Leroy Sane were allowed to watch Saturday's win from the comfort of the grandstand.

Bayern will however face Arsenal missing several first teamers. Canada defender Alphonso Davies is suspended, while forwards Serge Gnabry and Kingsley Coman are injured. Tuchel would not be drawn on who would replace Davies, telling reporters after Saturday's win over Cologne he may "do something crazy".

Asked if one of Bayern's centre-backs could make the shift out to left-back, Tuchel said with a smile "no, we want to win."

Amir Cup basketball: Al Arabi, Qatar SC register wins



Qatar Basketball League champions Al Arabi and Qatar SC registered wins in the Group A matches at the Amir Cup tournament yesterday. At Al Gharafa Stadium, Al Arabi defeated Al Gharafa 98-72 in the first match of the day, while Qatar SC beat Al Khor 89-65 in the second. Mustafa Hussain Ali scored 20 points for Al Arabi and Sindou Ismail Diallo netted 29 points for Qatar SC.

