

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Unbeaten
Stoinis ton helps
Lucknow chase
211 to beat CSK



FOCUS | Page 3

USADA calls for
WADA overhaul,
probe into China
swim doping

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Wednesday, April 24, 2024
Shawwal 15, 1445 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Inter seal Serie A
title after derby
thriller with
AC Milan

Page 4

AFC U-23 ASIAN CUP

Uzbekistan prove too hot for Vietnam, Kuwait win 2-1

UZBEKS WILL MEET DEFENDING CHAMPIONS SAUDI ARABIA IN THE QUARTER-FINALS TOMORROW

Uzbekistan showed they will be a team to be reckoned with in the knock-out stage of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 after an emphatic 3-0 win over Vietnam at the Khalifa International Stadium yesterday.

A first half surge saw Uzbekistan hit the back of the net three times as the 2018 champions concluded their Group D campaign with a perfect nine points.

They meet defending champions Saudi Arabia in the quarter-finals tomorrow while Vietnam, who also advanced despite the defeat, will go up against Iraq.

Having already clinched their respective quarter-final spots with a match to spare, Vietnam rotated their squad with head coach Hoang Anh Tuan making eight changes to his starting lineup, while Uzbekistan included Abdulkodir Khusanov and Ibrokhimkhali Yuldoshev, the players having been released by their French and Russian clubs respectively.

It didn't take long for Uzbekistan to assert their supremacy, with the Central Asian side taking the lead as early as the fourth minute.

The play unfolded with Jasurbek Jaloliddinov delivering a well-timed pass to Ibrokhim Ibragimov, who beat the offside trap to set up Alisher Odilov, who tapped home from close-range.

Vietnam looked to hit back and had a chance of a counter attack in the 20th minute but Nguyen Minh Quang, after intercepting a pass from Muhammadkodir Hamraliev, opted to shoot rather than pass to Vo Nguyen Hoang, with his shot going wide.

The 2018 runners-up kept pressing but were undone in the 36th minute when Ruslanbek Jiyonov sprinted past the defence to receive the ball from a long-range



Alisher Odilov scored a brace in Uzbekistan's 3-0 win over Vietnam in the Group D match of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha yesterday.

free kick, finishing with a superb shot into the bottom-left corner.

Four minutes later, Odilov doubled his tally by heading home Saidzamat Mirsaidov's cross, giving Uzbekistan a comfortable lead going into the break.

Hoping to spark a second half comeback, coach Hoang introduced four fresh players, but Vietnam remained on the defensive, struggling to withstand the relentless pressure from Uzbekistan.

Vietnam became more assertive as the match progressed but it was Uzbekistan who came the

closest to scoring with Ibragimov and substitute Diyor Kholmatov denied by the upright in the 74th and 84th minutes respectively.

WINNING FINISH FOR KUWAIT

Kuwait secured their first-ever win at the after defeating Malaysia 2-1 in their final Group D match yesterday.

Both teams had already been eliminated prior to the match but the win for Kuwait allowed them to leave on a high while Malaysia go home without a point for the second successive edition.



Kuwait players celebrate after their win over Malaysia in the Group D match at the Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakra yesterday.

Malaysia started on the front foot and fashioned two opportunities before the 20-minute mark with Luqman Hakim finding the back of the net only to be judged offside, with Daryl Sham then forcing Kuwait defender Khalid Alfidhli into a block to deny his side footed attempt.

Kuwait withstood the early pressure and started to pose questions to the Malaysian defence as the half wore on with Salman Mohammed's free-kick after half an hour requiring Malaysian goalkeeper Sikh Izhan Nazrel to be sure with his handling of the ball.

A minute before half-time, the tide turned when Sikh Izhan was

shown a straight red card after barging into Salman in his attempt to clear the ball.

Things got worse for Malaysia in the 14th minute of added time when referee Alexander King, after a VAR check, awarded Kuwait a penalty for Umar Hakeem's foul on Talal Alqaisi with Salman converting with ease past substitute custodian Firdaus Irman. Despite playing with a man down, Malaysia started the second half the brighter of the two sides, using the pass of Haqimi down the right to get behind Kuwait's defence but Faisal Alshatti made a superb last ditch clearance before the ball reached Mukhairi Ajmal.

Kuwait increased their lead on the hour mark when substitute Sultan Alfaraj, on the pitch for mere seconds, delivered the perfect cross for Alqaisi to thump home. Malaysia reduced the deficit three minutes later when Nooa Laine sent a long diagonal pass to Haqimi with the Kuala Lumpur City FC forward slamming his low shot past Abdulrahman.

Kuwait's numerical advantage was taken away in the 84th minute when goalscorer Salman was shown a straight red for a rash challenge on Umar but were able to fend off Malaysia until the final whistle to secure the win.

the-afc.com

PREMIER LEAGUE

Five-star Arsenal thrash Chelsea to open up lead

AFP
London

Kai Havertz and Ben White scored twice as Arsenal thrashed Chelsea 5-0 yesterday to surge ahead in the Premier League title race and ramp up the pressure on Liverpool and Manchester City. Leandro Trossard was also on target for the Gunners, who move three points clear of Liverpool and four of Manchester City.

The destiny of the title remains in City's hands as the defending champions have two games in hand. Liverpool have also played one fewer game than Arsenal and are in action at Everton in the Merseyside derby today.

However, Mikel Arteta's men's goal difference advantage now looks unassailable should it become decisive in the title race. Chelsea and Arsenal's title rivals were dealt a huge blow before kick-off as the Blues' danger man Cole Palmer was ruled out due to illness.

