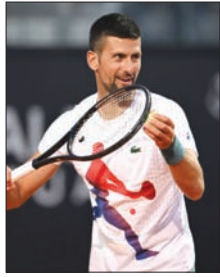


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IPL | Page 2

Head, Abhishek star as 'unreal' Hyderabad crush Lucknow



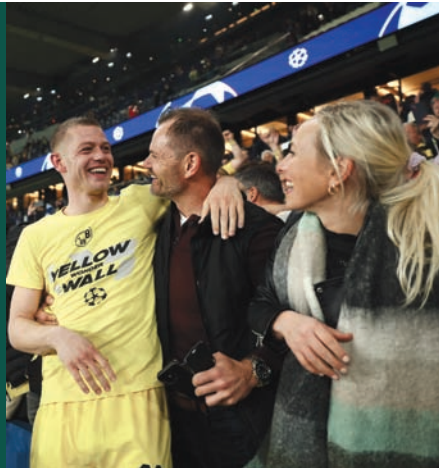
TENNIS | Page 3

Djokovic says he is ready to peak at French Open

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CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

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ATHLETICS

Barshim's vision takes flight with 'What Gravity Challenge'

Competition involving the world's 12 best high jumpers will be held today at the Katara Amphitheatre

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mutaz Barshim's best came 10 years back, but even today he is as excited as ever.

Yesterday, on the eve of the inaugural edition of his brainchild event 'What Gravity Challenge', the Qatari high jump icon said: "I woke up this morning and told my wife I'm really excited like it's the Olympics. That's how excited I am."

The Olympic champion's excitement is not just from an athlete's perspective, but also from being on the other side, the organising part of competition. 'What Gravity Challenge' is an initiative of Barshim - which according to the 32-year-old has been in the making for a long time.

The competition, which will be held today at the Katara Amphitheatre from 5:40pm and is organised by Qatar Athletics Federation (QAF), will involve the world's 12 best high jumpers. The event represents Barshim's personal expression of gratitude to Qatar, which has supported him throughout his career.

"I want to show my gratitude especially to the Qatar Olympic Committee President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani. He was the person who gave me the first start when I met him. He wanted me to create something for a lasting legacy. So I'm really thankful to them. And again I'm really happy. Just looking forward to having a wonderful event," the three-time world champion said.

The winner of the innovative event will take home a custom-made trophy crafted by esteemed artist Ahmed al-Bahrani and a prize of US\$15,000.

Barshim's best leap of 2.43m came in Brussels in 2014 and in between, the Qatari high jumper has won almost everything possible, barring surpassing the World record (2.45m) of Cuban legend Javier Sotomayor, set 35 years ago in Salamanca, Spain in 1993.

Talking about the changes in the last decade, Barshim said: "To be honest, if you look at all these years in between things have changed. In 2013 and 2014, we had top jumpers each clearing 2.40m in literally each meet. You're not the same person physically anymore. You have to be aware of your injuries, you need to be smart about it. But, for me the goal is always the same, whenever I'm participating I always



FROM LEFT: Puerto Rico's Luis Castro Rivera, Ukraine's Bohdan Bondarenko, Qatar's Mutaz Barshim, World record holder Javier Sotomayor of Cuba, New Zealand's Hamish Kerr, Sanghyeok Woo of South Korea and USA's JuVaughn Harrison pose after a press conference yesterday, on the eve of the 'What Gravity Challenge' high jump event.

want to be ready to perform."

Barshim, who is going to take part in the fourth Olympics in July, said the Paris Games is his top priority this year. "I haven't really started my Olympic preparation yet. I think after this event I will start my preparations. I want to see where I am. Because for me this year the Olympics is the most important," he said.

In-form Hamish Kerr, who defeated Barshim last month to win the Suzhou Diamond League with a clearance of 2.31m is also taking part in the star-studded high jump field. "It is an amazing event to be a part of and outside of a major championship you are not likely to see a more stacked field," Kerr said yesterday.

"I come from New Zealand, which is a long way away, but I was in Asia last week. So we decided to come here a bit early and do some sort of nice training. So yeah, it's been amazing. This is my third time in Doha. I just feel like I'm welcomed by everyone here."

"It is credit to Barshim and his legacy that he has managed to put together such a quality event, which heralds a new era for our sport. Taking what is quite a traditional concept and putting it in a unique setting is a fantastic way to showcase high jump and our unique skill set," the World Indoor champion added.

Ukraine's Bohdan Bondarenko, who jumped 2.42m in New York in 2014, is also part of the high-quality field along with 11 other of the world's finest high jumpers which includes a trio of 2.40m plus jumpers and the reigning world and Olympic champions.

USA's World's silver medalist JuVaughn Harrison said: "It feels great to be the next generation following the footsteps of Barshim and others, but challenging them at the same time. I'll try to do the same thing tomorrow. But you know, like I said, I've watched those. I admire him and to be able to compete against him is a great pleasure."



A brainchild of Mutaz Barshim, the winner of the event will take home a custom-made trophy crafted by esteemed artist Ahmed al-Bahrani and a prize of US\$15,000.

AMIR CUP

Alaaeldin scripts Gharafa's stunning comeback win over Ahli



Al Gharafa's Ahmed Alaaeldin (centre) celebrates after scoring in the extra time against Al Ahli in the Amir Cup last 16 match at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Ahmed Alaaeldin struck in the extra time as Al Gharafa edged past Al Ahli 4-3 in a thrilling Amir Cup last 16 match at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday. In the quarters, Gharafa will face Umm Salal, who had defeated Al Bidda 3-1 on Tuesday.

