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Bairstow stars as Punjab pull off record T20 chase against Kolkata

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ATHLETICS

Shared Olympic gold moment will not be repeated: Barshim

Qatari icon says he felt 'lucky' to have shared the gold with Italy's Tamberi at the Tokyo Olympics

AFP
Paris

Two athletes sharing Olympic gold in a near-empty stadium in Tokyo caught the imagination of an expectant audience across the world, which was at the time ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mutaz Essa Barshim embraced his old friend Gianmarco Tamberi at the end of the men's high jump as the judges confirmed the double gold for the Qatari and the Italian who have known each other for years dating back to competing as youths. "To be honest, it will never happen again," Barshim said in an interview.

"That moment, we'll never share that again. It was a one-time thing. Coming back from injuries and a dark place, I wanted to do something different, something with a different meaning. I'm glad it touched so many people's hearts, but we are sportspeople, we are professionals, we always want to be the best, we have that fire, 'I want to beat you, you want to beat me'."

Barshim said he felt "lucky" to have shared the gold with Tamberi. "We've been competing since 2010 and came to pro level together," he explained.

"As professional athletes we deal with a lot. There's one thing which is the biggest thing and that is injury. In 2018, I injured my left Achilles, broke both my ligaments and it was a very dark time for me, mentally and physically. One second you are the best and a few moments later you're on a wheelchair and they're dragging you out of the surgery room. Gianmarco, my friend, had a similar injury in 2016 just before the Rio Olympics which prevented him from



Mutaz Barshim during training in Suzhou, China, yesterday.

being there.

"When the bar was 2.37 metres in Tokyo and me and him cleared at the first attempt, we looked back and there was no one left, it was emotional. So it was a tie. I asked 'can we share?'. The reply was 'yeah it's possible' and that was it! We didn't even discuss things. I looked at Gianmarco's eyes, he looked at me, we jumped, we hugged and the rest is history, that's one of the moments that will stick forever."

Barshim joked that World Athletics plans to award every event winner prize money of \$50,000 (46,000 euros) would also guarantee no further shared gold. "It's not happening, 50 or 500, no sharing!" said the 32-year-old, who also has three world outdoor titles to his name.

"Anything offered in terms of a prize is good for the athletes, it's motivation. These athletes work really hard and sacri-

fice and this sort of prize is very important. Prize money in athletics doesn't compare to football or basketball, for example. It's a good start, you have to start somewhere."

Barshim kicked off his outdoor season with second place at the Xiamen Diamond League meeting last week and will stay in China for the Suzhou of the elite one-day circuit today before returning home to Doha for the next instalment there on May 10. "After I'll take some time off and hopefully peak at the Olympic Games," Barshim said, adding that he was looking forward to the return of fans to the quadrennial showpiece of sports after the Covid-blighted Tokyo Games.

"In terms of having the Olympics with fans back again, it's amazing. I love adrenaline, when the crowd is back, the sound of clapping or shouting, it's like a battle feeling," he said. "We didn't have that in Tokyo because of Covid but somehow we felt so ready because it was already postponed for one year. There was a lot of circling, but when it finally happened we were like kids going to Disneyland. We didn't need fans to feel the hype."

Today, Barshim will be keen to get back to winning ways after being beaten on countback in his season opener in Xiamen by USA's Shelby McEwen, with both men clearing 2.27m. They'll renew their rivalry in Suzhou in a field that includes world indoor champion Hamish Kerr of New Zealand. "My current form is good, I was hoping to get more solid jumps last weekend but it was really risky and I can't afford to have any more injuries," said Barshim. "I'm trying to play it safe. I want to wake up and go out there and do my best, enjoy every competition. Hopefully the weather will stay like this."



Qatar high jump legend Mutaz Barshim speaks at a press conference yesterday, on the eve of the Suzhou Diamond League in China.

AFC U-23 ASIAN CUP

Vale proud of fighting Qatar

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Lidio Vale hailed his Qatar players' tenacity and spirit after the AFC U-23 Asian Cup hosts exited the tournament on Thursday with a 4-2 extra-time defeat against former champions Japan at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Qatar gave the 2016 winners a scare despite playing much of the game with 10 men following goalkeeper Yousef Abdullah's 41st minute sending off, only succumbing to extra-time goals from Mao Hosoya and Kotaro Uchida.

"Everybody knows that when you play against Japan when they have 11 players and you have 11 players it's already very difficult, so imagine that you have to play with 10 players on your team against 11 very experienced Japanese players," said the Portuguese coach.

"I'd like to congratulate the Qatar players, they were fighters. They showed they were fighters in all the games, they did not surrender despite the fact we only played with 10 players today. The Qatari players have a very promising future. They have their own persona, their own character and their own ambition and I think they honoured their country. They honoured the maroon jersey today."

The Japanese had made a quick start with Fuki Yamada putting Go Oiwa's side in front with barely a minute on the clock but Ahmed al-Rawi's 24th minute header pulled Qatar level.

Abdullah was sent off with four minutes remaining in the first half when he stuck his studs into the thigh of Hosoya but the home side were undeterred, going ahead when Jassem Gaber nodded a free



kick past Leo Kokubo.