Palmer has scored or assisted nearly 50 percent of Chelsea's Premier League goals this season and his presence was badly missed by the visitors. Despite enduring a disappointing first season under Mauricio Pochettino, Chelsea had been unbeaten in eight consecutive league games prior to their FA Cup semi-final defeat to Manchester City on Saturday.

But they were blown away by an Arsenal side keen to reaffirm their title credentials after losing their last home game to Aston



Arsenal's Ben White (third right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Chelsea during the Premier League match. (Reuters)

Villa. The hosts flew out of the blocks and were in front inside five minutes. Trossard only ended up at the Emirates after Arsenal were gazumped by Chelsea in the battle to sign Mykhailo Mudryk in January 2023. The Belgian has proved to be a far more productive signing and smashed

in his 15th goal of the season at Djordje Petrovic's near post.

Chelsea were lucky to not have their bad start compounded by a red card when Nicolas Jackson escaped unpunished for a studs-up challenge on Takehiro Tomiyasu. Petrovic redeemed himself for fault at

the opening goal with two brilliant saves to turn away Havertz's low effort and a deflected shot by Trossard to keep his side in the game before half-time.

Chelsea did, though, have chances to level before the break. Jackson spurned three huge chances against City at Wem-

bley at the weekend and was equally wasteful when he headed a huge opportunity into his own hand. Petrovic briefly held Arsenal at bay early in the second period with saves from Declan Rice and Havertz.

However, the floodgates opened once White curled in Arsenal's second after Chelsea failed to clear a corner on 52 minutes. Havertz scored the winning goal in a Champions League final for Chelsea during his three years in west London, but he never performed consistently to the level he has found in recent months under Arteta.

Martin Odegaard's stunning through ball was met with the finish it deserved as Havertz smashed high past Petrovic. His next finish was more subtle as the German international fired in off the post from Bukayo Saka's pass for his seventh goal in his last 14 club games.

A night for forget for Chelsea was summed up by another sitter from Jackson when he hit the side-netting with just Raya to beat. And fortune was also not on Pochettino's side when White's attempted cross flew into the top corner from another sensational Odegaard pass.

Defeat leaves Chelsea still in ninth, three points adrift of the European places. Next up for Arsenal is what appears their toughest hurdle remaining away to Tottenham in Sunday's north London derby. Should Arteta's side prevail at the home of their fiercest rivals, City will likely need to be perfect in their final six games to retain the title.

FOCUS

Opener Warner predicts mammoth IPL scores won't be replicated at World Cup

AFP
New Delhi

Australia's David Warner says the T20 World Cup in the United States and West Indies will not see the same mammoth scores built on flat pitches in this year's Indian Premier League.

The current edition of the world's richest cricket tournament has seen monumental totals, including Sunrisers Hyderabad twice breaking IPL records with 277 and 287.

Warner's Delhi Capitals were at the receiving end of another run-fest when Hyderabad posted 266-7 at the weekend, courtesy of a 32-ball 89 by fellow Australian Travis Head.

But veteran opening batsman Warner said the pitches in the West Indies will have something for the bowlers when T20's showpiece global event begins on June 1.

"They can be slower and they're gonna turn a bit," Warner, 37, told reporters, leaning on his experience in the Caribbean Premier League.

"The wickets tend to get a little bit lower and slower."

Australian batters Head and up-and-coming Jake Fraser-McGurk have scored at strike-rates of 216 and up to pummel the opposition IPL bowlers.

Warner has not been at his best with 167 runs for the season so far at a strike-rate of 135.77, but he said the anchor role will be key in the West Indies.

"Even when we played there in the 2010 World Cup, the pitches weren't high-scoring," he said.

"That's when you did need an anchor, someone like Mike Hussey came out and scored runs for us. He had to come and sort of knock it around."

Warner added: "It's gonna be completely different there. Add the natural elements as well. They're

going to be predominantly day games, I think, because of the timings. So that plays a big factor."

Hyderabad, who won the IPL in 2016 under Warner, and their batsmen have redefined T20 scoring with their ability to hit nearly every ball out of the park.

Twice this year the team have hit a match-record 22 sixes and at Delhi's Feroz Shah Kotla ground they hammered an IPL-record 125 runs in the first six overs.

"The wickets have been very good. They've been very flat, very compact and very high-scoring," said Warner.

"And when you've got small boundaries, you're going to see very high scores."

"Back in the day there used to be turn and you couldn't get those scores," he added.

"Also, the lacquer on the ball is staying longer and hence it's not getting chewed up, and hence very little turn on offer," the Australian cricket star added.



CRICKET

Stoinis' 124 helps Lucknow chase 211 to beat Chennai

The Australian batter stays until the end to score his first IPL ton

AFP
Chennai

Australia's Marcus Stoinis hit an unbeaten 124 as Lucknow Super Giants chased down a target of 211 with six wickets and three balls to spare against Chennai Super Kings yesterday.

It was Stoinis' first IPL century and his second in T20 cricket, trouncing an unbeaten 108 by Chennai skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad at his home M A Chidambaram Stadium.

Lucknow looked in trouble at 88-3 after 11 overs but Stoinis put on 70 runs with Nicholas Pooran, who hit 34 off 15 balls, and an unbeaten 65-run stand with Deepak Hooda to achieve victory in 19.3 overs.

Stoinis reached his hundred in 56 balls as he and Hooda, who made 17 not out off six balls, secured Lucknow's second straight win over Chennai, replacing the five-time winners in fourth spot.