Ahli were up 2-0 just after 21 minutes as Naim Sliti and Yazan al-Nuaimat struck in six minutes apart. But Gharafa hit back through Fabrizio Diaz's long-range in the 27th minute. Ahli, however, took a two-goal advantage at half time after al-Nuaimat found the net in the 39th minute.

But a resilient Gharafa bounced back in stunning fashion after the break. Farid Boulaya's 68th-minute goal rejuvenated Pedro Martins' side with Ferjani Sassi taking the game to extra time with an equaliser in the 83rd minute.

In stoppage time of first half of extra time, Qatar international Alaaeldin headed from a close range to signal wild scenes in the Gharafa camp. But they had survive anxious moments after Ahli's Ramon Gines found the net in the 118th minute, but the goal was ruled out for offside.

Ahmed al-Ganehi, the winger for

Gharafa, expressed immense joy at their victory, emphasizing the team's unwavering spirit despite initially trailing by two goals. He stated: "Al Ahli started the match strongly after taking the lead, taking advantage of some mistakes. However, we created numerous scoring opportunities. Unfortunately, our lack of concentration and finishing ability cost us potential goals."

Al-Ganehi hoped that this victory would serve as a catalyst for Gharafa's performance in the upcoming stages of the Amir Cup. He stressed the importance of focusing on competing fiercely to vie for the Amir Cup title.

SADD FACE MARKHIYA TODAY

Today, Al Sadd will play Al Markhiya at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium at 5.15pm, Al Wakrah will meet Muaither at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium at 8pm, and Al Rayyan will take on Al Khor at Janoub Stadium, also at 8pm.

Al Rayyan coach Leonardo Jardim, speaking on eve of their match with Al Khor, said: "We finished runners-up in the League behind Al Sadd after a tight title race and lost the Qatar Cup final against Al Wakrah. We want to end this runner-up barrier in the Amir Cup."

All the players are determined to win the Amir Cup and make up for our performance in the final last week.

Al Khor coach Abdullah Mubarak said: "We have great ambitions in this special tournament after winning the Second Division. We are looking forward to a win against Al Rayyan and qualify for the quarter-final. All the players are confident for the match against experienced Al Rayyan team."

Al Sadd coach Wesam Rizk, said the match against Al Markhiya match will be a strong test. "Our ultimate goal is to win the Amir Cup, and we want to reconcile with fans after defeat in Qatar Cup semi-final. We are fully prepared and looking to give winning performance but I anticipate a resolute response from them against Al Markhiya."

Al Markhiya coach Madjid Bougherra said: "We have nothing to lose and we will play Al Sadd with an aim to make amends after slipping to the Second Division. Al Markhiya players always relish playing with big sides and they are eager to give a strong show."

Al Wakrah's assistant coach Ousmane Coulibaly said his team was high on morale after the Qatar Cup triumph. "We are playing in Amir Cup a tournament cherished by everyone, with high morale after winning the Qatar Cup."

Muaither assistant coach George Albin opined: "This match is important to us, and I have confidence in all the players to deliver their best."

CRICKET

Head, Abhishek help Hyderabad to 10-wicket win

'Kudos to their skill, they've worked very hard on their six-hitting'

AFP
Hyderabad, India

Openers Travis Head and Abhishek Sharma smoked half-centuries as Sunrisers Hyderabad crushed Lucknow Super Giants by 10 wickets yesterday to boost their play-off hopes in the IPL.

Chasing a modest 166 for victory, Head, who smashed 89, and fellow left-hander Abhishek, who hit 75, tore into the opposition at-tack to romp home with 10.2 overs to spare at their home in Uppal. "I'm lost for words. We've watched that batting on TV but that was unreal," Lucknow skipper K L Rahul said of the bludgeoning by the Hyderabad openers. "Everything was hitting the middle of the bat, kudos to their skill, they've worked very hard on their six-hitting."

Australia's Head attacked with a flurry of fours and sixes as he reached his fifty in 16 balls and went past 500 runs this season. Head is now third in the batting chart behind Virat Kohli (542) and Ruturaj Gaikwad (541) with his fourth half-century - he also has a ton - in this edition.

He took on the spinners with aplomb and said the skill will be invaluable on the slow pitches in the West Indies during the T20 World Cup in June. "Something I have been working on with spin, something I have been working hard on. It will be a big part in the Caribbean," said man of the match Head. "Nice to get 360 (degrees) and get to the parts of the ground I have not been to. We want to maximise the powerplay. It is not going to work every time but we want to go for it."

The 30-year-old Head lauded his younger partner Abhishek, 23, and said: "His spin game is something else. We complement each other so well."

Abhishek joined the charge as



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Travis Head (left) and Abhishek Sharma walk back to the pavilion during the Indian Premier League match against Lucknow Super Giants in Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)



Sunrisers Hyderabad's captain Pat Cummins celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Lucknow Super Giants' Krunal Pandya in Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)

he got to his fifty in 19 balls after the pair took Hyderabad to 107 in the first six overs of powerplay, when only two fielders are allowed outside the inner circle.

Hyderabad, who won the IPL in 2016 under David Warner, registered their seventh win in 12 matches to hand a perfect gift to birthday boy and captain Pat

Cummins, who turned 31 yesterday.

Abhishek hit the winning six as Hyderabad moved to third in the 10-team table with 14 points. Lucknow stay sixth after the bruising loss.

Top four teams will make the play-offs with the final on May 26 in Chennai.

Cummins said Head's unconventional hitting does not "surprise" him anymore and praised Abhishek for being "an incredible player of spin" and pace.

