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Clinical New Zealand outlast Pakistan to win 4th T20I



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Liverpool need Arsenal, Man City 'crisis' to win title, says Klopp

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GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Nadal begins Madrid farewell with victory over teen Blanch

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QATAR EQUESTRIAN TEAM WINS GOLD AT GCC YOUTH GAMES



The Qatar equestrian team won gold in showjumping at the First GCC Youth Games in UAE yesterday with flawless and fastest show in the Special Two Phases class. The team comprising Sheikh Mohamed bin Jassim al-Thani, Khalifa Abdullah al-Khalidi, Ghanem Nasser al-Qadi and Saad Ahmed al-Saad clocked an aggregate of perfect 195.31 seconds. Saudi Arabia secured the silver medal with a time of 188.63 seconds. "It's a great achievement and we are looking forward to win more accolades for Qatar," rider al-Saad said.

AFC U23 ASIAN CUP QATAR 2024

Hosts Qatar go down fighting against Japan in extra time

'THE RED CARD WAS THE TURNING POINT AS IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT TO PLAY WITH 10 PLAYERS'



Japan's Mao Hosoya (right) vying for the ball with Qatar's Hashmi al-Hussaini during their AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 quarter-final at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil



Qatar's Ahmed al-Rawi (left) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Japan in their AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 quarter-final at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday.



Japan's Fuki Yamada celebrates after scoring a goal in extra time against Qatar yesterday.

Extra-time goals from Mao Hosoya and Kotaro Uchino ensured Japan squeezed past 10-man Qatar and into the semi-finals of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 with a 4-2 win over Ilidio Vale's side at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Hosoya slipped the ball under substitute goalkeeper Ali Korayem to break Qatar's resistance 11 minutes into extra-time and Uchino added the fourth with seven minutes left as Go Oiwa's side moved a step closer to claiming the title.

"The red card was the turning point as it was very difficult to play with 10 players," Qatar coach Ilidio Vale said after the match. "I want to congratulate the players for their high fighting spirit. We are dejected to miss a chance for qualifying for Olympics but I am sure the team and Qatar football have a great future ahead," he added.

Fuki Yamada had given Japan a second minute lead before Ahmed al-Rawi levelled with a superb header 22 minutes later, the Qataris then shrugging off Yousef

Abdullah's 41st minute red card to go in front four minutes into the second half through Jassef Gaber.

But Seiji Kimura's 67th minute header restored parity while Hosoya and Uchino struck late to take their nation into the last four as the Japanese seek to maintain their record of qualifying for every Olympic Games since 1996.

Japan's late show came in contrast to their rapid start, the Samurai Blue taking the lead on their first foray forward.

Qatar gifted Oiwa's team the opener after Hiroki Sekine's hopeful long ball saw Saif Eldeen Hassan under-hit his pass and Yamada collected possession to smash a left foot shot into the top corner of Abdullah's goal.

Japan were in control, with Rihito Yamamoto and Joel Fujita dictating the tempo and Kuryu Matsuki busy, the FC Tokyo playmaker thumping his attempt from outside the area over the crossbar.

However, the Qataris steadily asserted themselves and, in the 24th minute, Vale's team pulled level. The ball found its way to Abdullah al-Yazidi on the right after Kein

Sato fell in an attempt to cut out possession and the Qatari's centre was met unchallenged by al-Rawi, who bulleted his header home.

Hosoya should have restored Japan's lead seven minutes before the break, shooting wide on the stretch from close range after Matsuki's incisive ball across the face of goal.

Moments later Abdullah was seeing red, dismissed after referee Hanna Hattab consulted the pitch-side monitor following a clash with Hosoya, the Qatari guilty of lashing out at the Japan striker as he leapt to clear a high ball.

Qatar refused to be despondent despite being down a man and, four minutes after the restart, the home side went in front. Moustafa Meshal's pinpoint free-kick delivery landed squarely on the head of Gaber and he made no mistake.

With a quarter of regular time remaining, though, the Japanese were level when Kimura nodded home Yamamoto's in-swinging corner from close range to set up a finish that saw Sato force replacement goalkeeper Ali Korayem into a save while Shota Fujio headed

over. Oiwa's side were unable to find a way through again in regulation time, but in the 101st minute Hosoya was fed by Ryotaro Araki and he slid his shot under Korayem while Uchino tapped in after the goalkeeper parried Sota Kawasaki's shot to break home hearts.

Indonesia advance after shootout drama

Indonesia stunned South Korea after they pulled off a 11-10 win on penalties after they were tied 2-2 after extra time to seal a historic semi-final place at the AFC U23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024.

Pratama Arhan produced the decisive spot-kick in a marathon shootout to cap a hard-earned triumph for the tournament debutants, who were pegged back twice in regulation time despite playing with a one-man advantage from the 70th minute onwards.

