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SPOTLIGHT

Barshim soars to season's best, wins 'What Gravity Challenge'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's high jump champion Mutaz Essa Barshim wowed home fans as he won the 'What Gravity Challenge' at the Katara Amphitheatre competing alongside top world stars scaling to his season's best 2.31m. The event – a brainchild of Barshim – was organised with the support from Qatar Olympic Committee and the Qatar Athletics Federation. Barshim held off a strong competition from South Korea's Sanghyeok Woo on countback as he also jumped 2.31m, while American JuVaughn Harrison settled for third place with 2.28m.

Speaking soon after his win, Barshim said, "To be honest, I am very happy. Today, the Gravity Challenge finally saw the light, after it was an idea on paper. I am very happy about winning the first edition in Doha. I thank all the sponsors and supporters. I think the fans who came here to witness the event and would like to present this victory to them. Our idea is that we will continue to host this tournament. This is just the first stop."

Barshim received the trophy, designed by local artist Ahmed al-Bahrani, along with a prize of \$15,000 from the Dr Thani bin Abdulrahman al-Kuwari, Second Vice-President of Qatar Olympic Committee.

Barshim cleared 2.28 and 2.31 in his first



Qatar's Mutaz Essa Barshim celebrates with the trophy after winning the 'What Gravity Challenge' at the Katara Amphitheatre yesterday. Dr Thani bin Abdulrahman al-Kuwari, Second Vice-President of Qatar Olympic Committee and Mohamed Issa al-Fadala, Qatar Athletics Federation President, are also seen in the picture.

attempts. Asian Champion Sanghyeok Woo had earlier cleared 2.28 in his second attempt, before clearing the 2.31 mark in

his third. USA's World Championships silver medalist Harrison's ended at 2.31, when



Barshim with runner-up Sanghyeok Woo (left) of South Korea and third-placed American JuVaughn Harrison. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

he failed all three attempts. He had cleared the 2.28 in his third try to finish third.

World Indoor champion Hamish Kerr of New Zealand jumped 2.25 metres to end up fourth while Donald Thomas of the Bahamas completed the top five with his sea-

son's best of 2.21.

Former world champion Bohdan Bondarenko and his Ukrainian compatriot Andrii Protsenko both registered 2.17 metres, while Japan's Naoto Tobe also cleared the same height, his season's best.

DOHA DIAMOND LEAGUE

Chopra wants to throw 90m, but says consistency is key

"I will be really happy if Neeraj throws 90m in Doha," says long jump star Tentoglou

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

An hour or so after the pre-event press conference for the Doha Diamond League was over, Neeraj Chopra was still giving interviews to journalists, seeking exclusive quotes from India's javelin superstar. While others who attended the media conference – Steven Gardiner, Nina Kennedy and Miltiadis Tentoglou – had long left the venue and were taking much-needed rest before today's event at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium, Chopra was in no hurry to leave.

Among many amazing qualities that the reigning Olympic, World and Asian champion possesses, it's his rare ability to handle every situation with composure and always sport a smile and pose for pictures for anyone who walks up to him.

But there is one question that has followed him ever since – by his own admission – he threw 88.06m at the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta, en route to winning the gold medal. When will he cross the 90m mark?

"I really want to break this barrier," Chopra said yesterday, as he launches himself towards what he hopes will be a successful title defence at the Olympic Games in Paris this August.

Fellow Olympic and World long jump Champion Tentoglou, who was seated two seats away from Chopra, chipped in: "I will be very happy if Neeraj throws 90m tomorrow, truly happy."

The Greek echoed what everyone in the athletics world would want. The 90m throw is a magic mark for a javelin thrower and Chopra – who set his personal best of 89.94 in 2022 – has never shied away from acknowledging that he needs to cross it one day. For an athlete, who has won all that needs to be won, the distance should not matter. But here is Chopra, who continues his quest for excellence despite having gone the distance no Indian has dared to achieve.

"I am stuck between 88 and 90 metres," said Chopra in a lighter vein yesterday. "This question has followed me ever since I threw 88.06 at the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta. But I had elbow surgery soon after, which forced me to miss the 2019 season."

"But I really want to break the barrier this year. Even last year, I had said that Doha is famous for 90m. But, we were not lucky due to too much headwind. Maybe tomorrow



FROM LEFT: Athletes Steven Gardiner of Bahamas, Neeraj Chopra of India, Nina Kennedy of Australia and Miltiadis Tentoglou of Greece pose after the press conference yesterday, on the eve of the Doha Diamond League.

we'll have a good day. Obviously, it is the Olympics year and India is a big country and everyone always expects gold. My focus is to just stay healthy and concentrate on my technique. And yes, if I stay healthy everything will be good," the 26-year-old added.