Seam bowler Bhuvneshwar Kumar set up victory with impressive bowling figures of 2-12 in his four overs to restrict Lucknow to 165-4 after they elected to bat first. Lucknow lost regular wickets until Nicholas Pooran, who hit 48, and Ayush Badoni, who smashed 55, put on an unbeaten stand of 99 in 52 balls to boost the team total. But the score proved too little against a team which posted record totals of 277 and 287 in this high-scoring edition of the T20 tournament.

BRIEF SCORES
Sunrisers Hyderabad 167 for 0 (Head 89*, Abhishek 75*) **beat Lucknow Super Giants 165 for 4** (Badoni 55*, Pooran 48*, Bhuvneshwar 2-12) **by 10 wickets**

FOCUS

QCA signs strategic partnership agreement



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar Chess Association (QCA) announced yesterday the signing of a co-operation and strategic partnership agreement with Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, aiming to introduce the game of chess into schools and academies affiliated with the Qatar Foundation (QF).

The partnership agreement covers mutual cooperation in line with QCA's objectives aimed at spreading the game of chess and its culture across schools and academies. This aims at increasing the numbers of chess players across different age groups in local tournaments, in addition to increasing the number of registered and ranked players at the International Chess Federation.

The agreement contributes to promoting chess in QF schools through organizing courses to teach chess to teachers, providing training certificates, establishing chess clubs in schools, and supplying chess equipment to students.

Mohamed al-Mudahka, QCA President, pointed out that the cooperation between QCA and QF aims to achieve many objectives, mostly spreading chess culture in schools and expanding its horizons, especially as it is part of a comprehensive educational programme. He also appreciated the significant cooperation with the Student Affairs and Community Engagement Pre University Education at QF, expressing his hopes for further collaboration to help QCA in achieving its vision and developing chess to build a large base for it.

Al-Mudahka further said that studies have clearly shown that chess significantly enhances students' mental abilities, leading to



improved academic performance. Accordingly, QCA is keen on using the game as an educational tool for schoolchildren to enhance their thinking skills, physical abilities, and self-confidence through the implementation of a scientific educational project.

Meanwhile, Sara al-Hajri, Director of Student Affairs and Community Engagement Pre University Education at QF, said that this cooperation reflects QF strong commitment to providing diverse opportunities to enrich student participation, as chess enhances vital skills such as strategic thinking, thus promoting academic and personal development for students. She added: "We look forward to the positive impact this cooperation will have on our students, as this agreement represents one of the results of joint cooperation during this year's National Sport Day."

Abdullah Shaheen al-Kaabi, Head of the Sports Affairs Section at Student Affairs and Community Engagement Pre University Education at QF, expressed his great happiness at such cooperation for its various positive outcomes. He also thanked QCA for supporting the students who represented the Qatari team in the recent Gulf Youth Games held in the UAE, and their success in winning numerous medals in individual and team competitions.

Crawley aiming for white-ball role

London: Batsman **Zak Crawley** is aiming to secure a more regular role in England's white-ball teams after establishing himself in the Test side under skipper Ben Stokes and head coach Brendon McCullum. Test opener Crawley has scored over 1,000 runs in 13 matches since the start of 2023, playing with an attacking, aggressive style that has often helped his team get off to quick starts. His Test form has led to calls for his inclusion in the white-ball teams, but the 26-year-old was left out of England's squads for last year's 50-overs World Cup and the Twenty20 edition next month. "I've always wanted to be a good white-ball player," Crawley, who has played eight one-day internationals and no T20s for



England, told the *Sky Sports Cricket Podcast*.

"I'm trying to add a few other shots to my game, but I feel like it's quite suited and I've gone well in T20 cricket in the past when I've had a run at it." Crawley said much of his focus had been on Test cricket in recent years.

"It was always my priority for me to play Test cricket," he added. "That will always be my number one format - it means the most to me - but playing any format for England is a huge honour and playing white-ball cricket is something I really want to do."

"It was really hard in the finale. Every pull was full gas. With 10km it was still 45 seconds with a tail wind so we knew we could have played with the bunch. We were going over 60 kilometres an hour. That's when we knew we could do it."

"Nobody bet on the breakaway today."

Pietrobon then attacked with almost a kilometre to go and built a lead. "I risked losing it to win it,"

Sangakkara backs Samson to shine for India at World Cup

New Delhi: Rajasthan Royals skipper **Sanju Samson** has made his case to become India's first-choice wicketkeeper-batsman at the Twenty20 World Cup in June, said Kumar Sangakkara, the coach of his Indian Premier League (IPL) team. Samson was named in India's 15-man squad for the June 1-29 event in the West Indies and United States but the inclusion of Rishabh Pant means the 2007 champions have options as they bid for a second title. India coach Rahul Dravid and skipper Rohit Sharma would have kept an eye on proceedings as Samson hit 86 off 46 balls during Rajasthan's 20-run loss to Pant's Delhi Capitals on Tuesday. Pant scored 15 off 13 balls. "It's really up to Rahul Dravid and Rohit Sharma and how they see the combination. But he (Samson) has made his case, so hopefully he'll have a good run in the World Cup," Sangakkara told reporters. Samson has been in good form this season, his 471 runs in 11 games. Pant is also among the top 10 batsmen with 413 runs from 12

games. "With Sanju, the biggest thing about this season for him is having a lot of clarity about the way he should bat," former Sri Lanka wicketkeeper-batsman Sangakkara added.

"There are certain stages of the game that he seems to lose a bit of concentration, which we've addressed from past seasons. "He's changed his mindset about the importance of rest and recovery, rather than just training all the time and being tired mentally and physically. The rest is his exceptional ability."

Sangakkara said Samson, who has been on the periphery of the Indian side in recent years, had the qualities to succeed after making a World Cup squad for the first time. "He's a special player and when he's fresh and focused there's nothing he can't do," he added. "He's a humble, grounded guy... not much on social media. He tends to like a lot of privacy, cares for the rest of the group." "Those are great qualities to have apart from talent and skill. I think he'll be exceptional in that group going to the World Cup."



