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TENNIS

Sabalenka knocked out by Vondrousova; Swiatek into semis

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ATHLETICS

# Barshim begins season with an eye on fourth Olympic medal

'I am a smart athlete now. I am older, wiser. If I have a small niggle, I know I have to take care of it'



Qatar's high jump star Mutaz Barshim addresses a news conference in Xiamen, China, yesterday.

By Rizwan Rehmat  
Doha

**G**lobal high jump superstar Mutaz Barshim feels fit ahead of the new season's opening competition today but the 32-year-old has his eyes fixed on another gold medal at this year's Paris Olympic Games.

The tall Qatari, who famously shared the high jump gold with Italian Gianmarco Tamberi at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, today faces world indoor champion Hamish Kerr in the men's high jump in Chinese city of Xiamen.

In a candid chat with the international media ahead of the opening round of the 2024 Wanda Diamond League, the three-time world high jump champion yesterday confidently said he can't wait for the new season to commence.

Excerpts from a Q&A session with Barshim:

**Q: It's been six months since we last saw you compete. You were at the 2023 Asian Games in Guangzhou, China. How has it been for you since your last competition?**

**A:** As you said my last competition was the (2023) Asian Games here in China. It was an amazing atmosphere then. It was a great competition. I really loved it. I am really happy to be back in China, competing again. It is a very important season. It is the Olympics season. The last six months were more of a relaxing time, to be honest. I was doing my recovery. I had



plans to compete indoors but then I had some (injury) issues so we decided not to risk it. Now I am feeling healthy again. My training has been going well. I am happy where I am at the moment. But it's my first meet of the season and I want to go out there and see what I can do. I am excited to compete.

**Q: Is there a certain height you would be happy with in the new season?**

**A:** It's still April so I don't know. I will be very happy if I win (in Xiamen). I want to push myself. I want to jump high. How high? I don't know (smiles). I will go to-

tomorrow (today) and see. I want to go and put on a good show.

**Q: Paris will be your fourth Olympics. Does it feel different or is it just another Olympics for you?**

**A:** My fourth Olympics, wow! It's crazy. Definitely (it) feels different. For me, (competing at) Olympics was a dream, you know. I remember watching the Olympics on TV. I wanted to be there (competing) so bad. I told myself one day I will be there. Here I am - I have been to three Olympics. One silver, one gold and going for my fourth Olympics. You still get that

tangle 'it is an Olympics year! So, it definitely feels different. I am just going to prepare myself to be ready to fight and hopefully be on the podium.

**Q: Did you enjoy the Asian Games last year?**

**A:** Yes, I definitely enjoyed the Asian Games last year. It was really amazing competing in China. The crowds were packed at the venue. The fans were really supportive, I loved it. Everything was really top-notch. Since then I have been having my break. It was like an off-season break with my family. Then I started my training again. I didn't do the indoors because I had some minor injuries. I have overcome everything. So yeah, I feel good and feel healthy. When I feel good, I can jump. In terms of training. Because of injuries, I couldn't do my regular training. I know I have a lot of work coming. I am really excited. The training is going how I want it to go. I had a lower back pain and a hip injury. They were not big injuries. I didn't want to risk it. I am a smart athlete now. If I have a small niggle, I know I have to take care of it. I don't want to miss three four months of action because of injuries that I didn't take care of. I am older, wiser (laughs).

**Q: Your good friend Gianmarco Tamberi, the high jumper, could be the flag-bearer for Italy at the Paris Olympics. How do you see that?**

**A:** Oh yes, why not? He's a great athlete. He is the Olympic champion. That would be really nice to see (smiles).

## Coleman focused on US trials, not Olympics, as Diamond League kicks off

**Xiamen, China: Christian Coleman** admitted yesterday to being more focused on safely negotiating the notoriously tough US trials than the actual Paris Olympics, where he hopes he will bid for a sprint double.

Coleman, who beat teammate Noah Lyles to 60 metres gold in the World Indoor Championships in Glasgow in February, had to sit out the Covid-delayed Tokyo Games after missing a drugs test. He donned a US vest at the 2016 Rio Olympics, where he ran the heats for the Justin Gatlin-led 4x100m relay squad that was eventually disqualified in the final won by Usain Bolt's Jamaica.

"I can't even think past June right now, just focused on being our absolute best when we need to be

at the trials," Coleman said ahead of the opening Diamond League meeting of the season in the Chinese city of Xiamen.

"If you're not at your best there then the season's all for nought, really.

"That's what makes it so special to be on the American team - the fact it's so hard to make it."

Coleman, along with teammate Fred Kerley - the 2022 world champion and Olympic silver medalist - holds the joint sixth fastest time over 100m ever run (9.76sec) and acknowledged that the United States would have a very strong 4x100m relay squad in Paris.

"Hopefully I can start the year off on a good note," said Coleman, who was world outdoor 100m champion in 2019 before his dop-



ing suspension. "Everyone's goal is first to make the team but whoever makes that team is obviously well capable of getting on that relay pool and doing something special.

"The world record is definitely within our reach."

Coleman admitted that competing in an Olympic year felt "a little different because you know the magnitude of it".

"I feel like it would be unrealistic not to acknowledge the fact that it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that not many people have the

opportunity to even experience, being in your prime and actually having a realistic chance of making it to the Olympics."