For Hwang Sun-hong's charges, who have made the last four on four out of the five previous editions, more than any other team, the defeat ended their hopes of making the Olympic Games for a 10th time. *the-afc.com*

NOT EVERYONE HAPPY WITH IPL'S 'IMPACT PLAYER' RULE

New Delhi: The Indian Premier League's (IPL) "impact player" rule has led to skyrocketing totals and quenched fans' thirst for runs but not everyone is happy with the change, especially the all-rounders in the popular T20 tournament. Introduced last season, the rule allows teams to bring in a substitute at any time for a player in the starting 11. Teams have been using it to great effect in the current campaign, swapping out a bowler for a batter during a run chase and bringing up 200-plus totals frequently. Sunrisers Hyderabad used the rule to their advantage a different way. Against Royal Challengers Bengaluru earlier this month, opener Travis Head smashed 102 off 41 balls as Sunrisers posted an IPL record 287-3, which bettered their own mark of 277-3 earlier in the season.

After their innings was over, Hyderabad replaced Head with bowler Mayank Markande, who claimed 2-46 in their 25-run victory. But the whispers of discontent among some players have grown louder. "I feel an all-rounder's role is in danger with the impact player rule," Delhi Capitals' Axar Patel told *JioCinema* after Wednesday's victory against Gujarat Titans. "Every team is looking to play either a pure batter or a pure bowler as the impact player, and the all-rounders are not being used." Patel smashed 66 and claimed 1-28 in the match to prove the value of an all-rounder as Delhi secured their fourth win in nine matches. India captain Rohit Sharma said he is not a fan of the rule as it will hold back the development of all-rounders. "You are taking out so much from the game just

to make it little entertainment for the people around," Rohit told the *'Club Prairie Podcast'*, hosted by former Australia stumper Adam Gilchrist and England ex-captain Michael Vaughan. "Guys like Washington Sundar and Shivam Dube are not getting to bowl, which for us is not a good thing," he said referring to the all-rounders, who are in contention for places in the India squad for the T20 World Cup in June. While IPL fans are delighted with the boundary deluge, Chennai Super Kings batting coach Michael Hussey sympathises with the bowlers. "It's hard for bowlers, especially if conditions are good for batting..." the former Australia player said. "It must be a great spectacle for the crowd to keep seeing these scores growing all the time and it probably puts a bigger emphasis on execution with the ball."



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Bhuvneshwar Kumar plays a shot during the IPL match between against Royal Challengers Bengaluru in Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

Gutsy New Zealand beat Pakistan, take lead in T20I series

Second successive defeat in Lahore is a jolt to a full-strength Pakistan side

AFP
Lahore

Experienced allrounder Jimmy Neesham kept his cool to defend six off the last ball to clinch a four-run victory for New Zealand yesterday in the fourth Twenty20 international against Pakistan in Lahore.

Pakistan needed 18 off the last over in their chase of 179 but Neesham came out in flying colours despite being hit for a boundary off the first ball, giving a packed Gaddafi Stadium crowd heartbreaks.

Opener Tim Robinson hit a maiden half century to lift New Zealand to 178-7 in 20 overs before pacer William O'Rourke claimed 3-27 to keep Pakistan down to 174-8.

Returning allrounder Imad Wasim (22 not out) managed to hit the last ball for a single as New Zealand take an unassailable 2-1 lead in the five-match series with the last game tomorrow, also in Lahore.

Pakistan also lost the third match by seven wickets after winning the first by the same margin while the first match was abandoned after just two balls – all three in Rawalpindi.

The defeats are a jolt to a full-strength Pakistan side in their preparations for the Twenty20 World Cup to be held in the United States and the West Indies in June.

New Zealand, missing a host of players due to Indian Premier League, injuries and unavailability, can feel elated at their bench strength going into the



New Zealand's Tim Robinson plays a shot during the fourth T20I against Pakistan in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

World Cup. Pakistan sensed they were in with a chance when Fakhar Zaman, who made 45-ball 61 with three sixes and four boundaries, lifted Pakistan from 79-4 with a 59-run stand for the fifth wicket with Iftikhar Ahmed who made a 20-ball 23.

But O'Rourke, playing only his fourth T20I, dismissed Ahmed to add to his wickets of Babar Azam (five) and Saim Ayub (20) to give New Zealand a boost.

Fellow pacer Ben Sears (2-27) claimed Zaman's wicket with 33 needed off 14 balls.

Earlier, Robinson batted with aggression. Robinson's 36-ball 51 with two sixes and four fours lifted New Zealand – who were sent in to bat – to 93-1 in 10 overs before Abbas Afridi's career best 3-20 helped Pakistan pull back. New Zealand started briskly with Robinson and Tom Blundell, who made 28 off 15, putting on 56 for the opening stand in five overs.