CYCLING

Track star Thomas wins Giro d'Italia 5th stage as Pogacar holds overall lead

AFP
Lucca, Italy

Frenchman Benjamin Thomas outfoxed the three other members of a late breakaway to take stage five of the Giro d'Italia in Lucca yesterday.

Thomas, a five-time world champion on the track, was part of a powerful quartet that escaped with 80km to go and eked out a narrow lead to the line.

Slovenian Tadej Pogacar yesterday finished safely in the peloton and retained the overall lead of the Giro.

Thomas of Cofidis escaped with Dane Michael Valgren of EF Education-EasyPost, Frenchman Enzo Paleni of Groupama-FDJ and Italian Andrea Pietrobon of Pol-

ti-Kometa after an intermediate sprint with less than 80km to go.

The quartet never led by more than 90 seconds but were able to turn that small margin into victory by working hard together while the sprint teams in the peloton were unable, or unwilling, to organise a coherent chase.

"It was like a long, long team pursuit," said Thomas.

"It was really hard in the finale. Every pull was full gas. With 10km it was still 45 seconds with a tail wind so we knew we could have played with the bunch. We were going over 60 kilometres an hour. That's when we knew we could do it."

"Nobody bet on the breakaway today."

Pietrobon then attacked with almost a kilometre to go and built a lead. "I risked losing it to win it,"



Team Cofidis' French rider Benjamin Thomas (right) celebrates after crossing the finish line to win the 5th stage of the 107th Giro d'Italia cycling race, 178km between Genova and Lucca, yesterday in Lucca. Thomas won the stage yesterday. (AFP)

said Thomas. "I didn't close the gap. It worked out perfectly." As the Italian faded, Valgren overtook but was in turn caught on the line

by Thomas. Thomas lives in the region with his Italian partner and rides the roads in training.

"I knew all the road of the final because I train there sometimes. It was helping me to know with the cobbles and the corners," said Thomas.

"Nice to win in Italy. Means a lot to me."

The stage was pockmarked by a series of nasty crashes in the nervous peloton.

After seemingly slipping on a manhole cover, French strongman Christophe Laporte rode on with a shredded shirt.

Later, after a group of riders hit a small traffic island, Canadian Riley Pickrell was left with blood pouring down his face.

Finally, Hungarian Attila Valter of Visma hit the ground for the second time in three days. The

rolling 178-kilometre stage from Genoa, with the only serious climb less than a third of the way in, was set up for a mass sprint finish in the hometown of Italy's greatest sprinter, Mario Cipollini - who holds the record for most Giro stage wins at 42.

However, the breakaway held firm and track cycling star Thomas was the quickest across the finish line.

The passage through the walled city of Lucca also marked the centenary of the death of composer Giacomo Puccini and the first performance of his last work, *Turandot*, which contains the most popular operatic aria in sports - 'Nessun dorma'.

Today's 180km run to Rapolano Terme starts at a local landmark named after the composer, the Torre del Lago Puccini.

ATHLETICS

Long jump great Lewis sees little scope for progression

AFP
Nassau, Bahamas

US long jump legend **Carl Lewis** does not see any immediate progression in what he dubbed the “toughest” of all field events, questioning the mental fortitude of easily distracted, up-and-coming athletes. Lewis won four consecutive Olympic long jump golds between 1984-96, as well as two world titles.

He went unbeaten in the event for a decade before famously being beaten by Mike Powell at the 1991 world championships in Tokyo in what has been dubbed one of the most thrilling field face-offs in history. It took Powell to leap a world record of 8.95 metres to win that day, beating Bob Beamon’s 8.90m set at altitude at the 1968 Mexico Games – and still an Olympic record.

Powell’s effort and Lewis’ two final jumps in Tokyo remain the three longest distances ever recorded at low altitude. “Why is the long jump not popular? Because no one’s jumping far,” the outspoken Lewis said of the perceived decline in interest in the discipline.

Illustrating Lewis’ point Greece’s

Miltiadis Tentoglou won the Olympic title in Tokyo with a best of 8.41m and took gold at last year’s world outdoor championships with a mark of 8.52m. “It’s not rocket science. When you have a generation that got used to people that were jumping 8.60m and competition was there, people were excited.”

Currently, he told a select group of journalists at the World Athletics Relays in Nassau, “fans don’t feel like they’re going to see anything special. With the long jump at one point, you really felt like ‘I want to be there because I’m going to see something special!’”

But times have changed, Lewis continued, with a severely reduced number of newcomers willing to submit to the rigorous training demands needed to become a top jumper. “I just don’t think our culture is raising kids to do that anymore” he said. “It’s just not in the culture to work that hard, to not be distracted. It’s just not there. And in our culture, I’m not talking about just athletes but I’m talking about kids. What I had to go through, a kid now? ‘Oh no, got to stop, mental health! Seriously, I’m just being honest.’”