Coleman added: "As far as the process is concerned, we do this every year, so it's really no different. You just try not to pay too much attention to outside factors and outside pressures.

"The main thing is focus on what's right in front of you, one day at a time. That's the same process every year, it's just a bigger opportunity."

Today's meeting in Xiamen, the first of back-to-back Diamond League meets in China, with a second in Shanghai on April 27, will also see women's world 100m champion Sha'Carri Richardson in action in the 200m.

Coleman dubbed Richardson, who also won 200m bronze at the Budapest worlds, "special".

"She's somebody who's at the forefront of women's empowerment in sport, she's taken it to a whole different level.

"She's a beast, a special talent, she's somebody who's going to continue to propel the sport forward and take it to new heights. 'I'm a fan,' he said.

"She's someone I take inspiration from."

Also in action in Xiamen, the first of 15 meets on the elite one-day track and field circuit, are 12 Olympic gold medalists, notably Swedish pole vault star Mondo Duplantis and Qatar's three-time world high jump champion Mutaz Essa Barshim.

ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS WORLD CUP DOHA

## Jordan's al-Saud wins pommel horse gold

**J**ordan's Ahmed Abu al-Saud lived up to his reputation on the pommel horse after he won the gold at the 16th Artistic Gymnastics World Cup Doha at the Ladies Indoor Hall yesterday.

The 28-year-old amassed 15,500 points yesterday to top the final, with world champion Rhys McClenaghan of Ireland finishing third (15,233).

Al-Saud had won the Asian Championships gold in Doha two years ago. He also became the first gymnast from Jordan to win a medal (silver) at the World Artistic Gymnastics Championships in

Liverpool. He followed it up with bronze at the 2023 World Championships in Antwerp, Belgium.

The 24-year-old McClenaghan is a double world champion on pommel horse after having won gold at the 2022 and 2023 editions, but al-Saud had the last laugh yesterday. Lee Chih Kai of Chinese Taipei (15,400) took the silver.

In the men's rings finals, Armenia's Vahagn Davtyan finished on top ahead of Nikita Simonov (Azerbaijan) and Samir Ait Said (France).

Karimi Milad of Kazakhstan won the Floor Exercise final after accumulating 14,766 points. Luke

Whitehouse of Great Britain took silver (14,566), Dmitriy Patanin also of Kazakhstan came third (14,500).

Panama's Karla Navas won the women's Vault gold in a field that also featured eight-time Olympian Oksana Chusovitina.

Navas walked away with gold after an impressive effort of 13,850 points, though she was closely challenged by North Korea's reigning Asian champion An Chang-ok (13,833). Bulgaria's 17-year-old Valentina Georgieva (13,466), who has already secured her berth for the Paris Olympic Games, finished third.

The women's uneven bar was clinched by Algeria's Kaylia Nemour. The 17-year-old registered 15,336 points with 7 in Difficulty and 8.366 in execution to pip her nearest rivals that also included Levi Ruivivar of the Philippines and Alena Tsitavets.

Kaylia had become the first African gymnast to win a medal at the 2023 World Championships where she won a silver on the uneven bars.

As many as 95 male and 55 female gymnasts representing 55 countries are taking part in the event, which will conclude today.



Jordan's Ahmed Abu al-Saud performs during the pommel horse final at the 16th Artistic Gymnastics World Cup Doha at the Ladies Indoor Hall yesterday.

MOTORSPORT

# 'All-or-nothing' Norris takes sprint pole in Shanghai

'It was tricky, you are always nervous going into a session like this. You just have to risk a lot'

AFP  
Shanghai

A fearless "all or nothing" lap from McLaren's Lando Norris in wet and wild conditions yesterday denied Lewis Hamilton pole position for the Chinese Grand Prix sprint race.

Hamilton thought he had claimed Shanghai pole in his Mercedes when Norris's lap of 1min 57.940sec on intermediate wet tyres was deleted for exceeding track limits, only to be dramatically reinstated a minute later.

Fernando Alonso in an Aston Martin showed his experience and guile to come third in the treacherous conditions with championship leader Max Verstappen fourth.

It was a second career sprint pole for Norris.

"It was tricky, you are always nervous going into a session like this," said the Englishman.

"You just have to risk a lot, push and build tyre temperature and what not. You only get three laps. The first two I aborted on both, so it was all or nothing."

Verstappen's Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez was sixth, splitting the Ferraris of Carlos Sainz and Charles Leclerc, who survived a big spin.

"It was just like driving on ice," said Verstappen, whose final lap time was deleted after a trip across the gravel outside the final bend.



McLaren's British driver Lando Norris drives during the sprint qualifying session ahead of the Chinese Grand Prix at the Shanghai International Circuit in Shanghai yesterday. (AFP)

"That is why also I think we deserved to be where we are in qualifying, it isn't really working for me in the wet but it is not where we are in the dry."

Hamilton has endured a poor start to 2024 but was clearly looking forward to starting from the front row.

"So happy, as soon as I saw the rain coming I was getting excited. In dry conditions we're not quick enough."

Alonso was also thankful for the late rain. "We were not super competitive on the dry," he said.