Needing 17 to win in the final over, Stoinis smashed Mustafizur Rahman for a six and three fours, including one off a no ball.

"Tough pill to swallow, but good game of cricket," said Gaikwad. "LSG played really well in the back end. We had the game in control till 13-14 overs, but Stoinis played a great innings."

Stoinis walked in in the first over after Quinton de Kock's departure for a duck and paced his innings to perfection as he hit 13 fours and six sixes in his 63-ball knock.

It was the highest score by a batsman while chasing in the IPL.



Lucknow Super Giants' Marcus Stoinis (left) celebrates after his team's win at the end of the Indian Premier League match against Chennai Super Kings in Chennai yesterday. (AFP)

Hooda said Stoinis "played like a warrior, he is a kind of motivation to us".

Sri Lanka pace bowler Matheesha Pathirana took two wickets including the dangerous Pooran.

Chennai posted 210-4 courtesy of Gaikwad's second IPL ton and a 104-run stand between the captain and Shivam Dube, who smashed 66, after the hosts were invited to bat first.

Gaikwad took on the opposi-

tion attack despite losing Ajinkya Rahane and Daryl Mitchell and raised his hundred from 56 balls with a six and four.

Gaikwad became only the third Chennai player after India's Murali Vijay and Australia's Shane Watson to hit two IPL tons and moved to second in this season's batting chart with 349 runs.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru star Virat Kohli tops the chart with 379 runs.

Dube got to his fifty with a four and a six before being run out in the final over, which saw veteran M S Dhoni walk out to a rousing reception and hit a four off the final ball.

BRIEF SCORES
Lucknow Super Giants 213 for 4 (Stoinis 124*) beat Chennai Super Kings 210 for 4 (Gaikwad 108*, Dube 66) by 6 wickets and 3 balls remaining

SPOTLIGHT

Aspetar official medical partner for AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024

Aspetar, Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital, is proud to announce its partnership with the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and the Local Organising Committee (LOC) to deliver comprehensive medical care for athletes competing in the prestigious AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024.

Taking place in Doha from April 15-May 3, the tournament features 16 teams vying for the continental title. As the exclusive medical provider, Aspetar will leverage its unparalleled expertise in sports medicine to ensure the well-being of all participating athletes throughout the competition.

Dr Khalid al-Khelaifi, Consultant Orthopedic Surgeon and Director of the Visiting Surgeons Program at Aspetar, heads the tournament's medical organising committee. Through this committee, Aspetar will oversee all medical services at all tournament facilities, including stadiums and player accommodations.

Dr al-Khelaifi said: "As part of the organizing committee and responsible for medical coverage of the tournament, we are committed to providing exceptional medical services that will ensure the success of the tournament, similar to previous major tournaments held in Qatar. Thus, Aspetar continues its pioneering role in delivering world-class medical services to athletes and major sports events, ensuring the safety of athletes and enabling them to compete at their best."

Aspetar will oversee a comprehensive range of medical services for the tournament, including:

- Medical personnel stationed at

- all four match stadiums
- Collaboration with local partners to provide emergency care, ambulance services, and paramedics for both competition and non-competition venues
- Expert guidance and exceptional medical care for acute sports injuries, musculoskeletal issues, and illnesses

Aspetar's commitment extends beyond players. The hospital will also dedicate a team of one physiotherapist and two massage therapists to support referees throughout the tournament.

Moreover, Aspetar provides 24-hour medical support, with on-call doctor services available around the clock at all team hotels through the dedicated Medical Command Center (MCC).

The AFC delegation/VIPs/referees will also have medical support at their accommodations with a clinic equipped to operate throughout the day and doctor on-call services from midnight to 8 AM, starting a week before the competition begins and throughout the tournament.

The Asian Football Confederation's vital role in athlete well-being and its significant contribution to the tournament's success. Aspetar is a founding member of the AFC Medical Centres of Excellence network, solidifying the AFC's commitment to top-tier healthcare for Asian footballers.

Aspetar's collaboration with the AFC extends beyond this tournament, offering specialized sports medicine programs like the AFC Medical Conference and Injuries Surveillance Study Programme for the AFC Champions League.



GOLF

Masters champion Scheffler wraps up fourth win of year at RBC Heritage

Scottie Scheffler poses with the trophy after winning the RBC Heritage golf tournament. Play was suspended on Sunday, due to inclement weather. (USA TODAY Sports)



AFP
Miami

Masters champion Scottie Scheffler wrapped up his fourth win of the year on Monday, securing victory by three strokes at the delayed finish to the RBC Heritage at Hilton Head.

A two-and-a-half hour storm and rain delay meant play was suspended on Sunday with Scheffler still having three holes to complete with a five-stroke lead.

The world number one took care of business making par on the 16th and 17th before ending with a bogey on the final hole - his first since a double bogey on the third hole of

the tournament. Sahith Theegala made a 28-foot birdie putt on 16 to finish solo second, his fifth top ten finish of the year.

Scheffler, who claimed his tenth career win on the PGA Tour, becomes the first player to win four times in a five-tournament stretch since Tiger Woods in 2007-08.

The Texan also become the first player since Bernhard Langer in 1985 to win the Masters and then triumph at the Heritage, which is held the following week.

"Last week was fantastic and then coming into this week, I didn't have my usual prep work but showed up rested and ready to go," Scheffler said in his post-round broadcast interview.