Lewis credits Jesse Owens as a role model, the American who became an iconic figure in winning four golds at the

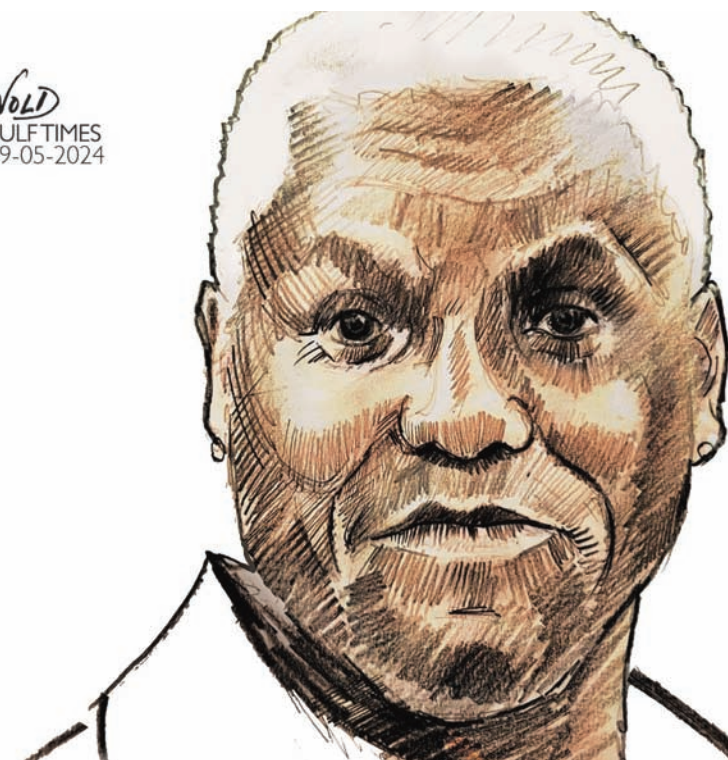
1936 Berlin Olympics, including the long jump. “Jesse Owens would have made the final every Olympic Games in history to this day,” Lewis said. “His personal best (of 8.13m) would have got the bronze medal in London. So why is that? Because it’s hard.”

Lewis was a fervent critic of World Athletics’ proposed change in rules in the long jump in a bid to eliminate foul jumps. The change would see the take-off board replaced by a “zone”, with distances measured from the moment of flight from within said zone. “You’re supposed to wait until April 1st for April Fools’ jokes,” Lewis tweeted at the time.

The 62-year-old elaborated that fouling percentages had barely changed over the last 30 years. “The reason the rate of fouling is high is because the event’s difficult,” he said, describing the take-off board as one of the very foundations of long jumping. “The beauty of the long jump is the challenge. When you take away that challenge... all of a sudden, you’ve created a new event. They’re doing testing and I think testing is going to show that people are not going to jump farther.”

Lewis also warned about the discrepancy in availability to new technology. “You create the constant complication of you’ll never be able to do that at every level, ever.”


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TENNIS

Djokovic says he is ready to peak at French Open

Serbian says his focus is also to do well at Wimbledon and Olympics

AFP
Rome

World number one Novak Djokovic said he believes he will be in top form for the French Open and hopes to prove that at the Italian Open which started yesterday.

The Serbian told a press conference in Rome that his focus is on Paris, Wimbledon and the Olympic Games and he had strategic reasons for skipping the recent Madrid event.

“It was not part of the schedule. The plan was to come here. That’s basically it,” said Djokovic at a press conference at the Italian Open. Djokovic, who turns 37 on May 22, just before the French Open gets underway on May 26, said he hoped to perform better than he did in his last tournament, the Monte Carlo Masters, where he lost to Casper Ruud in the semi-finals.

“I’m on a good route to peak at Roland Garros in Paris,” he said. “Hopefully, here in Rome I can play better than I did in Monte-Carlo. The wish, obviously, is always to go far, but let’s see.”

As top seed Djokovic, who has won the Italian Open six times, has a bye in the first round. He said the expansion of the event to nearly two weeks influenced scheduling choices.

“It’s a different concept now, the first time that Rome and Madrid are almost two-week events, like Indian Wells, Miami. It gives you more time to recover between matches if you keep going in the tournament, which I think is useful for me.”

As Djokovic continues to overhaul his team, he has rehired former physio Miljan Amanovic for “certain weeks” this season. Amanovic worked for Djokovic from 2007-2017 and again from 2018-2022. Djokovic has sacked several staff in recent months, including coach Goran Ivanisevic and the publicity team.

“I’m a proponent of having a quality team and entourage around you, having people who are experts in their field, who have experience, who have knowledge, who also understand psychology as well,” he said. “They know how



Novak Djokovic of Serbia during a training session in Rome yesterday.

to emotionally approach you when you need help or when you need space. You spend a lot of time on the tour together. You see them much more than you see your family, especially when you’re younger, when you’re travelling literally every single week of the year.”

MURRAY TO MAKE RETURN FROM INJURY AT GENEVA OPEN

Briton Andy Murray will make his comeback from injury at this month’s Geneva Open after the former world number one was handed a wildcard by the organisers of the French Open tune-up event yesterday.

Murray, who turns 37 later this month, rolled his ankle in the final set of his defeat by

Czech Tomas Machac in the Miami Open in March and withdrew from the Monte Carlo Masters and Munich Open last month.

The Scot opted not to undergo surgery and will now return in the May 18-25 tournament in Switzerland. The three-times Grand Slam winner, who had hip resurfacing surgery in 2019, previously said he did not plan to “play much past this summer” but hoped to compete at another Olympics.

Murray had also said he hoped to play at the French Open, which starts at Roland Garros on May 26. Murray has not played in the tournament since 2020. Wimbledon, where Murray has twice been champion, begins on July 1 and the Paris Games start later that month.

SPOTLIGHT

Nadal welcomes unusual role of underdog

AFP
Rome

Spanish tennis legend Rafael Nadal said yesterday he was “excited to be playing in Rome” despite entering the Italian Open unseeded and ranked 305. “All the matches are tough for me today, difficult and more unpredictable than what they used to be for me, especially on clay,” the 37-year-old, 10-time Italian Open winner said.

“I accept that role. I accept that challenge. I’m excited about the way that I can be able to play if I keep working the proper way and my body allows me.”