After relentless pressure Oiwa's side levelled through Seiji Kimura's 67th minute header and, while Japan were unable to break through before the completion of the 90 minutes, Hosoya's 101st minute strike and a fourth from Uchida 11 minutes later sealed Qatar's fate.

"It was the red card that made all the difference, it affected us organisationally speaking," said Vale.

"We will not be able to participate in the Paris Olympics, the dream of those young players will not come true. They were dreaming to be in the Olympics. They have worked really hard in the time we were together but we have ben-

efited a lot from all these efforts. The national team now has some mature players mentally and physically because they can compete at the highest levels.

"I'm going through a lot of emotions and it is the same for the players in the dressing room. We feel the pain of not achieving the dreams of our fans of going as far as possible in this tournament. The players have proved to be real men in these games. Of course, such competitions are beneficial because we have discovered players who have matured mentally and physically and have proven what they're made of by playing against the best Asian players and teams."

SPOTLIGHT

Uzbekistan end Saudi's reign

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Uzbekistan dethroned 10-man Saudi Arabia to book their spot in the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 semi-finals with a 2-0 win yesterday. Khusain Norchaev and Umarali Rakhmonaliev scored either side of half-time to secure Uzbekistan a fourth consecutive semi-final appearance, taking them a step closer to their Olympic dream with the 2018 champions to face Indonesia in the last four on Monday.

Uzbekistan dominated the early possession but struggled to find openings against a Saudi Arabia side who employed aggressive man-to-man marking at the Khalifa International Stadium. Saudi Arabia had the first sight on goal in the 19th minute when Aiman Yahya sent a cross into the final third, but it was a little too high for an unmarked Meshal Sibyani to connect.

Uzbekistan's attempt to match Saudi Arabia's intensity almost backfired in the 41st minute when Abdurauf Buriev fouled Abdullah Radif at the edge of the box, but Yahya steered his free-kick just wide. The match swung into Uzbekistan's favour two minutes into added time when Rayan Hamed's failed clearance led to a moment of brilliance from Nor-

chaev, who waltzed past a defender and goalkeeper Mohamed al-Absi before slotting home.

The young Green Falcons returned for the second half with the same tenacity, with their heavy press keeping Uzbekistan on the defence, but the equaliser continued to elude them as neither Mohammed Abu al-Shamat nor Eid al-Muwallad could get their long-range efforts on target.

Saudi Arabia suffered a further blow in the 70th minute when Yahya was given his marching orders after a second yellow card, with Abbosbek Fayzulaliev's subsequent free-kick deflecting off the upright. Hopes for a Saudi Arabian comeback were then dashed in the 84th minute when Buriev's fierce strike from nearly 30 yards out saw Al Absi parry the ball into the direction of a prowling Rakhmonaliev, who headed home the winner.

IRAQ'S JASIM ENDS VIETNAM'S RUN

At Al Wakra, Iraq became the final team to check into the semi-finals after they overcame Vietnam 1-0 at Al Janoub Stadium, joining Indonesia, Japan and Uzbekistan in the last four. With little separating the two sides, the decisive touch was supplied by Ali Jasim from the penalty spot in the 64th minute to give Iraq their first semi-final appearance since the 2016 edition, which was also held in Qatar. Iraq face Japan on Monday.



Uzbekistan's Khusain Norchaev celebrates after scoring against Saudi Arabia in the quarter-finals of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup at the Khalifa International Stadium yesterday.

CRICKET

Bairstow shines as Punjab pull off record T20 chase

THE PREVIOUS HIGHEST RUN CHASE WAS POSTED BY SOUTH AFRICA WHO OVERHAULED 258/5 SCORED BY WEST INDIES

AFP
Kolkata

Jonny Bairstow smashed an unbeaten century as Punjab Kings recorded the highest successful run chase in T20 cricket with an eight-wicket thrashing of Kolkata Knight Riders in the Indian Premier League yesterday.

The England star clobbered nine sixes and eight fours in his 48-ball 108 to help Punjab overhaul Kolkata's 261-6 with eight balls to spare in hot and humid conditions at the Eden Gardens.

Shashank Singh also impressed with the bat, making 68 not out off 28 balls with eight sixes and two fours.

The previous highest run chase in T20 history was scripted by South Africa who overhauled 258 for 5 made by the West Indies in 2023.

"Both teams played tremendously. You have to go back to the drawing board and see where you went wrong," said Kolkata skipper Shreyas Iyer.

"Not defending hurts but it's a great lesson for the players." Punjab registered only their third win from nine games and moved to eighth spot in the 10-team competition.

Kolkata, with five wins from eight games, remain in second place.

"From the dugout, I was watching the wicket. I felt the ball was coming on with good bounce," said Shashank.

"This match, the way Jonny



Punjab Kings' Jonny Bairstow celebrates after scoring a century during the Indian Premier League match against Kolkata Knight Riders at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday. **Right:** Punjab Kings' Prabhsimran Singh plays a reverse sweep yesterday. (AFP)



batted was a huge positive. It was a great learning for me, we still have five more matches to go."

Opening the Punjab innings, Bairstow put on 93 runs with impact sub Prabhsimran Singh (54) and another 85 runs with South Africa's Rilee Rossouw (26).

Prabhsimran was run out by a direct throw from Sunil Narine who also chipped in with the wicket of Rossouw in the 13th over.