But from 94-1 New Zealand lost three wickets, including that of dangerous Mark Chapman for eight, as Pakistan's fielders held catches to back some good bowling by Abbas. Dean Foxcroft

chipped in with 34 off 26 deliveries and skipper Michael Bracewell added 27 to keep the scoreboard ticking as New Zealand managed 43 in the last five overs.

BRIEF SCORES

New Zealand 178-7 in 20 overs (T. Robinson 51, D. Foxcroft 34; Abbas Afridi 3-20) **v Pakistan 174-8 in 20 overs** (Fakhar Zaman 61; W. O'Rourke 3-27)

Result: New Zealand won by four runs

Toss: Pakistan

Series: New Zealand 2, Pakistan 1, No result 1

NZ great Adams hopes other sports follow prize money plan

Bengaluru: World Athletics' decision to reward Olympic champions with cash prizes is a sign of progress and can spur other global sports federations to do the same for their athletes, New Zealand shot put great Valerie Adams said yesterday. World Athletics chief Sebastian Coe said earlier this month that the governing body would pay athletics gold medalists at the Paris Games \$50,000 each from a prize pot of \$2.4mn, in a move that signalled the end of 128 years of tradition.

Olympic silver and bronze medal winners in athletics will also receive prize money from the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

"I think it's great and it's progress. Athletics is a sport in which we don't make a ton of money, unlike cricket or rugby," double Olympic champion Adams told reporters in Bengaluru.

"It's (about) moving in the right direction. We're moving forward as a sport. Our sport is taking the lead in this space."

"I was an athlete myself so I'm totally for it and obviously all the athletes welcome it." While many athletes hailed a decision that will help offset high costs of training and competition, others questioned it as unfair to sports that cannot afford to do the same.

The British Olympic Association and Association of Summer Olympic International Federations were taken by surprise, while the chief of cycling's global governing body said the plan went against the Olympic spirit and solidarity among federations.

'WORK HARDER'

Rotorua-born Adams said the onus was now on other sports bodies to follow the lead of athletics. "They need to work harder to make it happen," said the 39-year-old, who is the event ambassador for the TCS World 10K run in the south Indian city. "It doesn't have to be at the same level (as World Athletics) but, at the end of the day, you can't punish one sport for trying and making it work for their athletes just because you can't make it work for yourself."

"Hopefully this will drive other sporting organisations to go out and find help and find sponsors and be able to give their athletes the same prize money where they can."

The towering Adams, who competed at five Olympics and won two golds, silver and bronze, called time on her career two years ago, having guided New Zealand to their best Olympic haul of 20 medals in Tokyo where she finished third in 2021.

"That was a big haul for us, it was one of our best Olympic Games. I think this year might be a bit more tough."

"However, for a small country we punch above our weight," Adams said.

The Paris Olympics run from July 26-Aug. 11.

SPOTLIGHT

Spinners help IPL's lowest ranked Bengaluru defeat Hyderabad after Patidar's quality 50

AFP
Hyderabad

Indian spinners Karn Sharma and Swapnil Singh took four key wickets to help IPL's lowest-ranked Royal Challengers Bengaluru defeat Sunrisers Hyderabad by 35 runs in Hyderabad yesterday.

Earlier, Faf du Plessis-led RCB won the toss and scored a par 206-7, setting a 207 run target for Hyderabad's in-form batting unit which has already broken some IPL batting records this season.

Hyderabad could only score 171-8 as RCB registered only their second win in nine games and are still languishing at the bottom of the 10-team table.

Indian batting superstar Virat Kohli hit a slow 43-ball 51 and stitched a 48-run opening partnership with Plessis, who fell after hitting 12-ball 25. England's Will Jacks (6) fell early before Rajat Patidar's explosive 20-ball 50 propelled Bengaluru to 130 in the 13th over, when the rookie batter fell to pacer Jaydev Unadkat.

Kohli fell in the 15th over leaving RCB reeling at 140-4 as their innings lost some momentum and wickets of Mahipal Lomror (7) and Dinesh Karthik (11) by the 19th over. Australia's star all-rounder Cameron Green hit an unbeaten 20-ball 37 to provide a final flourish as Unadkat (3-30) and T Natarajan (2-39) finished with five wickets between them.



RCB's Rajat Patidar celebrates with his teammate Virat Kohli (right) after scoring a half-century during the IPL match against SRH in Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)

Hyderabad's explosive openers, Australia's Travis Head and Indian rookie Abhishek Sharma, failed to build a partnership yesterday. Head (1) fell in the very first over of the chase to spinner Jacks and Sharma hit 13-ball 31 before he fell in the fourth over to leave Sunrisers at 2-37.

Bengaluru's Karn and Swapnil took three key middle-order wickets – Aiden Markram (7), Nitish Kumar Reddy (13), and Heinrich Klaasen (7) – to leave Hyderabad at 5-69 in the eighth over of

the chase. Hyderabad skipper Pat Cummins, who hit 15-ball 31 with three sixes, provided some lower-order flourish before dismissal to national teammate Green, who bowled two tight overs for 12 runs and two wickets. Hyderabad is still comfortably placed on the third spot in the IPL table and Cummins said that he "won't dwell on this one too much".