"I got off to a slow start on

Thursday but other than that I played some really nice golf in the middle of the tournament and it's nice to be done," he said.

Scheffler finished with a three-under 68, 19-under for the tournament.

Before his back-to-back wins this month, Scheffler had won the Arnold Palmer Invitational at Bay Hill and The Players Championship in March.

He said his streak of victories showed that he was maturing.

"I think mentally the last month or so has been as good as I've been in a long time and I think that is why I'm seeing some of the results," he said.

"Just staying in it, doing the best I can - and I lot of that stuff is eas-

ier said than done," he added. Despite Scheffler's remarkable level of consistency, in particular the minimal amount of errors, he said there is no question of him getting complacent.

"It does not get boring. I think hitting a really well-struck golf shot close to the pin is like an addicting feeling," he said.

"That's what keeps everybody coming back. Golf is a game that drives people nuts and then all of a sudden you hit this great shot and it feels wonderful and flies right up there by the pin and it just gives everybody hope."

Wyndham Clark, who shot 65 on Sunday after an electric front nine was tied for third with Patrick Cantlay.

SPOTLIGHT

Irked USADA calls for WADA overhaul

Reuters
Montreal, Canada

The US Anti-Doping Agency said yesterday that the World Anti-Doping Agency must be overhauled to restore confidence in the global body ahead of the 2024 Paris Olympics following its handling of a Chinese doping case.

USADA wants an independent prosecutor to review the case of 23 Chinese swimmers who tested positive before the Tokyo Olympics began in 2021.

They were not punished as WADA accepted Chinese authorities' explanation that their samples had been contaminated, with the body reiterating yesterday that it had no evidence to challenge the contamination scenario.

"Athletes and the public desperately need and deserve confidence in the global anti-doping system

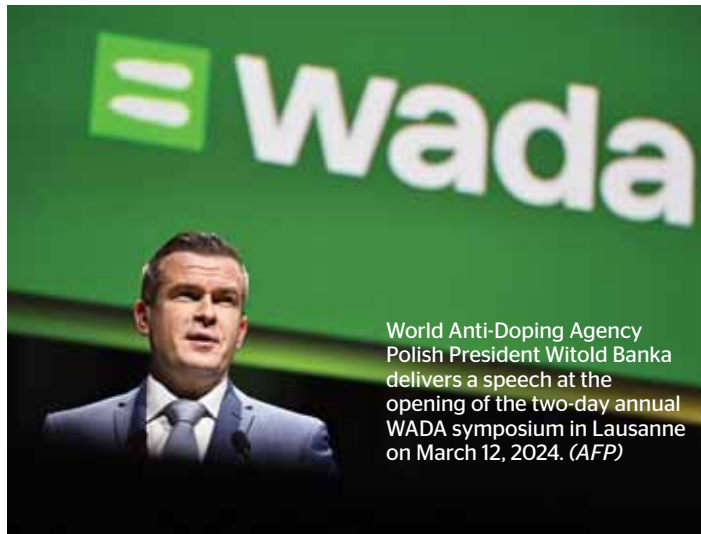
headed into these (Paris) Games," USADA said in a news release.

It called for: "governments to appoint an independent prosecutor to review the entire case file of the 23 positive tests and ensure that justice is delivered in these cases."

The Chinese swimmers tested positive for trimetazidine months before the Covid-delayed Tokyo Olympics began in the Japanese capital in July 2021.

WADA was notified in June 2021 of the Chinese anti-doping organisation's decision to accept that the swimmers were exposed to the substance through contamination from spice containers in the kitchen of a hotel where they were staying.

The case file was made available to the WADA science department which determined the contamination scenario was not only plausible but that there was no concrete element to call it into question.



World Anti-Doping Agency Polish President Witold Banka delivers a speech at the opening of the two-day annual WADA symposium in Lausanne on March 12, 2024. (AFP)

The head of USADA, Travis Tygart, said on Monday the swimmers should have been provisionally suspended, and his organisation kept up the pressure on WADA

yesterday.

"The statute of limitations has not run out in these cases and the pathway for application of the rules and due process may still ex-

ist," USADA said. "The effort to achieve whatever justice possible at this time must happen before the 2024 Paris Games, as it is unfair for all athletes competing in these Games to possibly compete against those who tested positive and whose results were kept secret until now."

But WADA, whose senior officials defended the handling of the case during a two-hour media availability on Monday, said in response it had no evidence to challenge the scenario that led to CHINA closing the cases in June 2021.

"WADA was advised by external counsel that it would lose any appeal at the Court of Arbitration for Sport based on such a challenge," WADA said in a statement to Reuters.

"This is a position that was also reached separately by the international governing body for swimming, World Aquatics, which in-

dependently studied the evidence and reached the same conclusion," the statement added.

"So far, despite all the attention created around this story, nobody has been able to produce any evidence that would allow a successful prosecution of these cases."

USADA also wants the governments at the WADA Executive and Foundation Board to launch a full review into how the swimmers escaped punishment.

"All athletes, sponsors, and fans of the Olympic and Paralympic Movement deserve a real global guard dog that has the teeth and the determination to apply the rules uniformly and fairly," said USADA.

"Additionally, following this review, we call on governments and the sport movement to overhaul WADA to ensure a cover-up of positive samples on the eve of the Olympic Games cannot occur ever again."

TENNIS

Alcaraz hoping to be fully fit to play in Madrid Open

VETERAN DJOKOVIC AIMING FOR ITALIAN OPEN IN ROME

AFP
Madrid

World number one and record 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic will not play at the Madrid Open this week but is hoping to appear in Rome.