"In the wet it was difficult to judge the level of grip and risk we wanted to apply but in the end I am happy"

Fifth-placed Sainz said the rain and cool conditions made it very difficult to get his intermediate tyres warmed up.

"We didn't manage to switch on the tyres so we couldn't push,"

said the Spaniard, the only driver to win a race this season apart from Verstappen. Formula One is back in China for the first time since 2019, when Hamilton won.

**Hometown hero Zhou**

A big crowd at the Shanghai International Circuit let out a huge roar when their hometown hero Zhou Guanyu made it into the third qualifying session.

He will start today morning's



Lando Norris (left) receives an award for getting first position in the sprint qualifying session in Shanghai yesterday. (AFP)

sprint from 10th for Sauber. The 24-year-old Zhou was elevated to F1 in 2022, but has had to wait till his third season to make his home debut because of the pandemic.

Zhou is yet to score a 2024 championship point but has given himself a great chance with a near-flawless qualifying show.

Every lap in his bright green Sauber was greeted by massive cheers from the grandstand opposite the pit lane as his times appeared on the scoreboard.

"We will give it everything," Zhou said yesterday.

"I am just happy with the first day and great to have everyone here. The pressure before the weekend was so extreme, like I felt when I made my debut."

Verstappen, who has won three

out of four Grands Prix this season, again looked quickest until the rain came near the end of SQ2.

It sets up an intriguing 19-lap sprint battle today morning as the three-time world champion attempts to find his way past Alonso, Hamilton and Norris.

"We have to try and have the best start possible," said Verstappen. And then I think it will be quite a long stint on one set of tyres in the sprint."

Hamilton said his fate lay with the weather gods.

"It really depends what the conditions will be like," said the seven-time world champion, who has won a record six Grands Prix in Shanghai. If they are like they were just now we have a chance of being up there."

CRICKET

# Rahul shines as Lucknow beat Chennai by 8 wickets

AFP  
Lucknow, India

K L Rahul's solid 82 runs off 53 balls helped Lucknow Super Giants comfortably beat Chennai Super Kings by eight wickets in the IPL yesterday.

Rahul's time at the crease, which saw him smash nine fours and three sixes, played a key role in pushing Lucknow past Chennai's 176-6 with six balls to spare.

"I felt that if we bat well, we could chase it down...when your partnership goes on, you can take a few more chances. Glad that it happened," said Rahul.

Chennai got off to a slightly jittery start after being invited to bat first, losing Rachin Ravindra (zero) and skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad (17) in the first five overs.

Ajinkya Rahane looked to steady the side, with the help of Ravindra Jadeja, but fell in the ninth over after racking up a respectable 36 runs off 24 balls.

Lucknow's clinical bowling restricted Chennai in the middle overs, with Shivam Dube (three) not being able to pop off.

But Jadeja soldiered on for the rest of the game, getting his half-century in the seventeenth over.

Reliable warhorse MS Dhoni,



who smacked 28 runs off 9 balls, helped Chennai turn up the heat in the last three overs and pushed the team to 176-6.

Lucknow opens Quinton de Kock and K L Rahul set up the chase with a superb 134-run partnership, before de Kock, who hit five fours in his 43-ball 54, fell in the fifteenth over.

Rahul went onto smash an incredible 82 runs off 53 balls before being dismissed in the eighteenth over.

A final push by Nicholas Pooran (23) helped seal the victory for Lucknow.

"We lost wickets regularly and were 10-15 short," said Gaikwad.

"Good to play them again soon, will come back with homework done."

**BRIEF SCORES**

**Lucknow Super Giants 180 for 2** (Rahul 82, de Kock 54, Pooran 23\*, Pathirana 1-29) **beat Chennai Super Kings 176 for 6** (Jadeja 57\*, Rahane 36, Moeen 30, Dhoni 28\*, Krunal 2-16) **by eight wickets**

Lucknow Super Giants' captain K L Rahul plays a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Chennai Super Kings at the Ekana Cricket Stadium in Lucknow yesterday. (AFP)

SWIMMING

# Titmus fires Olympic warning with fastest 400m freestyle of year



Ariarne Titmus reacts after competing in the women's open 400m freestyle final during the Australian Open Swimming Championships at the Gold Coast Aquatic Centre yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Gold Coast, Australia

World record holder Ariarne Titmus fired a warning shot yesterday to Katie Ledecky and Summer McIntosh ahead of the Paris Olympics with the fastest 400m freestyle of the year.

The reigning Olympic champion went under four minutes at the Australian championships on the Gold Coast, hitting the wall in 3min 59.13sec to remain unbeaten in the event since 2019.

Titmus beat Ledecky in a thrilling final at the Tokyo Olympics then broke the American great's long-standing world record in 2022, only for Canadian teenager McIntosh to better the mark last year.

The Australian hit back to reclaim the world record months later with the expected clash between the three in Paris shaping as a blockbuster.

"That's a good sign," said Titmus, who is again set to contest the 200-400-800 treble in France. She won gold over 200 and 400 in Tokyo and silver behind Ledecky in the 800.

"I'm just trying to think about my expectations on myself and what I expect to do in Paris."

"I know a lot of people are willing me on and I'm just trying to use it in the best way possible," added the 23-year-old, who has swum four of the six

fastest times in history. Lani Pallister finished second in a personal best 4:01.75 ahead of the Australian Olympic trials in June.