Winning captain Plessis said that their team had "been close for a while but you need to win matches to get confidence in the group".

"Massive win for us. When you're not winning it does affect you mentally, it does affect your confidence," he said. "You can't speak confidence into the group, you can't fake confidence into the group."

BRIEF SCORES

Royal Challengers Bengaluru 206 for 7 (Kohli 51, Patidar 50, Unadkat 3-30, Natarajan 2-39) **beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 171 for 8** (Shahbaz 40, Green 2-12, Karn 2-29, Swapnil 2-40) **by 35 runs**

CYCLING

Nys holds on in Tour de Romandie for first win



Team Lidl-Trek's Belgian rider Thibau Nys celebrates as he crosses the finish line ahead of second-placed team Decathlon AG2R La Mondiale's Italian Andrea Vendrame, during the second stage of the Tour of Romandy yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Les Marécottes, Switzerland

Thibau Nys grabbed the overall lead in the Tour de Romandie yesterday when he had enough energy left to outspurt the remnants of a day-long breakaway.

The 21-year-old Belgian was part of a six-rider escape early on the 171km second stage from Fribourg to the Marécottes ski resort.

Only Nys and Andrea Vendrame were still clear when they were caught and passed by Australia's Luke Plapp in the last kilometre. But Nys sprinted past for his first World Tour victory. Italian Vendrame was second.

"I wanted this victory so badly,

I've worked so hard for it, I'll remember it for the rest of my life," said Nys, a former junior world cyclo-cross champion. His father Sven Nys won two full world titles in the discipline.

The pack, containing the race heavyweights, finished 16 seconds back.

Nys, who rides for Lidl-Trek, displaced Frenchman Dorian Godon at the top of the overall classification.

The Belgian leads Vendrame of Decathlon-AG2R by four seconds with Plapp, of Jayco-AlUla, third at 22sec ahead of today's 15.5km time trial.

"I'm not strong enough right now in the time trial to keep the yellow jersey, but I'm going to enjoy wearing it tomorrow," said Nys.

TENNIS

Nadal launches Madrid farewell with easy victory

The 22-time Grand Slam champ beats Darwin Blanch 6-1, 6-0

AFP
Madrid

Rafael Nadal breezed to a straight sets victory over 16-year-old Darwin Blanch to reach the Madrid Open second round yesterday as he began his farewell appearance in the Spanish capital.

The 37-year-old said this week he was not fully fit but demolished his American opponent 6-1, 6-0 in one hour and three minutes as he continues his comeback from injury.

Nadal, a 22-time Grand Slam champion, is expecting 2024 to be his final season in tennis and this his last appearance at the Madrid Open.

He made his first competitive appearance since January at the Barcelona Open last week, where he was defeated in the second round by Alex de Minaur.

The Australian will be Nadal's second round opponent in Madrid too as the Spaniard tries to find form and fitness ahead of Rome and then the French Open, where he is the record 14-time winner.

"I am hoping to do as well as possible and I hope to be competitive against De Minaur," said Nadal.

"For me it has always been a pleasure to play in front of you all... the support I've received here since the first time I played is hard to compare to anywhere else, so I can only say thank you."

Nadal broke in the second game against the overpowered and initially overawed American, ranked 1,028th in the world.

Blanch got on the board in the fourth game but Nadal broke again in the sixth after the youngster drove a forehand into the net.

Blanch saved two break points at the start of the second set but Nadal converted the third to take further control. The merciless tennis great broke again after an entertaining rally for a 3-0 lead



Spain's Rafael Nadal celebrates winning his match against Darwin Blanch of the US at the Madrid Open yesterday. (Reuters)

and once more when Blanch went long to make it 5-0.

Nadal served it out, triumphing on his second match point with a powerful serve that Blanch could not control.

Nadal seeding for FO not being considered, says Mauresmo

Former world number one Rafael Nadal is unlikely to be seeded at next month's French Open, Roland Garros tournament director Amelie Mauresmo said yesterday.

On Wednesday, the Spaniard said he was not sure if he would be able to play at this year's French Open, which he has won a record 14 times.

The 37-year-old Nadal, a 22-times Grand Slam champion,

has plummeted to 512 in the rankings after a long spell on the sidelines, having missed almost a year with a hip flexor injury.

He is entered in the main draw for the French Open thanks to his protected ranking but that ranking does not apply for seeding, with the 32 highest-ranked players being seeded.

With no seeding, Nadal could be drawn against top players in the early rounds of the tournament.

Until 2020, Wimbledon was the only one of the four Grand Slams that did not stick to the ATP and WTA rankings, opting instead to also factor in a player's past performances on grass.