Despite the two dismissals, Shashank continued to un-

leash big shots, making sure Punjab did not lose their nerve while chasing the big total.

Earlier, Kolkata got off to a blistering start with Phil Salt and Narine sharing 138 runs off just 69 balls for the first wicket after being put in to bat.

Narine, dropped on 16, hammered four sixes and nine fours in his 32-ball 71 before holing out to Bairstow off leg spinner Rahul Chahar.

England's Sam Curran dismissed Salt who hit a 37-ball 75

studded with six sixes and six fours after being dropped twice by sloppy Punjab fielders.

Venkatesh Iyer chipped in with a cameo 39-run knock as Kolkata posted the highest IPL total ever at the Eden Gardens.

BRIEF SCORES
Punjab Kings 262 for 2 (Bairstow 108*, Shashank 68*, Prabhsimran 54, Narine 1-24) **beat Kolkata Knight Riders 261 for 6** (Salt 75, Narine 71, Arshdeep 2-45) **by 8 wickets**

FOCUS

Greece hands Olympic flame to 2024 Paris Games hosts in Athens



Greek actress Mary Mina, playing the role of High Priestess, holds the Olympic torch by the cauldron during the Handover Ceremony for the Paris 2024 Olympics at Panathenaic Stadium, Athens, Greece, yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Athens

Greece yesterday handed over the Olympic flame of the 2024 Games to Paris organisers in a ceremony at the Athens marble stadium where the competition was revived nearly 130 years ago.

Hellenic Olympic Committee chairman Spyros Capralos handed the torch to Paris Olympics chief organiser Tony Estanguet at the Panathenaic Stadium, where the first modern Olympics were held in 1896.

Estanguet in a speech said the goal for Paris was to organise "spectacular but also more responsible Games, which will contribute towards a more inclusive society."

Organisers want to ensure "that the biggest event in the world plays an accelerating role in addressing the crucial questions of our time," said Estanguet, a member of France's Athens 2004 Olympics team who won gold in the slalom canoe event.

A duo of French champions, Beijing 2022 ice dance gold medalist Gabriella Papadakis and former swimmer Beatrice Hess, one of the most successful Paralympians in history, carried the flame during the final relay leg into the Panathenaic Stadium.

Nana Mouskouri, the 89-year-

old Greek singer with a worldwide following, performed the anthems of France and Greece at the ceremony.

After spending the night at the French embassy in Athens, the flame today will begin its journey to France on board the 19th-century three-masted barque Belem.

Tomorrow, the ship will pass from the Corinth Canal - a feat of 19th century engineering constructed with the contribution of French banks and engineers.

The Belem is set to reach Marseille - a city founded by ancient Greek colonists around 600 BCE - on May 8.

Over 1,000 vessels will accompany its approach to the harbour, local officials have said.

French swimmer Florent Manaudou will be the first torch bearer in Marseille. His sister Laure was the second torch bearer in ancient Olympia, where the flame was lit on April 16.

Ten thousand torchbearers will then carry the flame across 64 French territories.

It will travel through more than 450 towns and cities, and dozens of tourist attractions during its 12,000-kilometre (7,500-mile) journey through mainland France and overseas French territories in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific.

On July 26 it will form the centrepiece of the Paris Olympics opening ceremony.

Du Plessis to sleep better after Bengaluru end losing streak

New Delhi: The playoffs remain a distant dream for struggling Royal Challengers Bengaluru but captain **Faf du Plessis** said he will sleep better after his team snapped their six-match losing streak in the Indian Premier League on Thursday.

The 35-run victory against Sunrisers Hyderabad was just Bengaluru's second win in nine matches and they remain rooted to the bottom of the 10-team league.

Despite their struggles, they still have a shot at a top-four finish that would give them the chance to win their first IPL title, and du Plessis said getting their second win would give them a boost.

"We've been close for a while but you need to win matches to get confidence back in the group," he said at the presentation ceremony.

"It's a massive relief. No matter where we are, when you're not winning it does affect you, it does affect you mentally, it does affect your confidence. I will sleep a bit easier tonight."

With only Virat Kohli delivering consistently with the bat and a bowling unit which has looked pedestrian at times this season, Bengaluru needed a much improved performance if they were to win at third-placed Hyderabad. And they got it, with Rajat Patidar smashing his second succes-



sive fifty of the tournament and Cameron Green following his unbeaten 37 with two wickets and a crucial catch that sent back the dangerous Heinrich Klaasen. "You can't speak confidence into the group, you can't fake confidence into the group. The only thing that gives confidence is performance," former South Africa skipper Du Plessis said. "We have got more guys scoring runs now. For the first half of the tournament only it was only Virat contributing. "Rajat playing two really good innings back-to-back, Greeny (Green) getting runs, it's massive for him just to get that load off his shoulders. "It's important as a batting line-up to contribute together because we have seen the scores are so big, it's never going to be just one guy scoring the runs."

SPOTLIGHT

Former Pakistan women's cricket team captain Bismah Maroof announces her retirement

AFP
Karachi

Pakistan's most prominent woman cricketer and former captain Bismah Maroof has announced her retirement, ending a 17-year trailblazing career where she became a champion for women's rights.