Media reports said the 36-year-old Serbian star had pulled out of the tournament in the Spanish capital and he was not included in the draw on Monday.

Djokovic is yet to win a title this season and has only played in four tournaments this year, having decided to lighten his schedule.

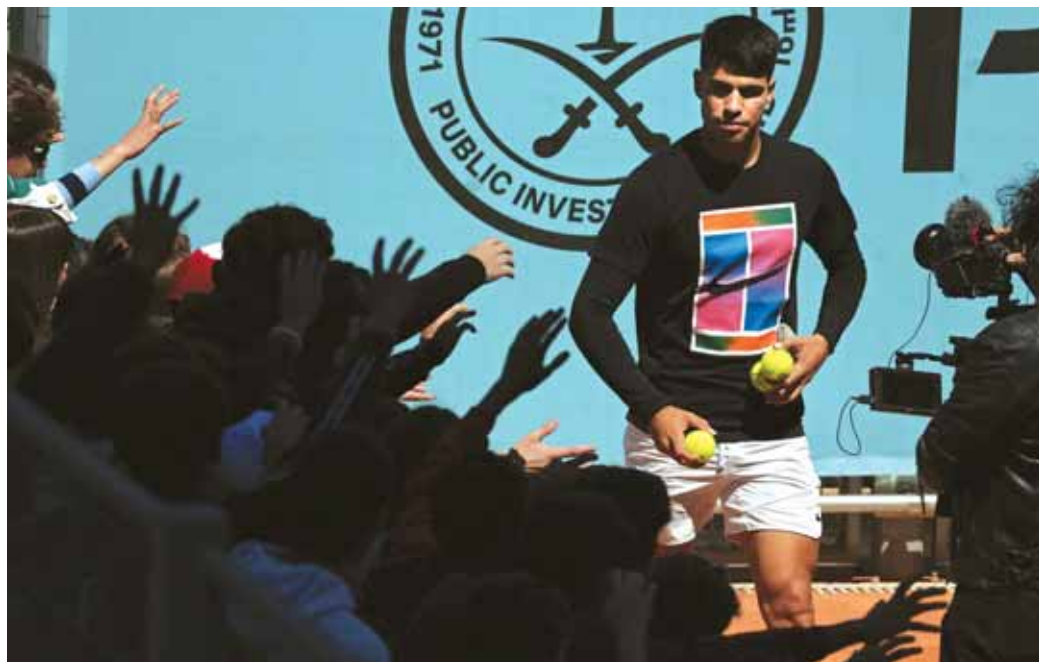
After being named World Sportsman of the Year for the fifth time at the Laureus Awards in Madrid on Monday, Djokovic said he was aiming for the Italian Open before defending his French Open title from May 26.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to play in Madrid this year... I've planned to play in Rome, so I hope I'll be able to do that, if I prepare well," Djokovic told reporters.

"This year has been a bit different for me, I haven't yet found my best level of tennis and I hope I will at Roland Garros."

Djokovic has now pulled out of the Madrid Open three times in four years.

The Serb is a three-time champion at the two-week clay court event in the Spanish capital.



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz offers some balls to supporters during a training ahead of 2024 ATP Tour Madrid Open at Caja Magica in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

It is his second Masters 1000 withdrawal this year after skipping the Miami Open in March.

Djokovic said he is "preparing his body" to be ready "especially for Roland Garros, Wimbledon, the Olympics and the US Open, the most important part of the season for me".

Veteran tennis great Rafael Nadal will continue his comeback from injury in Madrid and has

been pitted against 16-year-old American Darwin Blanch in the first round.

Nadal, 37, played at the Barcelona Open but was defeated in the second round by Alex de Minaur in straight sets.

If he defeats teenager Blanch then he will face Australian world number 11 De Minaur in the second round for the second week in a row. Reigning champion and

second seed Carlos Alcaraz said he was hoping to be fully fit to play in Madrid after a forearm problem and will face either Alexander Shevchenko or Arthur Rinderknech in the second round.

Jannik Sinner, second in the world rankings and top seed in Djokovic's absence, will face either Italian compatriot Lorenzo Sonego or a qualifier in the second round.

BONMATI AND DJOKOVIC WIN TOP LAUREUS AWARDS IN MADRID

Madrid: Spain's World Cup winning midfielder Aitana Bonmati was named the Sportswoman of the Year, while Serbia's Novak Djokovic captured the top men's honour at the Laureus awards ceremony late on Monday night.

Bonmati, who has cemented her place at the top of women's football by winning FIFA's The Best, Ballon d'Or and World Cup MVP among other accomplishments, made her way on to the stage for a second time on Monday as the Spanish women's football team were named Team of the Year, the first female squad to win the award.

Seven-time Super Bowl champion Tom Brady handed Djokovic his fifth Laureus award after the top ranked tennis player enjoyed a remarkable 2023. The Serb equalled Margaret Court's all time record haul of 24 Grand Slam titles after winning US Open last September.

Djokovic contested all four major finals in 2023, also winning the Australian and French Opens. He was the runner-up at Wimbledon.

England midfielder Jude Bellingham, who has taken La Liga by storm in his first season with Real Madrid, was named the Breakthrough Player of the Year, the first footballer to win this award.

Gymnast Simone Biles won Comeback of the Year award after winning four gold medals at last year's world championships, her first international event since

competing at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. Biles headed to the Tokyo Games eyeing a record haul of six gold medals but returned home with just a silver and a bronze after suffering a crisis of confidence that saw the American drop out of multiple events due to "the twisties", a type of mental block where gymnasts are disoriented.