After her Australian record-breaking exploits in the 200m and 400m medley, Kaylee McKeown was again on fire in the 50m backstroke - a non-Olympic event in which she holds the world record.

The 22-year-old powered to a 27.07 finish ahead of Mollie O'Callaghan (27.16) in the fifth fastest time ever.

"Had a bit of fun trying to change gears this meet, it's been good training," said McKeown, who is also the 100m and 200m backstroke world record holder.

Matt Temple signalled his Paris intentions with the quickest 100m butterfly of the year, surging to the wall in 50.80.

Former world champion Cameron McEvoy and sprint king Kyle Chalmers both went under 22 seconds in the 50m freestyle, with the former taking the title in 21.93 as he looks to make a fourth Olympics.

Elijah Winnington continued his stellar form with victory in the men's 800m freestyle, powering home in 7:43.08 by half a length from Sam Short.

Winnington set a world-leading time this year in the 400m free earlier in the meet. In other races, William Petric touched first in the 200m medley in 1:58.43 ahead of New Zealand's Lewis Clareburt, the 400m medley world champion.

## ROHIT SAYS INDIA-PAKISTAN TEST CRICKET WOULD BE 'AWESOME'

**NEW DELHI:** India captain **Rohit Sharma** has thrown his support behind any resumption of Test cricket against arch-rivals Pakistan, saying it would be "awesome".

The South Asian neighbours are bitter political adversaries and have fought three wars against each other since they were partitioned at the end of British colonial rule in 1947.

Their cricket teams have not faced off in a Test since 2007.

Instead they play only occasionally in the shorter versions of the game and usually on neutral territory in international tournaments. Rohit appeared Thursday on a YouTube chat show hosted by former captains Adam Gilchrist of Australia and Michael Vaughan

of England. Asked by Vaughan if playing Pakistan in a Test series would be beneficial for the five-day game, Rohit said: "I totally believe that."

"They are a good team, superb bowling line-up, good contest. Especially if you play in overseas conditions, that will be awesome," added the 36-year-old.

"I would love to. It would be a great contest between two sides... so why not?"

There have been several attempts made by administrators from both boards to resume bilateral cricket, including playing overseas in neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the UAE. In the recent years the England Cricket Board and Cricket Australia, too, have publicly voiced their interest

in hosting the marquee series.

Rohit is the first major name in Indian cricket to publicly share his opinion on a topic that Indian cricket administrators have previously responded to by saying the call of resuming bilateral ties with Pakistan was subject to permission from Indian government. "At the end of the day, we want to be in contest and I think it will be a great contest between the two sides. We anyway play them in ICC trophies, so it doesn't really matter. It's just pure cricket that I'm looking at. I'm not interested in anything else. It's pure cricket, game between bat and ball. It'll be a great contest." India and Pakistan have not faced each other on either side's soil in a bilateral series since 2012.



## Al-Baker and al-Shahwani triumph at 12th round of Hathab



Mohamed Khalifa al-Baker won the Medium Tour class during the 12th round of the Qatar Equestrian Tour - Longines Hathab yesterday. At the outdoor arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation, al-Baker registered the fastest round of 34.16 seconds on Etna du Chateau. In second place was Hussein Saeed Haidan in a time of 34.95 seconds on Viahibi, while Mohamed Saeed Haidan was third astride Obama in 35.29 seconds. The Medium Tour team event was won by Alfardan Group, with NK Cafe team finishing second, ExxonMobil team came third. Faisal al-Kahla, Deputy Director of the tournament and Mohamed Saleh al-Marri, Vice-Chairman of the Facilities and Logistics Committee crowned the winners. In the amateur competition, Hadi Nasser al-Shahwani emerged triumphant in a time of 22.08 seconds astride Beyonce. Hadi Mansour al-Shahwani was second on Dusty, while Abdulaziz bin Jassim al-Thani came third on Clints. Abdullah al-Qashouti, Chairman of the Media and Live Broadcasting Committee, honoured winners.

## Kiptum's death casts shadow over London Marathon for Bekele



**London:** Ethiopia's Kenenisa Bekele said Kelvin Kiptum will always have a special place at the London Marathon after the Kenyan's tragic death.

Bekele, a three-time Olympic track champion, is gearing up for tomorrow's latest edition of the race in the English capital. But the event will be overshadowed by the absence of long-distance runner Kiptum, who won last year's London Marathon for the third time before dying in a car accident in February.

Kiptum set a new London Marathon record time of two hours, one minute and 25 seconds last year and he was also the first man to run the marathon under two hours and one minute in Chicago. The 24-year-old's death sent shockwaves through the sport and he will be remembered before Sunday's race with 30 seconds of applause.

Bekele, who won Olympic gold in both the 5,000 metres and 10,000 metres at the 2008 Games in Beijing, has run the London Marathon five times, finishing as runner-up in 2017. The 41-year-old, who also has five World Championship titles on the track, is in no doubt of the lasting impact made by Kiptum.

"Kelvin of course, all of us miss him. Even within his short time, he has been setting an amazing history," Bekele said. "The course record is also under his name and we are all remembering him. We put him in a special place in our heart because in a really short time he has done a lot for our sport."