The 22-time Grand Slam singles champion has recently returned to the circuit after a long absence due to injury. He will open his campaign against Belgian qualifier Zizou Bergs with the Spanish icon taking nothing for granted but confident of his current match preparation. “I’m excited to be playing in Rome. It’s a tournament that brings back a lot of unforgettable memories,” said Nadal, who turns 38 on June 3. “But it’s day by day. This will be my third week almost in a row on the tour, third

tournament almost in a row. That hasn’t happened for a super long time – that’s good news. I need to keep going. I need to keep exploring how I will be able to manage to play every day. But I’m happy the way that I feel today.”

Nadal is not the only top player with injury issues. Young stars Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz are missing Rome. “When you push your body to the limit, you get injured,” said Nadal.

“When the game is faster and faster, you get injured. When you play most of the year on hard courts and the surfaces are tougher for the body, you get injured. That’s the simple answer.”

But he said that such issues were inevitable. “It is also about the tournaments, about the business, about the sport. At the end the players want to make money. The tournaments want to make money. The cycles come together.

“We accept that role. Things happen. You cannot complain about that. You accept what’s going on. You keep going. You get injured, you have to recover well. They are young (Alcaraz and Sinner), they are going to have plenty of time to play in Rome and have a lot of success here. No drama.”



Rafael Nadal signs autographs for fans at the Italian Open. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Osaka beats Burel to advance in Rome

AFP
Rome

Naomi Osaka marked her return to the Rome Open for the first time since 2021 with a straight sets victory over Clara Burel in the first round yesterday.

Former world number one Osaka came through against her 45th-ranked French opponent 7-6 (7/2), 6-1. It was the 26-year-old’s first win against a top-50 opponent on clay since beating Victoria Azarenka at the French Open in 2019.

Osaka, now ranked at 173 in the world after taking a break from the tour to have her first child, will face 19th seed Marta Kostyuk of Ukraine for a place in the third round. Kostyuk, the runner-up on clay in Stuttgart last month, lost to Osaka in their only other previous meeting, in three sets at the 2020 US Open.

Yesterday, the Japanese star sealed victory in 84 minutes, finishing with 27 winners, including eight aces, and broke serve four times. “I thought the first set was really tough. I’m really glad I was able to close it in two,” said Osaka after just her second win on



European clay this spring. “Overall I think mentally I tried to stay as strong as I can, so I’m really happy about that.”

She added: “I was up 5-3, serving for the set and I lost (the game). But just being able to hang in there and eventually close it on my terms is something that I’m very proud of myself for. I obviously played a lot better in the second set. I’m hoping that when I play my match tomorrow, I want to learn from the mistakes I did today.”

Olympic flame arrives on French soil for Paris Games

Marseille: The Olympic flame arrived in France at Marseille yesterday on board a 19th century ship in front of 150,000 spectators for a ceremony that posed a first major security test for organisers of the 2024 Paris Games.

The flame was brought to the southern French port from Greece on the three-masted Belem, 79 days before the Olympics begin. As the ship entered Marseille’s Old Port with hundreds of small boats trailing behind, planes from the Patrouille de France display team traced the Olympic rings in the sky before they returned to paint the red, white and blue of the French flag.

Fireworks tore into the sky as the Belem docked after its 12-day voyage from Greece, where the flame was lit in ancient Olympia on April 16. Olympic gold

medal-winning swimmer Florent Manaudou carried the torch from the deck of the ship. Manaudou passed it to Paralympic champion sprinter Nantenin Keita, who handed the torch to French rapper Jul to light a cauldron.

The arrival of the flame marks the start of a 12,000-kilometre (7,500-mile) torch relay across France and its far-flung overseas territories. Organisers are hoping the first public spectacle of the Games on French soil will help build excitement after a row about the price of Olympics tickets and concerns about security.

President Emmanuel Macron praised the “unprecedented effort” of the security forces in Marseille and said after watching the flame arrive that he hoped the Olympics would bring France together. “I want our compatriots to imagine that this is a moment

of unity and that we are capable of it and that we can be proud of it,” Macron said.

The chief organiser of the Paris Olympics and Paralympics, Tony Estanguet, said this week “the Games are coming home”. France, which last hosted the Olympics a century ago, sees itself at the heart of the modern Olympic movement after a French aristocrat, Pierre de Coubertin, revived the idea of the Games as practised by the Greeks until the 4th century BC.

After the Covid-hit edition in Tokyo in 2021 and the corruption-tainted Rio de Janeiro Games in 2016, the Paris Olympics are seen as an important moment for the sporting extravaganza. In the background in Marseille, around 6,000 security forces are on duty at a time when the country is on its highest terror alert.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Joselu's double powers Real to thrilling win

Heartbreak for Bayern Munich fans at iconic Bernabeu Stadium

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid produced a spectacular comeback against Bayern Munich to reach the Champions League final with Joselu striking twice late on, earning them a 2-1 win yesterday to progress 4-3 on aggregate.

Alphonso Davies smashed the visiting German giants ahead in the second half but record 14-time winners Madrid produced a sensational comeback with Joselu netting in the 88th and 91st minutes.

Spanish champions Real Madrid face another German side, Borussia Dortmund, in the Wembley final on June 1, after they stunned the team they call their "black beast".

Squad player Joselu, on as a late substitute, wrote his name in Madrid's history books with his last-gasp brace.

"There have been a lot of times we have looked dead and buried, but we have that mentality of never say die," said Real midfielder Jude Bellingham. "Joselu deserves it all, he has been an amazing squad member this season."

Madrid had enjoyed the better of the match but it seemed Davies' superb strike had set up a repeat of the 2013 all-German final in London. Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel made three changes from the first leg, benching veteran Thomas Muller and Leon Goretzka. Dani Carvajal started for Madrid after missing the first leg suspended and was heavily involved as the hosts dominated the opening stages.