The 32-year-old ended her international career on Thursday after featuring in Pakistan's 3-0 home defeat in the one-day international series against the West Indies.

"I have decided to retire from the game I love the most," Maroof was quoted in a Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) statement.

"It has been an incredible journey, filled with challenges, victories, and unforgettable memories."

The left-handed batter scored 3369 runs in 136 one-day internationals and 2893 in 140 Twenty20 internationals - both Pakistan records.

She captained Pakistan in 62 T20Is with 27 wins and 34 ODIs with 16 wins.

She will still remain active in league cricket. Maroof's journey made her an icon for gender rights in a patriarchal society, where women's participation in sports poses a challenge to strict social norms.

She gave birth in August 2021, prompting the PCB to implement a maternity clause in central contracts for women cricketers that allocated paid maternity leave.

Maroof and her daughter Fatima gained a



Bismah Maroof played 136 ODIs for Pakistan

massive following during the women's World Cup in New Zealand in 2022, where videos of Indian players playing with the baby went viral on social media.

ICC's recognition

The International Cricket Council posted a photo on social media platform X of the mother-daughter duo with the caption: "Little Fatima's first lesson in the spirit of cricket from India and Pakistan". Maroof thanked the PCB for its support during her motherhood.

"The support from the PCB has been invaluable, particularly in implementing the first-



A young fan holds a placard during a cricket match involving Pakistan women's team in this 2022 file photo.

ever parental policy for me, which enabled me to represent my country at the highest level while being a mother," she said.

Maroof won gold medals with the Pakistan team in the 2010 and 2014 Asian games and played in four editions of the Women's ODI World Cup between 2009 and 2022.

She also featured in eight editions of the T20 World Cup, including the last event in 2023.

BOTTOMLINE

China anti-doping agency says will 'actively co-operate' with WADA audit

AFP
Beijing

China's anti-doping agency said yesterday it will co-operate with a compliance audit ordered by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) involving a case where 23 Chinese swimmers tested positive for a prescription heart drug.

"CHINADA will actively cooperate with the coming audit by WADA, and provide assistance where needed," the China Anti-Doping Agency said in a statement.

WADA said on Thursday it would send a compliance audit team to China to "assess the current state of the country's anti-doping program" run by CHINADA.

In its statement, CHINADA said it "will work for the rights and interests of clean athletes and the integrity in sport".

WADA has faced criticism since media reports that the swimmers tested positive for trimetazidine (TMZ) - which can enhance performance - ahead of the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 but were not sanctioned after WADA accepted the argument of Chinese authorities that the case was caused by food contamination.

On Thursday, WADA said it had asked for an independent review, calling on Swiss public prosecutor Eric Cottier to look into its handling of the case of the Chinese swimmers.

CHINADA said the world body's request for an independent review was "a clear demonstration of fairness, openness and transparency of WADA".

The head of the United States Anti-Doping Agency

(USADA), Travis Tygart, has called the situation with the positive tests a "potential cover-up" and USADA on Thursday branded WADA's announcement of an independent investigation "self-serving".

CHINADA maintained however that "there have been false accusations and misleading defamatory reports from some organizations and media, including the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA)", which it said chose "to ignore China's firm attitude in the fight against doping".

'Misinformation' claims

It added that USADA and the media had worked to "manipulate public opinion by spreading misinformation in order to attack WADA and CHINADA, and shake the well-functioning global anti-doping system."

Beijing meanwhile has called reports about the case "fake news".

"The relevant reports are fake news and not factual," foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said on Monday. Cottier, the Swiss prosecutor reviewing the case, has been asked to evaluate if there was any bias shown towards China or "any undue interference or other impropriety" in the handling of the case.

The lawyer will also be asked to determine if the decision not to challenge or appeal against the verdict of CHINADA, that the cases involved food contamination, was reasonable.

The team which will travel to China will additionally include "independent auditors from the broader anti-doping community".

WADA said the visit was part of its regular compliance monitoring programme.

AL-KUWARI WINS FIRST ROUND OF JORDAN NATIONAL RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP



Qatari driver Abdulaziz al-Kuwari won the first round of the 2024 Jordan National Rally Championship onboard his Skoda Fabia Rally2, achieving the best timing in all the special stages. Khaled al-Suwaidi, however, was forced to withdraw from the rally after the second special stage due to a health issue while occupying the second position. The participation of the Qatari drivers in this rally is part of the plan set by the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) to prepare for the upcoming Jordan International Rally – the second round of the Middle East Rally Championship – which will take place next month.

TENNIS

Alcaraz and Sabalenka advance at Madrid Open

Wearing a protective sleeve on his right arm, 2-time Grand Slam winner Alcaraz beats Shevchenko

AFP
Madrid

Defending Madrid Open champions Carlos Alcaraz and Aryna Sabalenka both triumphed in their opening clashes in the Spanish capital yesterday to reach the third round.

Alcaraz returned after a month out to begin his double defence with a convincing 6-2, 6-1 win over Alexander Shevchenko, while Sabalenka survived a tense three-set tussle against the in-form Magda Linette.

Men's world number three Alcaraz shone on home clay after a forearm problem led to his withdrawals from the Monte Carlo Masters and Barcelona Open.

"It's been quite a tough month for me, with the uncertainty over when I'd be back," said Alcaraz.