Biles, who is the most decorated gymnast with 37 world and Olympic medals, then took a two-year break from the sport to protect her mental health before making her triumphant comeback last year.

The Laureus World Sports Awards nominees are selected by the global media, while the winners are determined by the 69 members of the Laureus World Sports Academy.

The awards have been presented annually since 2000.

2023 LIST OF WINNERS

- World Sportsman of the Year:** Aitana Bonmati
- World Sportsman of the Year:** Novak Djokovic
- World Team of the Year:** Spain Women's Football Team
- World Breakthrough of the Year:** Jude Bellingham
- World Comeback of the Year:** Simone Biles
- World Sportsman of the Year with a Disability:** Diederik Groot
- World Action Sportsman of the Year:** Arisa Trew
- Laureus Sport for Good:** Rafa Nadal Foundation



Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic poses with the Laureus World Sportsman of the Year award during the 25th Laureus World Sports Awards gala in Madrid. (AFP)

BADOSA 'FIGHTING' TO SAVE TENNIS CAREER DESPITE DOCTORS' CONCERNS

Madrid: Former world number two Paula Badosa yesterday vowed to "keep fighting" for her career despite doctors telling her "it would be complicated" to continue playing professional tennis due to a stress fracture she sustained in her back last year.

The Spaniard was told she might have to manage her pain using cortisone shots in order to stay competing and admits she has had many low moments as she tries to come to terms with the medical advice she is being given.

"I cried a lot and I'm still crying sometimes when I hear that and when I have talks with the doctors," Badosa told reporters at the Madrid Open ahead of her first-round match.

"But at the same time, I have this personality, this character that it's like, 'I will still get through it, I will still keep fighting'. I'm like that, I'm a little bit stubborn. But I think maybe that in this case can help."

Besides consulting with doctors, Badosa has turned to many of her colleagues - including Andrey Rublev, Karen Khachanov and Bianca Andreescu - who had suffered similar injuries, seeking encouragement.

"Sometimes you just don't want to accept what the doctor says and you're like, 'For sure they're making a mistake'.



"I just try to stay positive," added the 26-year-old. "There are some days that I wake up and I'm not feeling that well and I ask myself, 'Is this worth it?'"

Badosa, who did not play last year after exiting Wimbledon in July due to the injury, was forced to retire from her second-round clash with Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka in Stuttgart last week with a minor adductor tear. But she had pushed the world number two before that moment, with the players level in a deciding set.

"It's the level that you want to be at, that fighter again. So even though I didn't win in that moment, for moments like that I will keep fighting," she said.

Badosa is undergoing four hours of treatment every day to be ready for the action in Madrid.

Zheng facing race to be fit

Meanwhile, Chinese world number eight Zheng Qinwen revealed she sustained a leg injury in Stuttgart and is hoping she recovers in time for her opener at the Caja Magica.

Unlike most of her compatriots, Zheng enjoys competing on clay, thanks to her years of training in Spain, where she developed a heavy top-spin on the red dirt. Her first breakthrough at the Grand Slams came at Roland Garros, when she made the fourth round in 2022, and the 21-year-old will have many eyes on her at the French Open next month after reaching this year's Australian Open final.

"I'm always excited when the clay season is coming but I don't want to be over-excited, because when you get over-excited, the injury comes. Maybe that's why (I got injured)," Zheng said. "I didn't have a good preparation. So now I have to think, whether I like or I don't like, I have to do the things correct."

ANNOUNCEMENT

No Russian fencers will appear at Paris Olympics, says EFC

AFP
Paris

No fencers from Russia or Belarus will take part in the Paris Olympics after those eligible under a neutral banner did not enter for European qualifiers, according to the European Fencing Confederation.

"There are unfortunately no Russian or Belarusian athletes," EFC president Giorgio Scarso told reporters yesterday. "The date for enrolment has passed. The reason for their absence is not known, there was no official declaration of letter to explain it."

Russia's fencers last year rejected the "proposed return format" set out by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to come back to international competition, raising the possibility they would boycott Olympic qualifying events.

Russian Olympic Committee president Stanislav Pozdnyakov, a four-time Olympic sabre champion, had threatened a boycott after some athletes - including his own Olympic gold medal-winning daughter Sofia - were barred from competing.

The IOC had offered Russians the chance of competing in Paris as neutral athletes



without the national flag or anthem as long as they did not publicly support the war against Ukraine and were not employed by the military or security services.

"No Russian fencers will go to these Olympics," Russian fencing federation head Ilgar Mamedov told Sports.ru this week.

"We have made our principled position clear: we are not going to divide our team into those who please the West and those who, in their opinion, are 'bad Russians'."

Six places at the Paris Games are up for grabs at the European qualifying tournament in Differdange, Luxembourg, over the weekend.

QOC officials attend opening ceremony of GCC Youth Games



Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain met with the officials on the sidelines of the opening ceremony of first GCC Youth Games, which took place at the Dubai Opera yesterday. Second Vice-President of the Qatar Olympic Committee Dr Thani bin Abdul Rahman al-Kuwari besides top officials of Qatar's sports federations also attended the ceremony. **RIGHT:** Qatar athletes march during the opening ceremony. About 1,500 people attended the ceremony of the Games, which kicked off on April 16 and runs through May 2. Rider Sheikh Mohamed bin Jassim al-Thani carried the Qatari flag during the opening ceremony. Qatar's showjumping contingent includes riders Sheikh Mohamed bin Jassim al-Thani, Khalifa Abdullah al-Khalidi, Sultan Salem al-Nuaimi, Ghanem Nasser al-Qadi and Saad Ahmed al-Saad. The Qatar equestrian delegation is headed by Abdullah Mohamed al-Marri, Director of the Qatari Equestrian Teams.