Real Madrid's Joselu celebrates scoring their first goal with teammates in the Champions League second leg semi-final against Bayern Munich at Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

Rodrygo Goes was inches away from converting Carvajal's low cross and the Spain defender then cleverly set up Vinicius Junior with a pass nutmegging a defender, and Manuel Neuer tipped the Brazilian's shot against the post.

The rebound fell to Rodrygo but his effort was weak and with a desperate arm Neuer was able to claw it out to complete a fine double save. Bayern's Serge Gnabry limped off injured with Davies replacing him before Harry Kane's first flash of danger.

Madrid goalkeeper Andriy Lunin was alert to push the England captain's vicious long-range volley around the post. Neuer palmed away a Vinicius free-kick as the teams ended a high-inten-

sity, relentlessly frantic first half level. The second period was just as fraught, with Davies' cross deflecting onto the roof of Lunin's goal. Vinicius was unplayable down Madrid's left and Rodrygo prodded his low cross agonisingly wide of the far post.

The 38-year-old Neuer made superb saves to deny both Brazilian forwards again before the hour mark as Madrid controlled the game and ratcheted up the pressure. However just as in Munich, when Los Blancos were at their strongest, Bayern pounced.

Kane fed Davies and the Canada international cut inside from the left and smashed a shot beyond Lunin into the far top corner after 68 minutes.

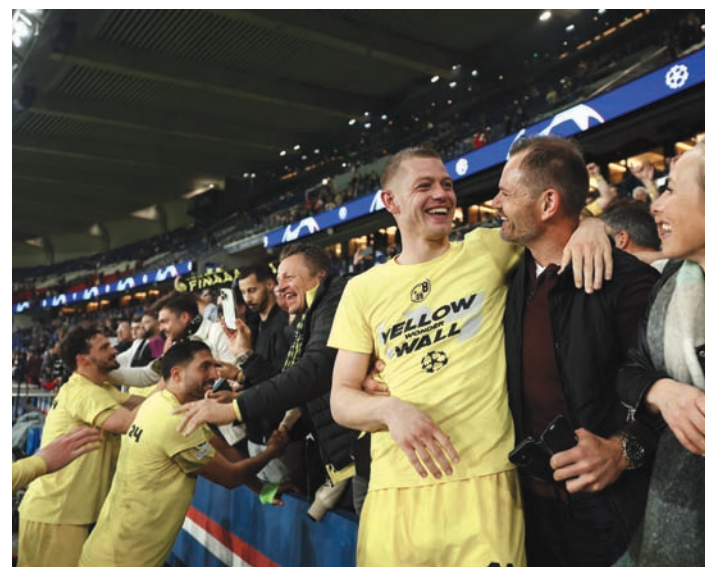
Madrid thought they had levelled moments later through Nacho but after a VAR review the strike was ruled out as the defender had grabbed Joshua Kim-mich's face before shooting.

Tuchel took off Kane in the final stages to try and hold on to victory but it slipped through his fingers as Madrid produced more indelible European memories.

Neuer fumbled what appeared a simple Vinicius strike and Joselu gratefully bundled home from close range. With Bayern reeling Madrid struck again, decisively. It was Joselu once more, the striker on loan from second division side Espanyol, turning home after Antonio Rudiger cut the ball back to him.

SPOTLIGHT

Flying under the radar, Dortmund stun Europe with final spot



Dortmund's Norwegian defender Julian Ryerson celebrates after winning the UEFA Champions League second leg semi-final against Paris Saint-Germain at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris on Tuesday. (AFP)

Reuters
Berlin

Borussia Dortmund were not on anyone's Champions League radar when the season started but the club's sensational run to the final with a 2-0 aggregate win over Paris St Germain on Tuesday proved their plan was right all along, said coach Edin Terzic.

Dortmund came into the season on the back of a bitter Bundesliga title loss on the final matchday of the previous campaign. And while their league results quickly confirmed Terzic's team did not have the consistency to be a serious title contender this season, it was a different story in Europe.

Dortmund, who won the tournament in 1997 and were runners-up to Bayern Munich in 2013, cruised through their group with only one loss in six matches against PSG, AC Milan and Newcastle United.

"There is always a team that no one has on their radar that reaches the quarter-finals or the semi-finals. We wanted to be the team that will not necessarily on anyone's radar," Terzic said. "That road has been unbelievable."

They did not play the kind of

spectacular football that instantly attracts attention but scored key wins at Newcastle and Milan. After losing on the first matchday Dortmund went five group games without defeat to top the section.

"After the second matchday (following a loss at PSG and a home draw against Milan) almost no one believed in us any more," said captain Emre Can.

"We only had one point after two matches but we kept believing in us and that was the most important thing. Keeping two clean sheets in two matches against PSG is no mean feat."

Prior to their two 1-0 wins over PSG in the last four, Dortmund had dispatched PSV Eindhoven in the round of 16 and Atletico Madrid in the quarter-finals. Dortmund, fifth in the Bundesliga with two games left, will now face either Bayern or Real Madrid after last week's 2-2 first leg draw in Munich.

"We will come up against a very tough opponent, no matter who it is," said Dortmund's Mats Hummels, who scored the winning goal on Tuesday. "Since that second matchday we have kept believing we can hold our own in the Champions League. There is absolutely no reason whatsoever not to believe that we can also win the final."

MATCH REPORT

Fiorentina in Europa Conference League final after 1-1 draw

Reuters
Bruges, Belgium

Lucas Beltran scored a late penalty as Fiorentina secured a 1-1 second-leg draw at Club Brugge yesterday to win their semi-final tie 4-3 on aggregate and secure back-to-back appearances in the Europa Conference League final.