"The priority today was to see how I felt, in a difficult match.

"The feelings were very good, and I think I played at a very good level despite coming without rhythm...I am very happy and it's a pleasure to play here in Madrid again."

Wearing a protective sleeve on his right arm, two-time Grand Slam winner Alcaraz quickly dispelled any doubts after his time out by flying out of the blocks in the



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz returns the ball to Russia's Alexander Shevchenko during the 2024 Madrid Open match yesterday. **Right:** Aryna Sabalenka reacts during her Madrid Open match against Poland's Magda Linette. (AFP/Reuters)

first set with a break. The 20-year-old Spaniard was as exciting as ever, frequently on the attack, and secured a second break in the fifth game for a 4-1 lead.

Indian Wells winner Alcaraz hit the net with a drop shot to let the Kazakhstani back in but broke again himself for a 5-2 advantage which he served out.

Alcaraz pulled off two second set breaks for a 3-0 lead but again allowed his 23-year-old opponent to

cut the deficit before striking back with a third break, which he consolidated for 5-1.

The 2022 and 2023 Madrid winner and second seed wrapped up his victory in little over an hour with another break when Shevchenko sent a forehand long.

Alcaraz will face Thiago Seyboth Wild in the third round after the Brazilian surprised Lorenzo Mussetti 6-4, 6-4. Andrey Rublev ended a four-

match losing streak with a straightforward 6-1, 6-4 win over Facundo Bagnis.

"It feels really great after a while to start with a win and I'm happy with my performance," said Rublev, who lost his temper and obliterated his racquet after a first round exit in Barcelona.

Poland's Hubert Hurkacz hit nine aces as he powered past Briton Jack Draper 6-1, 7-5. In the women's draw Sabalenka

edged the wily Linette 6-4, 3-6, 6-3.

The Australian Open winner has struggled since her triumph in Melbourne and her Polish opponent fought well in the two-hour nine minute contest.

Big-hitter Sabalenka, ranked second in the world, edged the first set but struggled in the second as Linette broke to love and then consolidated for a 4-1 lead. The 32-year-old then carved

out three break points in the sixth game but although she could not take them, eventually steered the match to a deciding third set.

Two-time Grand Slam champion Sabalenka saved three break points to stay on serve and then found a net cord winner to break herself for a 5-3 lead.

Sabalenka, 25, wrapped up her narrow victory over the world number 48 by smashing down an ace and will face Katie Boulter or Robin Montgomery in the third round.

"I think in that second set she just put a little extra pressure on my serve, and I just didn't handle my emotions well," said Sabalenka yesterday.

"We went to a third set, and I'm just happy that I was able to close this match with a win."

Elena Rybakina eased past Lucia Bronzetti 6-4, 6-3.

The Kazakhstani, ranked fourth in the world and with a tour-leading three titles this season, continued her good form after triumphing in Stuttgart last week.

Rybakina faces Egyptian Mayar Sherif in the next round after she surprised Stuttgart runner-up Marta Kostyuk 6-2, 7-5.

Chinese fifth seed Zheng Qinwen retired with a thigh injury from her match against Yulia Putintseva, who had taken a 7-5, 2-0 lead.

MOTORSPORT

Bagnaia hits back with record Jerez practice lap ahead of Spanish GP

AFP
Jerez de la Frontera, Spain

A wounded world champion roared back yesterday, Francesco Bagnaia lowering his own lap record in practice at Jerez for this weekend's Spanish MotoGP.

The factory Ducati rider, champion in 2022 and 2023, won the opener in Qatar yet has subsequently fallen to fifth in the championship standings coming into this fourth round of the season.

But the Italian sent out a warning to the pretenders to his crown by dominating the practice yesterday with a sizzling late lap of 1min 36.025 to better his own previous best time at the circuit in Andalusia of 1min 36.170 set in 2022.

He topped second practice ahead of Maverick Vinales, the Aprilia rider on a cloud after his heroics at the Grand Prix of the Americas, where he won both the sprint and the race itself off a record pole.

In third came Marc Marquez, who briefly led the United States race before abruptly parting company with his Ducati satellite Gresini bike.

The six-time MotoGP world champion, who has switched stables after 10 years at Honda, is on the hunt for his first win since Oc-



Ducati Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia rides during the first practice session of the Spanish Grand Prix at the Jerez racetrack in Jerez de la Frontera yesterday. (AFP)

tober, 2021.

"The aim for the time being remains making the podium," said Marquez, a top-3 finisher in the sprints in Portugal and the USA.

If Acosta, second in Texas last Sunday, emerged victorious in front of his home fans this weekend he would deprive Marquez of the record of the youngest MotoGP winner in history.

Jorge Martin, who leads this season's championship by 21 points (30 clear of Bagnaia), posted the fifth fastest time, four tenths of a second quicker than teenaged rookie sensation Pedro

Acosta.

The top 10 automatically go through to the second qualifying session shaping the first four rows of the grid today, this group joined by the two fastest riders from the first session.

The qualifying today will be followed by the 12 lap sprint race, with the 25-lap main event tomorrow where Bagnaia is seeking a third consecutive win.

In the world championship title race, Martin leads on 80 points, from Enea Bastianini (59 pts), Vinales (56), Costa (54) and Bagnaia (50).