Bekele believes a lot of factors will come into play if Kiptum's course record is to be challenged this weekend. "Most of the time in London, maybe the first half is a very fast start because of pacing, but with me it can depend," he said. "I can read my body, listening to my feelings and of course the circumstances - like with the weather."

Ethiopia's Tamirat Tola comes into London as the reigning New York Marathon champion, which followed on from his victory at the 2022 World Championship in Eugene. Tola, who claimed 10,000m bronze at the 2016 Rio Olympics, feels in good shape heading into Sunday's showpiece race.

"I have been working hard to prepare my body for the marathon in London," he said. "My training is OK and my body is okay, so we will see (what happens) on Sunday."

Selection for this year's Olympics in Paris could also be secured this weekend, but Tola said he will not let that distract his focus.

### TENNIS

# Sabalenka knocked out by Vondrousova

Swiatek on course for third successive Stuttgart title after win over Raducanu

Reuters  
Stuttgart

**W**orld number two Aryna Sabalenka's hopes of reaching a fourth consecutive Stuttgart Open final ended after a 3-6 6-3 7-5 quarter-final defeat by Marketa Vondrousova yesterday, while champion Iga Swiatek maintained her perfect record at the event.

World number one Swiatek extended her run at the tournament to 10-0 and is now two wins away from claiming a third successive Stuttgart title following her 7-6(2) 6-3 win over Briton's Emma Raducanu. She will face fourth seed Elena Rybakina for a place in tomorrow's final.

Sabalenka had won her last four matches with Vondrousova, and after winning the opening set, the Australian Open champion looked on course to progress. Wimbledon champion Vondrousova led 4-1 in the second set before Sabalenka pulled it back to 4-3 but the Czech sixth seed broke for a third time and held serve to force the decider. Sabalenka went 5-4 ahead in the final set before Vondrousova reeled off three games in a row to reach the semi-finals where she will meet either American third seed Coco Gauff or Marta Kostyuk of Ukraine.

"It was a very tough match, and I think a great one, too," Vondrousova said. "She's a great player so I just tried to stay in the rallies. She hits very fast so it's tough to do something. But I stayed calm in the crucial moments."

Sabalenka reached the quarter-finals after her good friend Paula Badosa was forced to retire through injury on Wednesday, with the match tied at one set each and 3-3 in the



Czech Republic's Marketa Vondrousova plays a backhand during her quarter-final match against Aryna Sabalenka at the Stuttgart Open. (AFP)

decider. Fourth seed Elena Rybakina also reached the semi-finals after overcoming the challenge of in-form Jasmine Paolini 6-3 5-7 6-3. Paolini won the Dubai Tennis Championships in February and rose to a career-high 14th in the world rankings and

reached the last 16 at Indian Wells in March. After winning the opening set, Rybakina had let slip a 4-2 lead in the second and came back from an early break by the Italian in the final set.

"I'm happy with my energy," Rybakina

said. "Of course, I had chances in the second set where I could have closed it out but overall, I think it's just a matter of matches and feeling better and better on the court."

### TSITSIPAS SAVES TWO MATCH POINTS TO REACH BARCELONA SEMIS

World number seven Stefanos Tsitsipas saved two match points to defeat Facundo Diaz Acosta and reach the semi-finals of the Barcelona clay-court tournament. The Greek came through 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (10/8) after his 53rd-ranked Argentine opponent missed a match point in the 12th game of the deciding set.

Both men then saved more match points in the tie-breaker before Tsitsipas, a three-time runner-up at the Barcelona tournament, secured a ninth successive win following on from his Monte Carlo Masters title victory at the weekend. The 25-year-old Tsitsipas will face either 36th-ranked Arthur Fils of France or Dusan Lajovic, the world number 59 from Serbia, in the semi-finals on Saturday.

Casper Ruud, the world number six from Norway who was runner-up to Tsitsipas in Monte Carlo, eased past Italian Matteo Arnaldi 6-4, 6-3. "It is not easy. You are playing for a spot in the semi-finals," said Ruud. "I was able to come through in the end after a few crazy rallies."

Argentinian Tomas Etcheverry also booked his place in the semi-finals with a hard-fought straight sets win over Britain's Cameron Norrie. Etcheverry, ranked 30 in the world, one place higher Norrie, edged a tight match 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/1) and will face Ruud for a place on the final. "I spoke to my coach last night and also my team, that I have to play aggressively to win this match," the 24-year-old Etcheverry said.

### SPOTLIGHT

## Athletics president Coe divides Olympic movement with prize money move

AFP  
Paris

**W**orld Athletics president Sebastian Coe's decision to award prize money to Olympic gold medallists was welcomed by athletes but has sparked a backlash from bosses of other sports. Coe put the cat among the pigeons when he announced last week that track and field gold medallists at the Paris Games this year will receive \$50,000 (47,000 euros).

It is the first time a sports federation will pay prize money at an Olympics. The total prize fund of \$2.4m will come from the International Olympic Committee's revenue share allocation that World Athletics receives every four years. In the strongest criticism, the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF) said the move "undermines the values of Olympism and the uniqueness of the Games".

"One cannot and should not put a price on an Olympic gold medal," it added. The head of one leading Olympic sport, International Cycling Union (UCI) president David Lappartient, made clear his displeasure. "If we concentrate money on top athletes, a lot of opportunities will disappear for athletes all over the world," the Frenchman said.