The Italians led 3-2 from the first leg in Florence, but Hans Vanaken levelled the tie with an early opener for Belgian side Brugge.

Fiorentina looked the more likely to score though and after Christian Kouame twice struck the frame of the goal, they were awarded a penalty when Brandon Mechele's high boot caught the face of M'Bala Nzola and Beltran levelled on the night with five minutes remaining.

Fiorentina, who lost to West Ham United in the Conference League final last season, now face

the winner of the second semi-final tie between Olympiakos and Aston Villa in Athens today. The Greek side lead 4-2 from the first leg.

Brugge had been hoping to reach their first European final in 46 years, but were second-best over both legs against more attack-minded opponents.

They squared the tie on aggregate when Vanaken's wicked in-swinging cross from the left had the beating of everyone, including team mate Maxim De Cuyper and Fiorentina goalkeeper Pietro Terracciano.

Kouame's thunderous shot from the edge of the box struck the underside of the crossbar and stayed out by inches, before the unlucky Ivorian hit the frame of the goal again, this time with a header.

Fiorentina got the chance to score the goal they deserved after Mechele's carelessness and Beltran provided the knockout blow to the hosts.

Malaysian football on guard after spate of attacks on players

Kuala Lumpur: Malaysia's FA has recommended players consider hiring bodyguards while Johor Darul Ta'zim (JDT) has beefed up security for its squad after their midfielder Safiq Rahim became the third player to be attacked last week. Safiq, a former national team captain, had his car windscreen smashed by unknown assailants late on Tuesday. Selangor FC winger Faisal Halim was left in critical condition after being splashed with acid at a shopping mall on Sunday, while national team player Akhyar Rashid was injured in a robbery outside his home in the eastern state of Terengganu

last week, media reported. Terengganu police have said both attacks were unrelated, but the incidents have sparked concern in Malaysia where violence against athletes is rare. Safiq, who was unharmed in the incident, said in a copy of a police report shared on Instagram that two men on a motorcycle approached his car with a hammer and smashed his rear windscreen. JDT, who are run by the crown prince of the Johor royal family, called on police to investigate the attack on Safiq and said it had advised players to be cautious of their surroundings and about what they post on social media.

PREVIEW / EUROPA LEAGUE

Leverkusen eye Dublin final as another record looms

AFP
Berlin

Xabi Alonso's rampaging Bayer Leverkusen will have an additional incentive in today's home second-leg Europa League semi-final against Roma: breaking a 59-year-old European football record.

Avoiding defeat against Roma today will not only mean a trip to Dublin for the Europa League final, it will also extend their unbeaten run to 49 games – the best mark in European football history.

A Eusebio-inspired Benfica went on a 48-game unbeaten streak between 1963 and 1965. The record has stood since, but Leverkusen have a golden chance of blowing it out of the water.

Alonso's side has already overtaken Juventus' 43-match unbeaten run from 2011 to 2012, which was the best of a team in the top five European leagues.

Leverkusen won 2-0 in Rome last week and could progress to the final even with a one-goal loss, but breaking the record would be yet another outstanding achievement in an already brilliant season.

Speaking after Leverkusen equalled Benfica's record with a 5-1 win at Eintracht Frankfurt on Sunday, Leverkusen goalkeeper and captain Lukas Hradecky said pursuit of an unbeaten season gave his side "extra motivation".

"It's close," said Hradecky after the game, explaining "I can tell my granddaughter and grandson about this."

The Finn was referring to the league season, where Leverkusen have two more games to become the first team to go a Bundesliga campaign without defeat, but Leverkusen are just five matches away from an unbeaten treble.

Even with Alonso forced to watch from the stands due to a yellow card suspension, Leverkusen



Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso with Jonas Hofmann during training at Ulrich Haberland Stadium, Leverkusen, Germany, yesterday. (Reuters)

were not troubled against Frankfurt.

Already crowned Bundesliga champions for the first time back in April, Leverkusen are through to the German Cup final, where they face second-division Kaiserslautern.

Avoiding defeat today will set up a meeting with either Atalanta or Marseille in the Europa League final in Dublin.

Before the start of the season, Leverkusen had just two major trophies in their history.

With the Bundesliga already under their belt, Alonso's side could more than double their historical trophy haul in the Spaniard's first full season in charge of a top side.

Former Leverkusen coach and sporting director Rudi Voeller said the call to hire Alonso was "brave and adventurous", as well

as a "perfect decision". Speaking with the *Koelner Stadt-Anzeiger*, Voeller praised Leverkusen's "outstanding squad" depth.

"It's rare in the football business that you not only strengthen in the top positions, but also in the areas behind them."

"That's the secret why Bayer is still unbeaten."

"The treble is still possible. But no matter what happens, it's still an outstanding season."

Leverkusen have managed to keep their stunning run going despite Alonso deciding to rest players.

Attacking midfielder Florian Wirtz and wing-back Alex Grimaldo were left out of the squad entirely on Sunday.

"They had small complaints in the last few days. We didn't want to take any risks," Alonso said.

"They'll train again from Tuesday." Leverkusen scored five despite missing Wirtz, their attacking midfield lynchpin, and assists machine Grimaldo.

Wirtz has four goals and four assists in nine Europa League games this season, including a goal in the first leg in Rome.

"He's still 21 and has a great future ahead of him," Alonso said after the Roma game.

Wirtz celebrated his 21st birthday at midnight just an hour after the match was over, with the team celebrating with the midfielder in the dressing room.

With close to a full-strength squad and playing at home for the second-last time this season, breaking Benfica's record on Thursday could be the next step in Wirtz and Leverkusen's great future.