Wimbledon's seeding formula

was criticised by players, including Nadal, before it was abandoned.

Asked about Nadal being seeded at this year's French Open, Mauresmo told reporters: "Right now it's not a topic..."

"Wimbledon did it for a very, very long time, and it certainly brought some advantages but we also saw all the disadvantages it could bring. For the moment, it's not on the table."

"We're keeping our fingers crossed for him above all, for us too obviously. We're keeping a close eye on what's happening for him on court. We're in touch with his team. Whether there's a tribute depends very much on him. We'll follow his wishes."

FOCUS

Osaka stumbles against Samsonova, Gauff sails through in Madrid Open



Russia's Liudmila Samsonova (right) shakes hands with Japan's Naomi Osaka after winning their round of 64 match at the Madrid Open yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Madrid

Liudmila Samsonova brought former world number one Naomi Osaka's return to clay to a halt in the second round of the Madrid Open yesterday with a 6-2, 4-6, 7-5 victory.

Elsewhere, American Coco Gauff sailed through to the third round with a 6-0, 6-0 thumping of Arantxa Rus.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Osaka twice battled back from a break down in the second set to force a decisive third but world number 17 Samsonova eventually ground out the victory.

Japanese star Osaka returned to tennis in January after a long break and earned her first victory on clay for two years on Wednesday against Greet Minnen.

However Russian 15th seed Samsonova, whom Osaka beat at Indian Wells in March, was able to end a four-match losing streak with her victory in two hours 22 minutes in the Spanish capital.

Hard-court expert Osaka, 26, is not overly fond of the red dirt and has not won back-to-back matches on the surface since 2019.

She lost last week at the Rouen Open in France against Martina Trevisan in her first match back on clay but improved this week.

"I felt - I don't want to say happy - I felt good that I was able to fight back," said Osaka.

"I think it's a big difference from my match in France, so I was happy that I learned from that match, but obviously really sad that I lost."

Samsonova raced into a 4-0 first set lead, breaking in the first and third games as Osaka struggled.

"Honestly, it's not the sliding

part for me, it's the touch," said Osaka.

"I feel like I'm getting the balls, I'm just not really placing them well."

After recovering an early break Osaka was broken again in the fifth game and Samsonova took a 4-2 lead. However Osaka battled back and won the next four games to take the set.

In the decider the players exchanged breaks before Osaka eventually blinked in the 11th game, with Samsonova wrapping up victory on serve. She will face Madison Keys in the next round.

Gauff, 20, romped to a 'double bagel' triumph in only 51 minutes against her 33-year-old Dutch opponent Rus.

The American saved four break points in the match to become the third player ever to win 6-0, 6-0 in the Madrid Open main draw.

World number three Gauff will face Ukraine's Dayana Yastremska in the third round.



US' Coco Gauff returns the ball to Netherlands' Arantxa Rus at the Madrid Open yesterday. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

WADA plan to launch independent review into Chinese doping

Reuters
Montreal

The under-fire World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) said yesterday it would launch an independent review over its handling of a case that allowed 23 Chinese swimmers who tested positive for a banned substance to avoid punishment.

The investigation will be led by Swiss prosecutor Eric Cottier, a former attorney general of the canton of Vaud, who WADA said will have access to all files and documents related to the case and will be free to consult any independent experts.

Cottier will begin his work in the coming days and is expected to deliver his findings within two months.

"WADA's integrity and reputation is under attack," said WADA president **Witold Banka** in a statement. "In the past few days, WADA has been unfairly accused of bias in favour of China by not appealing the CHINADA case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport," he said referring to China's anti-doping agency and sport's highest court respectively.

"We continue to reject the false accusations and we are pleased to be able to put these questions into the hands of an experienced, respected and independent prosecutor."

Calls for an independent investigation have grown since a *New York Times* report on Saturday said 23 Chinese swimmers had tested positive for the banned drug trimetazidine (TMZ) months before the Covid-delayed Tokyo Olym-



pics in July 2021.

The swimmers avoided sanctions after an investigation by Chinese authorities ruled the adverse analytical findings, or AAFs, were the result of being inadvertently exposed to the drug through contamination.

A report determined all the swimmers who tested positive were staying at the same hotel where traces of trimetazidine (TMZ), which is found in heart medication, were discovered in the kitchen.

WADA has defended its handling of the case, saying it had no evidence to challenge China's findings and that external counsel had advised against appealing them.

The United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) has led the call for an independent investigation along with an overhaul of WADA to restore confidence in the global body ahead of the 2024 Paris Olympics.

USADA chief Travis Tygart has accused WADA of being involved in a "potential cover-up" and the global anti-doping has responded by threatening legal action.

GOLF

McIlroy open to return to PGA Tour policy board

Reuters
New York

Rory McIlroy all but confirmed yesterday that he will return to the PGA Tour's policy board and is just waiting to be asked.