GRESINI'S VETERAN RIDER MARQUEZ EYES FACTORY BIKE NEXT YEAR

Jerez, Spain: Six-times MotoGP champion Marc Marquez said he wants to return to racing on a factory bike in 2025 after switching from Honda to Ducati satellite team Gresini Racing ahead of this season.

Satellite teams use older versions of the bikes, with Gresini currently using a Ducati Desmosedici GP23, as opposed to the factory Desmosedici GP24 machines being used by the Ducati and Pramac Racing teams this year.

"At the moment I have nothing clear. Of course I would like a factory bike," Marquez said in an interview on MotoGP's website yesterday.

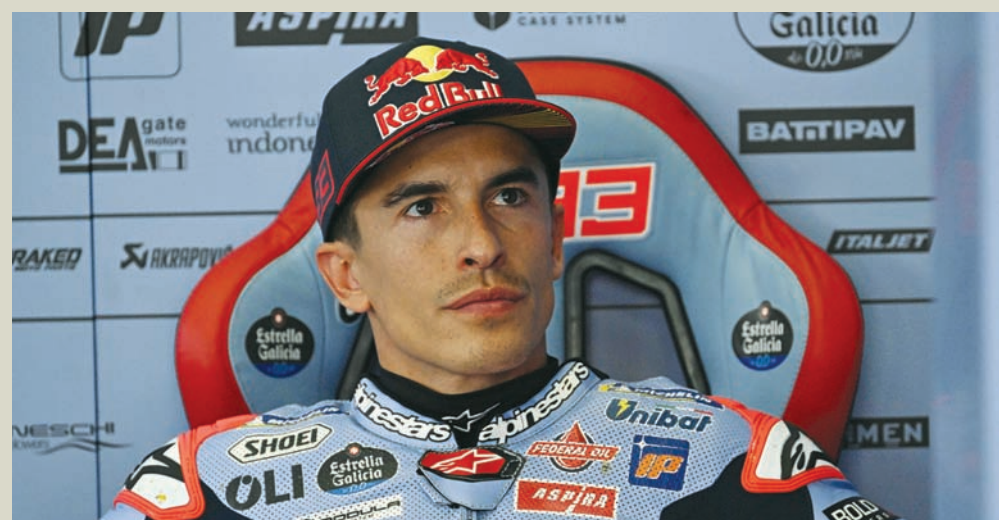
"My work is to try to do 100% to have a factory bike for next year. I don't have contact with anyone, I just want to do the best and if you are fast on the racetrack you will have more options to choose from.

"Of course around Jerez, then Le Mans and Mugello there will start to be some contacts (with manufacturers), this is true. But at the moment I have some margin on the racetrack to keep going," Marquez, who is eighth in the standings, is looking to claim a fourth career win at this week's Spanish Grand Prix in Jerez.

The Spaniard was leading the Grand Prix of the Americas earlier this month at the halfway stage but crashed out due to an issue with his front brake.

"The team is working a lot, super hard with Ducati to see what we can do for the future to not have these problems again," Marquez said of his preparations for tomorrow's race.

"But I am here to learn things, and now we need to clean all these small mistakes to be more constant on those top positions."



Ducati Spanish rider Marc Marquez looks on from the box during a practice session of the Spanish Grand Prix at the Jerez racetrack in Jerez de la Frontera yesterday. (AFP)

FOOTBALL

Ligue 1 title beckons for treble-chasers PSG



Paris Saint-Germain's coach Luis Enrique speaks at a press conference yesterday.

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain can complete the first step of a potential treble today knowing a victory at home to Le Havre will wrap up a record-extending 12th French league title with three matches to spare.

Ousmane Dembele and Kylian Mbappe both scored twice as PSG cruised to a 4-1 win at Lorient on Wednesday, but Monaco's 1-0 victory over Lille delayed the party for Luis Enrique's side a few more days at least. "We hope it's going to be a special day tomorrow," Luis Enrique said. "It's nicer to win (at home) rather than hoping for another team to lose."

For PSG, it will represent a 10th Ligue 1 crown in the last 12 campaigns going back to the start of the Qatar era which has transformed French football. Indeed it could get even better for the champions-elect, with

an upcoming Champions League semi-final against Borussia Dortmund and the French Cup final against Lyon next month offering the chance for a treble.

"We're in a splendid period and we have almost all the players available. The supporters are happy and it's a very positive end to the season," Luis Enrique told reporters. "I'm going to carry on in the same way, by rotating players, why would I change? What changes is that if we win tomorrow, we'll officially be champions and to do it in front of our supporters is perfect."

PSG are unbeaten in 25 league matches since their only loss this term, at home to Nice in September. "We're a more mature team now. But that's part of a process, PSG have changed a lot of things since the summer," said Luis Enrique. "It's a building phase, we'll see at the end of the campaign what we've been able to achieve. And I'm convinced next year we'll be even better."

Le Havre, on the other hand, risk an immediate return to the second tier after

a dreadful 2024, and a run that has seen them win just once in 12 matches with goals scarce. Monaco are on course to finish second after five wins in their past six, with Brest now clinging on to the third automatic Champions League qualifying spot after successive defeats.