"We really believe that this is not the Olympic spirit. The proposal was not discussed."



It was not just the decision to pay prize money that annoyed Coe's fellow federation chiefs. "ASOIF was neither informed nor consulted in advance of the announcement," it said, adding "it is important and fair to discuss the matter at stake with the other federations in advance".

"What surprised everybody is that Coe took the decision unilaterally with one hour's warning to the IOC and zero hours warning to other federations," Michael Payne, a former IOC marketing director who retains close links to the body, said. "The view of the federations, not unreasonably, is that they have been thrown under a bus. What are you going to do only three months before Paris?" Payne said.

Coe, a double Olympic 1500m champion in the 1980s, said his sport had long since ceased to be amateur "so it is very important that the sport recognises that change in landscape".

In a statement to AFP responding to the federations' criticism, World Athletics said paying prize money was "about underscoring our unwavering commitment to empowering the athletes and recognising the critical role they play in the success of any Olympic Games".

The statement said it was impossible to put a "marketable value" on winning an Olympic medal. "But we think it is important to make sure some of the revenues generated by our athletes at the Olympic Games are directly returned to those who make the Games the global

spectacle that it is," World Athletics added.

Athletics is traditionally the headline sport at any Olympics and athletes have welcomed the move. Karsten Warholm, the Olympic men's 400m hurdles champion, said last week: "To be honest, anything offered in terms of a prize is good for the athletes, it's motivation."

Coe's British compatriots have been critical of the decision. "Now other sports are clearly going to get some scrutiny or even pressure from athletes saying: 'Well what about our sport, how can this sport do it and not us?'" the British Olympic Association's chief executive Andy Anson said. "It's a debate we can have, but we need to have it at the right time, and the right place, and together."

It is not the first time Coe has followed a different path to other federations. He took the lead in adopting a hardline stance against Russia over the invasion of Ukraine, earning widespread praise for banning all athletes from Russia and Belarus from his sport.

Payne though is scratching his head over Coe's reasoning behind the prize money move. "He has always been independent," the Irishman said. "He is also a very skilled and experienced political operator. He ran a brilliant campaign for London to win (the hosting of the 2012 Olympics). (But) this one I cannot make out."

This has fuelled suggestions Coe might be eyeing the IOC presidency when Thomas Bach vacates the seat next year. Payne believes that "if it was a presidential ploy, it was a gold medal of an own goal". "Because who is electing the president? It's the IOC members. Many of them are international federation presidents, who are apoplectic with rage."

### FOCUS

## Olympic chief Bach says AI can be a game changer for athletes

AFP  
London

**I**OC president Thomas Bach said artificial intelligence (AI) can help identify talented athletes "in every corner of the world" as he unveiled the Olympic AI Agenda in London yesterday. Bach, speaking at Olympic Park, which hosted the 2012 Games, said the Olympic movement needs to lead change as the global AI revolution gathers pace. "Today we are making another step to ensure the uniqueness of the Olympic Games and the relevance of sport, and to do this, we have to be leaders of change, and not the object of change," said the International Olympic Committee president.

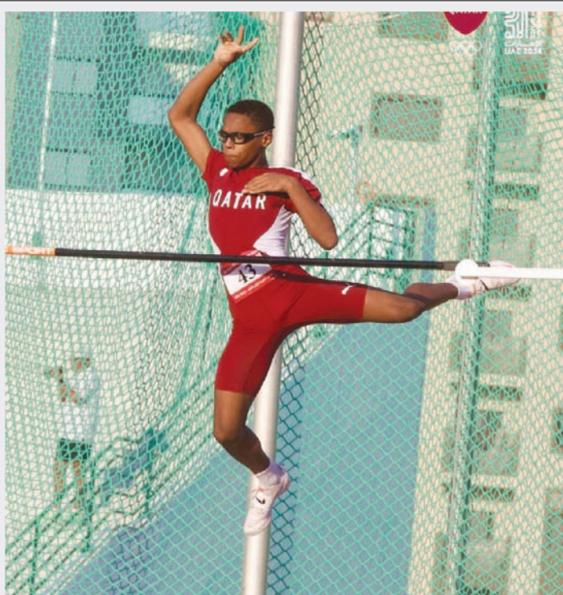
The former fencing gold medalist said it was vital to have a "holistic" approach to create an "overall strategy for AI and sport". Bach, speaking less than 100 days before the start of the Paris Olympics, said "unlike other sectors of society, we in sport are not confronted with the existential question of whether AI will replace human beings".

"In sport, the performances will always have to be delivered by the athletes," he said. "The 100 metres will always have to be run by an athlete - a human being. Therefore, we can concentrate on the potential of AI to support the athletes. AI can help to identify athletes and talent in every corner of the world. AI can provide more athletes with access to personalised training methods, superior sports equipment and more individualised programmes to stay fit and healthy."

Bach said other advantages of AI included fairer judging, better safeguarding and improved spectator experience. The Olympic AI Agenda comes from the IOC AI working group -- a high-level panel of global experts including AI pioneers and athletes, set up last year.