At a press conference before the start this week of the Zurich Classic of New Orleans, McIlroy was asked to confirm a report that he's coming back to the board that he left in November and will take a seat on the board of PGA Tour Enterprises.

He said, "Not as of yet, no."

The four-time major champion from Northern Ireland believes he can be helpful after stalled negotiations between the PGA Tour and the Saudi Arabia-financed LIV Golf league after a "framework agreement" for a merger announced last June.

"I don't think there's been much progress made in the last eight months, and I was hope-

ful that there would be," he said. "I think I could be helpful to the process. But only if people want me involved, I guess."

He said he talked with Webb Simpson, who discussed potentially coming off the board.

"I said, look, if it was something that other people wanted, I would gladly take that seat, and I would the conversation that we had," McIlroy said.

"But yeah, I think that's the whole reason. I feel like I can be helpful. I feel like I care a lot, and I have some pretty good experience and good connections within the game and sort of around the wider sort of ecosystem and everything that's going on. But at the end of the day, it's not quite up to me to just come back on the board. There's a process that has to be followed," he continued. "But I'm willing to do it if that's what people want, I guess."

Simpson is on the board with fellow current PGA Tour player directors Patrick Cantlay, Peter

Malnati, Adam Scott, Jordan Spieth and Tiger Woods. A vote could have been scheduled for Wednesday, according to a report in *The Guardian*.

McIlroy, 34, said that if he comes back, he would push for unification as "the only way forward for the game of golf." He initially had been a sharp critic of LIV Golf but now would consider compromises and also communicate his point that unification is best for the sport and for the PGA Tour in particular.

"We obviously realise the game is not unified right now for a reason, and there's still some hard feelings and things that need to be addressed," McIlroy said, "but I think at this point for the good of the game, we all need to put those feelings aside and all move forward together."

McIlroy, who is partnering with Ireland's Shane Lowry in Zurich's two-man team format, doesn't think being on the board hindered his performance, saying he played

some of his best golf. It did require his time and took a toll as he spent less time on other interests.

"We're golfers at the end of the day," said McIlroy, who joined the Player Advisory Council in 2019. "We don't need to be trying to run a \$15 billion business. We need to go out there and play golf and let the business people do the business things."

The PGA Tour and DP World Tour have not completed a final merger agreement with LIV's financiers, the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF), in the months since a self-imposed Dec. 31 deadline came and went.

In the meantime, LIV poached its highest-profile golfer to date in two-time major winner Jon Rahm. The Spaniard was ranked among the top three in the world when he signed with LIV Golf in December.

The PGA Tour entered a separate partnership with Strategic Sports Group (SSG), a consortium of US-based sports team owners.

Norman sees Adelaide success as blueprint for all LIV Golf events

Adelaide: Entertainment, star names and awareness of culture are the three key ingredients **Greg Norman** has used to build LIV Golf, with the Australian confident the formula can be transplanted anywhere to capitalise on pent-up demand. Now in its second full season, spanning 14 tournaments, the Saudi-backed league and its 54-hole format, punctuated by thumping music, has injected itself as a rival to the PGA Tour, poaching a slew of high-profile talent. Its fledgling success is nowhere more evident than in Norman's homeland, with fans flocking



to the tour's Adelaide stop last year and capacity expanded at this week's event to cater for demand.

"This event here, from last to this year, is the benchmark for LIV," said Norman.

"We get all the other events, 13 events around the world to take a look at what we've delivered here and what Adelaide has delivered and what the state government has delivered and what the local community and the region has delivered, and you go, it can be done. Here it is." South Australia state premier Adelaide was named the world's best golf event of 2023 by the

World Golf Awards, which are part of the World Travel Awards. "We always took a calculated risk as a government that Australian golf fans had been starved of high-quality professional golf for decades ... and they responded in droves," he said.

"What I think will take this event to another level this year is that there are a lot more people here. We've increased the capacity of the facilities here at Grange (Golf Club)."

Norman is already planning LIV's 2025 and 2026 schedules, despite uncertainty around what the global golf calendar may look like.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool need Arsenal, City 'crisis' to win title: Klopp

AFP
Liverpool

Jürgen Klopp conceded Liverpool need a collapse from Arsenal and Manchester City to win the Premier League after a shock 2-0 defeat at Everton on Wednesday.

Klopp tasted defeat in front of a crowd in the Merseyside derby for the first time to leave the Reds' title hopes hanging by a thread.

Liverpool trail Arsenal by three points with four matches remaining and are just one point clear of City, who have two games in hand.

"You can read the table. We need a crisis at City and Arsenal and we need to win football games," said Klopp, who is nearing the end of his tenure at Anfield.

The German had enjoyed a

dominant record over Everton with only one previous defeat in 18 games, but his final taste of the Merseyside derby was a bitter one.