Lille are a point behind Brest, who travel to Breton rivals Rennes on Sunday, while Nice are not entirely out of the running for a top-three finish either despite a challenging second half of the season. Marseille, winless in five domestically, warm up for their Europa League semi-final first leg against Atalanta with the visit of Lens.

FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

Today: Paris Saint-Germain v Le Havre (1900)

Tomorrow: Metz v Lille (1100), Clermont v Reims, Lorient v Toulouse, Strasbourg v Nice (all 1300), Rennes v Brest (1505), Lyon v Monaco (1700), Marseille v Lens (1900)

PREMIER LEAGUE

Coach Arteta urges Arsenal to 'raise the bar' against Spurs

Gunners are one point clear of City, who have a game in hand

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta has urged Arsenal to "raise the bar" as the Premier League leaders prepare for a defining moment in the title race against north London rivals Tottenham.

Arteta's side make the short journey to Spurs tomorrow looking to keep title rivals Manchester City at bay with a vital victory. The Gunners are one point clear of second-placed City, who have a game in hand, and will kick off at Nottingham Forest soon after the final whistle in north London.

After a damaging home defeat against Aston Villa, Arteta's team have bounced back by winning at Wolves and crushing Chelsea 5-0 on Tuesday. But the Arsenal boss is well aware of the threat posed by fifth-placed Tottenham, who drew 2-2 at the Emirates Stadium in September, and he called on his players to find another gear this weekend.

"Enjoy the moment, try to navigate things to a natural way. Tottenham are super-competitive at the moment. There is one thing to do in this situation, compete, compete, compete," Arteta said. "It's a really good sign because we know what we are going to have to do to win it and we have to raise the bar to match that."

City responded to Arsenal's emphatic win against Chelsea by crushing Brighton 4-0 on Thursday. Pep Guardiola's side will be crowned champions for an unprecedented fourth successive season if they win their last five games.

But Arteta is not concerned about his former club's results, preferring to ensure his team are focused on their own performances. "It's another game that they managed to win in a convincing way, something that we cannot control. Let's do what we have to do," he said.

"You have to show it every season, every game and in this league that's extremely difficult to do. We are going to do everything we can to win it and if we do win it, we are going to try to win it again. If we don't, for sure we will try again."

Arsenal are hoping to win the title for the first time in 20 years after blowing an eight-point lead to gift City the trophy last season. Arsenal famously won the league twice at Tottenham's old White Hart Lane stadium, in 1971 and 2004.

The Gunners cannot clinch silverware on enemy territory this time, but a victory would keep them in the title hunt while damag-



Arsenal's Jurrien Timber (left) and Declan Rice at a training session yesterday.

ing Tottenham's hopes of qualifying for the Champions League via a top-four finish.

SPURS WILL BE ON THE ATTACK AGAINST ARSENAL: POSTECOGLOU

Meanwhile, Ange Postecoglou insisted Tottenham will stick to his attacking philosophy against Arsenal. Postecoglou's side cannot afford to lose to their bitter rivals at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium as they try to stay in the race to qualify for the Champions League.

Fifth placed Tottenham are six points behind fourth placed Aston Villa, who can extend that advantage to nine if they beat troubled Chelsea today. Tottenham will have three games in hand on Villa by the time they kick off against Arsenal, but Postecoglou knows only victories will do in the battle to finish in the top four.

With that in mind, the Australian has no intention of sending his team into the derby with a defensive mindset, even though Arsenal showed their attacking prowess with a 5-0 rout of Chelsea on Tuesday.

"It's just about making sure you embrace the challenge and try to tackle it in the way that got us into this position in the first place," Postecoglou said. "From our perspective we've had some inconsistencies and challenges this year, but when we've played well we've played

a certain way and gone about things in a certain way.

"There's no point now when you get to the most important part of the year to shy away from that or change your approach. You've got to double down on it and focus on playing our football. That's a great measure for us because otherwise you'll never know where you're short or whether you can be successful in doing it our way."

Postecoglou know a Tottenham win this weekend would be a major blow to Arsenal's bid to win the title. "We understand the importance of being at home in these kind of games to not let our biggest rival win in the biggest derby for us," he said. "We understand the consequences of that. I'm not going to dictate how our fans feel and what they feel is important."

FIXTURES

Today: (1400 GMT unless stated): Aston Villa v Chelsea (1900), Everton v Brentford (1630), Fulham v Crystal Palace, Manchester United v Burnley, Newcastle v Sheffield United, West Ham v Liverpool (1130), Wolves v Luton
Tomorrow (1300 GMT unless stated): Bournemouth v Brighton, Nottingham Forest v Manchester City (1530), Tottenham v Arsenal

Qatar's Dawoud bags 110m hurdles gold at U-20 Asian Championship



Qatar's Omar Dawoud won gold in the 110m hurdles at the U-20 Asian Athletics Championship in Dubai yesterday.

Klopp says Liverpool target Slot in line for 'best job in world'

London: Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp has told Arne Slot he will be getting the "best job in the world" if the Feyenoord boss succeeds the German at Anfield. Klopp will step down at the end of this season and Slot is the leading contender to replace him after Liverpool opened talks with his Dutch club this week.