FOOTBALL

Inter seal Serie A after derby thriller with AC Milan

Inzaghi's men secure crown with five matches remaining



Inter Milan players celebrate after winning the Serie A title after victory over AC Milan at the San Siro on Monday. (Reuters)

AFP
Milan

Inter Milan sealed the Serie A title on Monday after beating AC Milan 2-1 and creating an unassailable lead at the top of the league with their sixth straight derby victory. Goals from Francesco Acerbi and Marcus Thuram gave Inter a 17-point advantage over closest challengers Milan and secured their 20th league crown with five matches of the season remaining.

Inter last won Serie A in 2021, followed by AC Milan in 2022 and Napoli last year. For Simone Inzaghi it was the first league title as a manager and on a cold, soaking wet evening at the San Siro he strode proudly in front of a clutch of Inter's "away" fans in the 75,000 crowd as they roared in delight and fired fireworks from the stands at the final whistle.

Milan made a fight of it in the final moments after Fikayo Tomori pulled one back with 10 minutes remaining but Inter held out to kick off a title party after a stormy ending to the match which featured three red cards. "I feel like crying because we worked so hard, we deserve this joy," said tearful captain Lautaro Martinez. "It's been wonderful but we have to keep going because we've already won a lot of trophies and we want to win many more."

Inter have become the second team to win 20 Italian league titles, and will have a second star stitched onto their jersey, after Juventus who

are way out in the lead with 36 league crowns.

Inzaghi's team did it style, laying waste to the rest of the division and becoming the first team to claim the title by winning the Milan derby and leaving his opposite number Pioli on the verge of the sack. "He was struggling 14 months ago according to the media and look what he has achieved since. I am happy here, I work well and I think the team has margin for improvement," insisted 2022 Scudetto winner Pioli.

With outgoing champions Napoli crashing and burning early in the campaign and Milan falling away in the autumn Inter raced off into the distance at the turn of the year. Juve looked like putting up a fight but they collapsed in February just as Inter strung together a run of 13 wins which also gave them hope of repeating a deep run in the Champions League.

Inter failed in that mission as they were knocked out of the Champions League by Atletico Madrid in mid-March, but by that time the domestic damage had already been done. The future looks bright too as Inzaghi, Martinez and Italy midfielder Nicolò Barella are all set to renew their contracts while smart work in the transfer market and increased revenue have helped mitigate significant financial harm wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Piotr Zielinski and Mehdi Taremi will arrive from Napoli and Porto as free agents in the close season while big stars like Thuram should stay. "Crazy feeling, crazy game. We wanted to do it for our fans and we did it. It's my first league title and I'm very proud of it," said Thuram.

The nominal away side on Monday, Inter were on their way to a title party in the 18th minute when Acerbi was left completely free to head home Benjamin Pavard's flick-on. Inter should have been two ahead seven minutes later through Lautaro Martinez who lost his footing when Federico Dimarco's perfect cut-back fell to the Argentine striker.

And his strike partner Thuram was equally at fault for Inter not increasing their lead seven minutes before the break as he shot a great chance just wide after being set up by Nicolò Barella. But shortly after half-time Thuram made up for that miss with a brilliant individual goal which took his tally for his debut Serie A season to 12.

France forward Thuram collected Alessandro Bastoni's long pass on the left and eventually cut inside before drilling home at Mike Maignan's near post. Yann Sommer did well to keep out Theo Hernandez's well-struck shot as Milan fans let go a barrage of flares in the stands.

The resulting smoke mixed with the persistent rain to create a misty atmosphere around the San Siro, and just as Inter looked set to see the match out Tomori made sure it would be a grandstand finish when he headed home on the rebound. However instead of levelling the match Milan lost their heads, with both Theo Hernandez and Davide Calabria receiving straight red cards in stoppage time. Inter's Denzel Dumfries was also sent off in the closing minutes, but that will matter less to his team who danced and bounced in front of joyous fans.

SHOOTING

Stefceckova triumphs as Couzy, Dmitriyenko bag Olympic quotas

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Slovakia's reigning Olympic trap women champion Zuzana Stefceckova laid down a huge marker for this summer's Paris 2024 Games as she dominated at the Final Olympic Qualification Championship Shotgun at the Lusail Shooting Complex.

The 40-year-old, who also took Olympic silver at the Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Games, won gold in hot and windy conditions in Lusail, finishing four hits clear of Australia's Laetisha Scanlan on 46.

The two Paris quota places on offer in this event went to France's 34-year-old Melanie Couzy, who finished sixth in the final, and Kazakhstan's Mariya Dmitriyenko, who took eighth place at the Rio 2016 Games.

Dmitriyenko earned her slot after finishing fourth in a shoot-off involving six athletes who had totalled 118 hits in qualifying, although she missed out on the final by one place.

The top three in the shoot-off were Couzy, Scanlan and Adriana Ruano Oliva of Guatemala – and the French athlete was the only athlete who made the final who had begun the championship eligible to win an Olympic quota place. The Kazakh athlete was under pressure to the end as the woman who finished one place behind her in the shoot-off, Turkiye's Safiye Temizdemir, was also eligible to win a quota place, although the sixth-placed Fatima Galvez of Spain already had a slot won for Paris.