"It was not the most inspired performance," added Klopp. "I really feel for the people, I'm really sorry for that. People tell me before about record in the derby. It feels really different (to have lost)."

"It was unnecessary but it happened."

A run of four wins in nine games has seen Klopp's men crash out of the Europa League and FA Cup as well as falling off the pace at the top of the Premier League.

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk called on the players not to let Klopp's farewell fizzle out with a whimper.

"I think everyone has to look in the mirror and look at their performance and if they've given every-

thing. Do they really want to win the league?" Van Dijk said. "We weren't good enough. We all have to do much better. We can't let the season go out like tonight. We have to do much better in every sense."

Virgil van Dijk said Arne Slot's attacking tactics could be the ideal match for the club if the Feyenoord boss wins the race to succeed Jürgen Klopp.

Klopp will leave Anfield at the end of this season and Slot has emerged as the leading candidate to replace the German.

Liverpool are reportedly in talks with Slot over a potential move to Merseyside and Van Dijk has expressed his support for his fellow Dutchman's football philosophy.

"I find it hard to answer of course, but I think Arne Slot is perhaps one of the better Dutch

coaches at this moment," Van Dijk told Viaplay following Liverpool's 2-0 defeat at Everton on Wednesday.

"I think the way of playing and the philosophy he has, that he could be a Liverpool coach."

"Only I think from what I read and hear is that it's still far from being completed. We shall see."

If Slot is picked to take over from Klopp, who led Liverpool to the Premier League title in 2020 and won the Champions League in 2019, he will likely have to lift a team that is set to finish this season on a low note.

Liverpool's Darwin Nunez and manager Jürgen Klopp look dejected after their Premier League match against Everton in Liverpool yesterday. (Reuters)



HORSE RACING

Al-Hajri's General Panic claims End Of Season Cup

Jockey Lukas Delozier rides Hargan to Al Utouriya Cup victory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mohamed Abdulhadi S al-Hajri-owned General Panic capped Qatar's horse racing season with a thrilling victory to clinch the End Of Season Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

Under jockey Tomas Lukasek, the Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki-trained bay overcame a stiff challenge from Aemilianus, ridden by Marco Casamento, to win the 1600m Thoroughbred (Class 1) feature race by a head.

The race gave a fitting end to the exciting season that comprised 45 Al Rayyan Meetings while Al Uqda Racecourse hosted 22 meetings.

The final meeting last evening that had 12 races on the card also featured Al Karana Cup for Purebred Arabian Novice Plate and the Al Utouriya Cup - the Purebred Arabian Open Race.

The Khalid Hamad MA al-Atteya-owned Keheilah Al Sakab on second career start, took a spectacular victory in the Al Karana Cup.

Under Alberto Sanna, the grey filly tracked the leaders until she was produced in the final 200m to speed past her rivals and record a comfortable two-length win for trainer Jassim Hamad al-Atteya in the 1400m race.

HE Sheikha Iman bint Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Hargan scored for the second straight time, winning the Al Utouriya Cup.

The six-year-old trainee of Rudy Nerbonne came with a massive sweep from the back of the 16-runner field to go past his rivals one by one to take the lead in the final 100m and score by over three lengths with Lukas Delozier in the saddle.

Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, QREC Racing Manager, presented the trophies to the winners.

RESULTS

End Of Season Cup Day
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Season Finale Trophy - Thoroughbred (Class 1) General Panic, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Tomas Lukasek
2 - Al Utouriya Cup, Purebred



The connections of General Panic celebrate after the bay horse won the End Of Season Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim



Jockey Tomas Lukasek guided General Panic to the End Of Season Cup victory yesterday.

Arabian Open Race
Hargan, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
3 - Al Karana Cup, Purebred Arabian Novice Plate Keheilah Al Sakab, Jassim Hamad al-Atteya, Alberto Sanna
4 - Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80) Glengarra, Saleh Naji SH A al-Yafei, Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi
5 - Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90) Tenjin, Mohamed Ghazali, Marco

Casamento
6 - Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90) Sarangani, Gassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento
7 - Thoroughbred Handicap (70-90) Pagliacci, Ahmed al-Jehani, Saleh Salem al-Marri
8 - Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80) Sardem, Bader al-Balushi, Maikon De Souza
9 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap

(45-65) Torkia, Mohamed Ghazali, Marco Casamento
10 - Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate Zakadir, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
11 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate Rasmaan, Mohamed Khaled Elahmed, Muanis al-Siyabi
12 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate Dukhan Alsej, Jassim Hamad al-Atteya, Anas al-Seyabi

FOOTBALL

Xavi, Barca remain tied in marriage of convenience

AFP
Barcelona

Xavi Hernandez and Barcelona's relationship seemed on the rocks in January but they have made the decision to stay together in a marriage of convenience.