Speaking on Thursday, Slot said he had "every confidence" Liverpool would strike a deal and admitted he was keen to take over from Klopp. The highly rated 45-year-old, who has previously been linked with Tottenham and Leeds, took Feyenoord to the Dutch title in 2022/23 and won the Dutch Cup earlier this month.

Liverpool's Dutch captain Virgil van Dijk this week said Slot's attacking philosophy could be a good fit at Anfield. Klopp also offered a positive review of Slot's qualities, while emphasising the appeal to any manager of taking the reins at Liverpool.

"I like the way his team plays football. If he is the one, I like that he wants it," Klopp told reporters. "I don't know him, but some people who know him say he's a good guy. I like that a lot. So good coach, good guy. Looking forward for the club, if he is the solution, if he is the man, I'm more than happy. It's the best job in the world, best club in the world. Great job, great team, fantastic people. A really interesting job." Feyenoord are currently sec-

ond in the Eredivisie table, with PSV Eindhoven nine points clear at the top. Failing to win the title would be a disappointment for Slot, mirroring Klopp's frustration at Liverpool's own faltering title bid.

Liverpool are in third place, three points behind leaders Arsenal and two adrift of second-placed Manchester City. City have a game in hand on both Arsenal and Liverpool, who look to have blown their chance after defeats against Crystal Palace and Everton.

The Reds have also crashed out of the Europa League and FA Cup at the quarter-final stage to ruin Klopp's hopes of a glorious send-off after nine years in charge. Klopp suggested missing out on the title could actually be a help to his eventual successor, since expectations may not be as high next season.

Liverpool's dismal 2-0 defeat against Merseyside rivals Everton on Wednesday was a major disappointment for Klopp, who took the blame for their lacklustre performance and first loss at Goodison Park for 14 years.

"It is my job to create an atmosphere where the boys can be the best version of themselves and that is where I have failed. I take the blame 100 percent," he said. "I'm not in the mood to surrender, to wave the white flag. We have to make sure we play better."

Man City's Premier League charges to be resolved in 'near future'

London: Premier League chief executive Richard Masters yesterday revealed the case against Manchester City for alleged financial breaches will be resolved in the "near future".

City are bidding to win a fourth successive Premier League title this season, which would be their second triumph in the competition since being hit with 115 charges of breaching financial rules in February 2023. The allegations relate to City's conduct in nine seasons starting in 2009 until 2018, when the Premier League opened an investigation into the club.

Asked whether another City title success while the charges remain unresolved would damage the credibility of European football, Masters said: "It's not for the football authorities to start being selective about who they would like to win the league. The key point is that you've

got that jeopardy until the final day. Who knows where we will be on May 19?"

Masters, speaking at the European Leagues general assembly, added: "Obviously we can't comment on the case, the date has been set and the case will resolve itself at some point in the near future, and I cannot make any further comment on it."

An independent commission is set to hear the case later this year, but not before the current campaign ends. Second-placed City are one point behind leaders Arsenal but have a game in hand and will clinch the title if they win their last five matches.

The wait for a verdict on City comes in a season in which Everton and Nottingham Forest were hit with points deductions for breaching the league's profitability and sustainability rules (PSR). Everton's initial 10-point penalty was reduced to six on appeal, but they were then given another

two-point punishment for similar offences, which they are also appealing. Relegation-threatened Forest have appealed after being handed a four-point deduction for their own PSR breaches.

GNABRY TO RETURN, SANE DOUBTFUL FOR BAYERN'S REAL CLASH

Bayern Munich coach Thomas Tuchel said forward Serge Gnabry "will play and will score" in Tuesday's Champions League semi-final first leg at home to Real Madrid, but Leroy Sane's status for the match is in doubt. Gnabry scored a goal in Bayern's 2-2 draw at Arsenal in the first leg of the quarter-finals on April 9 before he suffered a muscle injury. Tuchel said he would return next week but would not reveal whether he would start. Former Manchester City winger Sane is less likely to feature though because of a pubic bone injury, with Tuchel

saying Bayern need to "take it day by day."

Centre-back Dayot Upamecano is also a doubt after spraining his ankle in training. Six-time European champions Bayern are already without Kingsley Coman, Sacha Boey and Bouna Sarr for the match. Tuchel is set to depart at the end of the season, but he said he was cutting out the noise about his replacement and focusing on football.

SPANISH FOOTBALL FEDERATION APPOINTS ROCHA AS PRESIDENT

The Spanish football federation appointed Pedro Rocha as its president, after disgraced former chief Luis Rubiales stepped down last September. Rocha, currently under investigation as part of a corruption case involving the federation, had filled the role on an interim basis and was left as the only candidate for the election due to

take place in May. This week the Spanish government resolved to oversee the scandal-hit organisation "in response to the federation's crisis". When the Spanish government's National Sports Council (CSD) gathered Thursday, deciding to create a committee to oversee the federation, they did not suspend Rocha, which allowed the RFEF to appoint the 69-year-old as chief.

Spain's leading sports court had issued a report saying the RFEF, led by Rocha on an interim basis after Rubiales resigned, had taken decisions "beyond its remit" in that period. It was the sport court's report that led to Thursday's CSD decision to oversee the federation. World and European football governing bodies FIFA and UEFA issued a statement Thursday expressing "great concern" at the situation around the RFEF. Spain are due to host the 2030 World Cup along with Portugal and Morocco.