When asked about the potential negatives of AI, Bach was keen to emphasise the importance of free choice in sport. "He and she, or the parents, must still have the free choice," said the German. "So a guy who is then maybe identified as a great athlete in wrestling must still have the chance to play tennis and cannot be sorted out from these sports."

## QATAR WIN THREE GOLD AND FOUR SILVER AT GULF YOUTH GAMES



Qatar athletes won seven medals – three gold and four silver – yesterday at the inaugural edition of the Gulf Youth Games in Abu Dhabi. The athletics team won five medals, which included three gold and two silver, while the chess team won two silver medals. The gold medals were won by Hamza Hashim (long jump), Abdullah al-Abdullah (pole vault) and Hamad Dhawi al-Sultan (discus throw). The four silver medals were won by Rakan al-Rashidi (long jump), Younis al-Balushi (pole vault) and the under-18 women's chess team consisting of Rawda al-Qasabi, Layan al-Qasabi and Fatima al-Kuwari, and the under-14 boys' team consisting of Khaled al-Jamaat, Hamad al-Kuwari and Ibrahim al-Janahi. After the fourth day of competition, Qatar has won 14 medals, including 6 gold, 4 silver and 4 bronze.

### AFC U-23 ASIAN CUP

# South Korea, Japan cruise into quarters

Saudi edge closer to quarters spot after a 5-0 win over Thailand

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Japan booked their place in the quarter-finals of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 yesterday as Go Oiwa's side handed the United Arab Emirates a 2-0 defeat at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium to guarantee themselves a top two finish in Group B.

Goals from Seiji Kimura and Sota Kawasaki kept the 2016 champions perfect after their opening two games and they will face off against Korea Republic on Monday to determine who takes top spot in the standings. The result also means the UAE, who face China in their next game, cannot progress to the knockout rounds.

Oiwa's side prevailed despite the coach making seven changes to the side that defeated the Chinese on Tuesday with one of those call-ups, Kimura, heading wide of the target eight minutes into the game.

Hiroki Sekine's left-footed drive in the 13th minute flew across the face of Khalid Tawhid's goal while eight minutes later the Emirati goalkeeper was left flapping when Ayumu Ohata set up Ryotaro Araki to strike at goal, the ball thumping against the crossbar.

The Japanese were edging closer and in the 26th minute Tawhid was called into action to tip Kei Sato's diving header over the bar after the Werder Bremen midfielder had been found by Rihito Yamamoto's arcing ball into the area.

UAE's resistance was to last less than a minute more as, from the resulting corner, Japan took the lead. Fuki Yamada overhit his set-piece but, after picking up the loose ball, Yamamoto lifted his centre towards Kimura and he headed home via the inside of the post. Japan pressed for a second, with Sekine heading wide and Tawhid moving sharply across his goal line to push Yamada's curling top corner-bound free-kick to safety.

Leo Kokubo was called into action in the Japan goal two minutes before the break when he dropped to his left to keep out Abdulla Abbas' low shot on the run while, deep into injury time, the winger steered a close range header wide. Those were rare sights of goal for the UAE, however, with Sato and Araki both squandering opportunities while Ohata had a second for Japan ruled out for offside when referee Sadullo Gulmurodi consulted the pitch side monitor just after the hour mark.

By the 65th minute, though, Oiwa's side had doubled their lead when Kawasaki glanced his header into the far corner, steering the ball home after Ohata's first-time cross from



Japan's Sota Kawasaki (left) celebrates after scoring against the United Arab Emirates during the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Group B match at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.



Lee Young-jun (front) netted both the goals in South Korea's win over China at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

the left bye-line. Kuryu Matsuki should have added a third inside the final five minutes but could only find Tawhid's hands after being put in on goal by fellow substitute Mao Hosoya. Kaito Suzuki then headed against the crossbar and Sato shot high over the target as time ticked down, although it mattered little as Japan claimed all three points.

Meanwhile, South Korea booked their spot in the knockout stage after a 2-0 win against China at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium. Lee Young-jun, who netted the sole strike in their opening win against the UAE, came up with the goods again for South Korea by grabbing both goals in the Group B encounter.

It was a lesson in ruthlessness from South Korea, who had only three shots on target and scored two, with their clash against Japan on Monday to decide the group winners.

Later, Saudi Arabia produced a dominant performance to beat Thailand 5-0 in the Group C tie at Khalifa International Stadium as they edged closer to a place in the quarter-finals. Aiman Yahya, who grabbed a brace against Tajikistan in their opening game, scored once and assisted two with Abdullah Radif hitting a hat-trick as the 2022 champions made it two wins out of two with Iraq up next for them on Monday.

Meanwhile, Iraq revived their knockout stage hopes with a 4-2 win over Tajikistan at the Al Janoub Stadium. The 2013 champions dominated from the start and now need a win over Group C leaders Saudi Arabia on Monday to stand a chance of advancing into the quarter-finals, having lost their opening match to Thailand.

### PREMIER LEAGUE

## Arteta urges Arsenal to prove their worth after double blow

AFF  
London

Mikel Arteta has urged Arsenal to prove they have the mental strength to bounce back from a painful spell that wrecked their Champions League challenge and dented their Premier League title bid. Arteta's side lost 1-0 to Bayern Munich on Wednesday as the German side earned a 3-2 aggregate quarter-final victory.