After the coach said he would walk away at the end of the season from a dream job that turned out to be "cruel" and "unpleasant", three months later he changed his mind in a dramatic U-turn.

"In January I saw the best thing was for me to leave, but now I see it differently," Xavi said at a press conference yesterday.

President Joan Laporta said the club needed "stability" and not drastic decision-making, despite failing to meet any of their objectives this season.

The decision came hot on the heels of Barcelona's Clasico defeat by Real Madrid that leaves them 11 points behind the leaders in La Liga, and Champions League elimination by Paris Saint-Germain. Those losses virtually guarantee Barcelona will end the campaign without a trophy, a disappointment after their first La Liga triumph in four years last season.

Barcelona did manage to compete with Europe's giants on an even keel in a way they have not in years past - securing their best Champions League result on the road in a decade with a 3-2 win at PSG. They reached the quarter-finals for the first time since 2020 and knocked-out Serie A winners Napoli.

While Xavi's list of excuses this season has run longer than the club's restrictive salary bill, Ronald Araujo's early red card

against PSG in the second leg was a key factor in the second-leg 4-1 collapse.

Lamine Yamal's hotly disputed "ghost goal" in the 3-2 Clasico defeat by Real Madrid is another crucial flashpoint which went against Barcelona.

"It's in our hands now," said Xavi, after years fearing the worst on the biggest nights against superior forces.

However the club's improvement since Xavi's initial decision in January is not the chief reason the club are willing to keep him, instead only the easy explanation. Despite Laporta claiming they had not looked into alternative options, Barcelona could not see a suitable one.

Reserve team coach Rafa Marquez was not particularly convincing, nor was the favourite to replace Xavi, Hansi Flick.

Julian Nagelsmann is staying with Germany, Thomas Tuchel has struggled with Bayern Munich and would likely prove too expensive for Barcelona in any case. As would Jürgen Klopp, who wants a break after his time at Liverpool - taking over at chaotic, cash-strapped Barcelona would be entirely contrary.

Next season if things go awry Laporta has Marquez as an escape plan. To appoint the Mexican now would open the door to another potential new coach having to be found after that, along with the financial consequences. "Regarding money, Xavi has behaved with great dignity," said Laporta. "He has never been greedy."

Xavi also offers Laporta an umbrella from the steady rain of criticism - the only reliable deluge in drought-ridden Catalonia - with the 44-year-old's glittering past as a Barcelona player making him an easy target.



FC Barcelona President Joan Laporta (left) and Barcelona's coach Xavi during a press conference in Sant Joan Despí, Barcelona, yesterday. (AFP)

Spanish government to 'oversee' scandal-hit football federation

The Spanish government decided yesterday to create a commission to "oversee" the country's scandal-hit football federation (RFEF) and try to pull it out of crisis.

"The Spanish government adopted this decision to redress the serious situation of the RFEF so that the organisation could enter a stage of renewal in a stable climate," the National Sports Council (CSD), an agency dependent on the Ministry of Sports, announced. Spain are set to host the 2030 World Cup along with Portugal and Morocco, but in recent months the RFEF has lurched from one embarrassment to another.

The CSD said it will create a "commission of supervision, standardisation and representation" led by "independent personalities" which will "oversee" the RFEF during the coming months in response to the federation's crisis and in defence of Spain's general interests.

According to the Spanish press, former Spain coach and 2010 World Cup winner Vicente del Bosque could be one of the members of this commission. However world and European football governing bodies FIFA and UEFA issued a statement expressing "great concern" at the situation around the RFEF.

"FIFA and UEFA will seek additional information to assess the extent to which the CSD's appointment (of the committee)... may affect the RFEF's obligation to manage its affairs independently and without undue government interference," they said. FIFA suspended Zimbabwe and Kenya's memberships over government interference in 2022, subsequently lifting the bans. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Saudi's Aramco agrees FIFA sponsorship deal

AFP
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's state oil giant Aramco and world football governing body FIFA yesterday announced a major sponsorship agreement until the end of 2027.

The deal is the latest high-profile investment in global sports for Saudi Arabia who have already been confirmed as the only bid for the 2034 World Cup.

In a joint statement it was confirmed Aramco would become FIFA's Major Worldwide Partner exclusive in the energy category. The deal involves sponsorship rights for multiple events including the 2026 Men's World Cup and the Women's World Cup the following year.

"We are delighted to welcome Aramco to FIFA's family of global partners," FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in a joint statement released by the energy company.

"This partnership will assist FIFA to successfully deliver its flagship tournaments over

the next four years and, as is the case with all our commercial agreements, enable us to provide enhanced support to our 211 FIFA member associations across the globe.

"Aramco has a strong track record of supporting world-class events, but also a focus on developing grassroots sport initiatives," he said.

"Through this partnership with FIFA we aim to contribute to football development and harness the power of sport to make an impact around the globe," Aramco CEO Amin H. Nasser said.