Spain's Andres Garcia won men's trap event yesterday to earn a Paris 2024 quota place.

GARCIA WINS TO SECURE PARIS 2024 QUOTA

Spain's 20-year-old Andres Garcia put himself in line for his first Olympic appearance as he earned a Paris 2024 trap men quota place with victory.

Garcia – world junior champion in 2021 and European junior champion a year later – offered further evidence of his huge talent as he held off Italy's 43-year-old Mauro De Filippis, already in possession of an Olympic quota place, to win gold by 46-45.

All except the Italian went into this tense final eligible to win a quota place, and the first to secure his country that honour was Turkiye's 41-year-old Oguzhan Tuzun as he secured third place ahead of Malta's Gianluca Chetcuti.

De Filippis, world silver medallist in 2019 and gold medallist at last year's European Games, had topped qualification with 124 – just one shy of the maximum.



Slovakia's Zuzana Stefceckova celebrates after winning the women's trap event during Final Olympic Qualification Shotgun Championship at the Lusail Shooting Complex yesterday. Australia's Laetisha Scanlan (left) finished second while her compatriot Penny Smith was third.

Enrique wants to 'mark history' with PSG treble

Paris: Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique said yesterday he was chasing history as the club bid for the treble of Ligue 1, Champions League and French Cup trophies this season. PSG can take the first step by wrapping up the Ligue 1 title for the 12th time on Wednesday with a win at Lorient and if second-placed Monaco fail to beat Lille. But Luis Enrique, 53, who took over the Paris giants last year, has a unique hat-trick in his sights – a feat he achieved with Barcelona in his first year as coach in 2015.

"Without a doubt, it's a motivation to do something that has never been done in France, to mark the history of the club, of the city and if it can be for the country, so much the better," the Spaniard told a press conference at Campus PSG in Poissy outside Paris. "But for now we just have one title (the Champions Trophy won in January against Toulouse), and we must continue to fight in the championship because the

opponents deserve it."

PSG, who have not lost a Ligue 1 game since September, are now 11 points clear of Monaco in second with just five matches remaining. "It's still a long and winding road, we will have to be focused to achieve our objectives," warned Luis Enrique.

"I hope we can win the league tomorrow, but when that happens is not important, we will have to keep a united, focused team. It doesn't matter when we win the championship, we have deserved it for a long time. The important thing is how we win it."

The Spaniard said the most pleasing thing was that in his first season "the players have assimilated my concepts and I'm happy with what I see".

PSG beat Barcelona in the Champions League quarter-finals and play Borussia Dortmund in the semi-finals next month as they chase the elite European trophy for the first time.

FEYENOORD BOSS SLOT LEADING RACE FOR LIVERPOOL JOB: REPORTS

London: Feyenoord coach Arne Slot has emerged as the leading contender to succeed Jurgen Klopp as Liverpool manager, according to British media reports. Slot, 45, led Feyenoord to their first league title in six years last season and won the Dutch Cup on Sunday.

He had been a front runner to take over at Tottenham a year ago before ruling himself out of contention. Report said Slot is now leading the race for the unenviable task of following Klopp at Anfield. However, the Reds could face competition from Bayern Munich and Barcelona, who are also looking for new coaches next season. Bayer Leverkusen boss and former

Liverpool midfielder Xabi Alonso had been the favourite when Klopp announced his decision in January to stand down at the end of the season after nearly nine years in the role. However, Alonso has committed to staying at Leverkusen after leading them to a first-ever Bundesliga title.

Sporting Lisbon coach Ruben Amorim was also linked with the Liverpool vacancy but reportedly held talks with West Ham on Monday about replacing David Moyes next season. Slot moved to Feyenoord in 2021 after impressing in his first managerial role at AZ Alkmaar.

He led the Dutch giants to the inaugural Europa Conference League final at the end

of his first season, in which they narrowly lost 1-0 to Jose Mourinho's Roma. Slot then delivered just a second league title in 24 years to De Kuip last season, but his side trail PSV Eindhoven by nine points with only four games remaining in this year's Eredivisie title race.

EMERY EXTENDS VILLA CONTRACT

Aston Villa manager Unai Emery has extended his contract until 2027, the Premier League club announced. Emery has done an impressive job at Villa Park, guiding the club from a relegation fight when he took over from Steven Gerrard in November 2022 to the brink of Champions

League qualification. The Birmingham club are fourth in the Premier League table, six points ahead of fifth-placed Tottenham, who have two games in hand. Villa are also through to the semi-finals of the Europa Conference League, where they will face Olympiakos as they hunt a first European trophy since 1982, when they were crowned European champions.

FOREST TO GET ACCESS TO VAR AUDIO AFTER PENALTIES FURORE

Nottingham Forest will be given the opportunity to privately hear the VAR audio related to three rejected penalty claims in their 2-0 Premier League defeat at Everton

on Sunday. Relegation-threatened Forest called on Monday for the audio between Stuart Attwell and on-field referee Anthony Taylor to be released publicly.

Sources close to referees body the Professional Game Match Officials Limited (PGMOL) said it has nothing to hide and will give Forest the opportunity to hear the audio in private, as it would any other club making a similar request.

The audio related to a wrongly disallowed Luis Diaz goal for Liverpool at Tottenham earlier this season was released publicly, but in that instance there had been a serious communication error so the matter was treated differently.