The end of Arsenal's attempt to win the Champions League for the first time followed a damaging 2-0 home defeat against Aston Villa in the Premier League. Critics said the Gunners' stumble over the last week reflected a lack of character and toughness in Arteta's squad.

But Arsenal can return to the top of the table by winning at Wolves today while leaders Manchester City are in FA Cup semi-final action against Chelsea. "It's been an experience, not the best one," Arteta said. "We're fully focused on the times we have ahead of us with six games to go. The context is clear, if we win we go top of the league, you don't need anything else to be motivated."

Arsenal are without a win in their last three games, having drawn their quarter-final first leg against Bayern. Arteta claimed the first game against Bayern and the Villa clash could have produced different results if Arsenal had avoided key mistakes.

"It is what it is and we have to accept it. The Bayern one at home at the beginning, it could have been different," Arteta said.

"Against Villa we were the better team, but in the second half we paid the price for the chances we gave them and we have to move on from there. Now it is about showing against Wolves what we are made of and turning the situation around."

Chasing Arsenal's first Premier League crown in 20 years after blowing an eight-point lead in the title race last season, Arteta knows the verdict will not be kind if his team finish empty-handed again. But the Spaniard refused to blame his players for their wobble as he told them to make a final push for the title.

### KLOPP TELLS LIVERPOOL TO PUSH FOR TITLE

Jurgen Klopp has told spluttering Liverpool they can still clinch the Premier League title if they recover from a dismal spell by winning the last six matches of his reign. Klopp's side crashed out of the Europa League quarter-finals on Thursday after a 1-0 win against Atalanta that failed to overturn the three-goal first leg deficit.

It was the latest blow for Klopp in the closing weeks of his nine-year stay at Anfield. Liverpool also bowed out of the FA Cup at the quarter-final stage after losing to a last-gasp goal at bitter rivals Manchester United.

United rubbed salt into Liverpool's wounds by holding them to a draw in the Premier League on April 7, before Crystal Palace plundered a shock win at Anfield last weekend. Klopp's men have gone from leading the table to sitting two points behind leaders Manchester City in third place.

But the German, whose team travel to Fulham tomorrow, has not given up hope on giving Liverpool a record-equalling 20th English title as a parting gift. "It's not obviously in our hands, it is not about that. I think if we would win all our games there is a good chance we will be champion. If not there is a good chance someone else will be champion," Klopp said.

"Maybe we only have to win five, but nobody knows. Who would have thought that Arsenal lose against Aston Villa? We all sit here and think 'OK, yeah. City will win all their games' and that's happened quite frequently, but they have a lot of games to play and difficult opponents as well. We don't think about that. We don't think about them. It is just how can we make sure we start winning games again?"

Liverpool have had two seasons where the title race with City has seen them miss out by just one point after both clubs finished strongly.

### FIXTURES:

Today (1400 GMT unless stated): Luton v Brentford, Sheffield United v Burnley, Wolves v Arsenal (1830)  
**Tomorrow:** Everton v Nottingham Forest (1230), Aston Villa v Bournemouth (1400), Crystal Palace v West Ham (1400), Fulham v Liverpool (1530)

## Nagelsmann commits to German team ahead of home Euros

**Berlin:** Julian Nagelsmann has signed a contract extension with the German men's national team, the domestic football association said yesterday, putting to bed speculation of a quick return to club football.

The new deal keeps Nagelsmann with Germany for an additional two years and will see him coach the team at the 2026 World Cup in North America.

"This is a decision from the heart. It is a great honour to coach the national team," Nagelsmann said in a statement.

The announcement comes just a few weeks before Germany is set to host the 2024 European championships over June and July. Nagelsmann said he was "moved by the enthusiasm of the fans" after victories in recent friendlies against France and the Netherlands. "Together, we now want to have a successful home Euros," said Nagelsmann, whose deal with the national team was set to run out

after the summer tournament.

The German Football Association (DFB) was already "absolutely convinced" of the need to retain Nagelsmann's services, national team director Rudi Voeller said in the statement. Nagelsmann was a "brilliant tactician, who not only has great knowledge of the game, but has the passion to motivate and inspire each and every one of his players", said the legendary German striker turned executive.

The 36-year-old coach was "on the wish list" for a lot of top clubs in Europe, Neundorff said. Nagelsmann was strongly linked with a return to Bayern, who sacked the native Bavarian in March last year after a run of poor results.

Bayern jumped at the chance to replace Nagelsmann with former Chelsea coach Thomas Tuchel but things have only gone from bad to worse for the German giants. This

season under Tuchel, Bayern surrendered their Bundesliga crown to Bayer Leverkusen, ending a streak of 11 straight titles.

The failure in the league means Tuchel will leave Bayern at the end of the season. A successor has yet to be named but two widely touted candidates, Leverkusen's Xabi Alonso and Nagelsmann, are now out of the running.

Germany will be looking to perform on home turf after being dumped out of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar at the group stage. A miserable run of results following the tournament was enough for DFB management to decide they could not continue with coach Hansi Flick.

Germany's fortunes have since picked up with Nagelsmann at the helm, boosted by the return to the fold of experienced midfielder Toni Kroos. Euro 2024 kicks off in Munich on June 14, when Germany face Scotland at Bayern's Allianz Arena.



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta at a training session yesterday.