Chopra, however, insisted remaining consistent has been his key to success in big events. "Maybe it is my greatest weapon. I will throw over 90, but consistency is more important for me," he pointed out.

Chopra enjoys immense popularity in India but downplayed his celebrity status saying his decision to train in South Africa, Turkey recently and in Europe later this year, was motivated by the need to focus on the Paris Olympics.

Today, Chopra will face competition from Jakob Vadlejš, to whom he finished second at the Diamond League final in Eugene last September but ended his season with victory at the Asian Games.

They will be joined by Grenada's two-time

world champion Anderson Peters, who finished third behind Chopra and Vadlejš in Doha last year, plus 2015 world champion Julius Yego and world finalist Oliver Helander.

The women's pole vault features the indoor and outdoor world champions, as Australia's Nina Kennedy opens her Diamond League campaign against Britain's Molly Caudery, who competes for the first time since her world indoor triumph in Glasgow.

Kennedy said she was confident of adding Olympic gold later this year as she begins her season in Doha.

"The last two years in my career have been a huge step up. Two world medals and a Diamond League final winner. I will be going to this Olympics with a good shot. It's these new nerves and new feelings, which is all new to me. I am trying to approach it exactly like last year. I am excited but I am trying to enjoy this pressure," the Australian said.

In the men's long jump, world and Olympic champion Tentoglou makes his Doha

Diamond League debut as part of a field also featuring Carey McLeod, Tajay Gayle and Simon Ehammer.

The 26-year-old athlete – who retained his world indoor title with victory in Glasgow in March – boasts a personal best of 8.60m from 2021 and is so far unbeaten this year. In recent years he has gained a reputation for being an exceptional championship performer and in particular, for his final jump heroics. "I keep myself motivated because I love the event and love to jump," said Tentoglou, when asked about what motivates to keep going.

"I plan to get better every time and every year. This year is very special because of the Olympics in Paris. There are European Championships too next month. I am doing more quality training. It's going to be a difficult year but I am excited. I am definitely one of the best and other guys know that I can jump very well anytime so I think I put pressure on them," the Greek said.

Doha ready to host Diamond League, says al-Fadala

Doha: Qatar Athletics Federation (QAF) President Mohamed Issa al-Fadala yesterday said Doha is ready to host another successful Diamond League meeting which will take place at Qatar Sports Club's Suheim Bin Hamad Stadium today.

A host of Olympic and world medallists are taking part in the event as organisers aim to provide the perfect stage for top quality performances. In a packed programme, event highlights are expected to include the men's javelin, men's long jump, women's 800m, men's 400m, men's 1500m and women's pole vault.

"Doha is always ready to deliver the best and we are looking forward to exciting contests," said al-Fadala. "We are happy to host the Olympic, world and continental champions once again, and we are confident of providing them the best facilities. We wish them all the best," the QAF President added.

Athletes will vie in 14 Diamond League disciplines today with Qatar set to be represented by a five-member team including Ismail Doudai Abakar (400m hurdles), Abdul Rahman Saeed (1500m), and Ammar Ismail Ibrahim and Ashraf Osman (400m). Moaaz Mohamed Ibrahim will compete in the discus throw event, which is not a Diamond discipline in Doha.

"It's an Olympic year so we have been careful with athletes participation. We initially had seven athletes but two of them were unfortunately ruled out due to injuries."

The Doha meet is the third leg of the Diamond League. The series comprises 15 meetings in total across four different continents and started with Xiamen on April 20.

CRICKET

Kohli's 92 keeps RCB in the hunt for play-off spot

BENGALURU EASILY DEFEND 241 AGAINST PUNJAB KINGS

AFP
Dharamsala

Virat Kohli slammed 92 to set up a 60-run win for Royal Challengers Bengaluru over Punjab Kings and keep their slim play-off hopes alive in the Indian Premier League yesterday.

Kohli, 35, rode his luck and shared two crucial partnerships with Rajat Patidar (55) and Cameron Green (46) as Bengaluru scored a big 241-7 at the Dharamsala stadium.

Punjab paid the price for some sloppy fielding, dropping Kohli twice on zero and 10 off debutant seamer Vidwath Kaverappa.

Punjab suffered their eighth loss in 12 games and bowed out of the competition.

Punjab skipper Sam Curran said it had been a "frustrating and disappointing" end to their campaign.

"A lot of positive signs but not enough to get over the line and get the wins we needed. Gutted but lots to learn."

Bengaluru bowler Swapnil Singh, who took two wickets, said the victory meant a lot to the side.

"Enjoyed it a lot. The ball was swinging initially, so I looked to swing it. Pressure is less when everybody is (scoring) runs. Mentally it relaxes you," he said.

Rilee Rossouw gave Punjab a promising start, putting on 65 runs for the second wicket with Jonny Bairstow (27).

Rossouw, who belted his first half-century of the season, looked set for a bigger score but took a hit on his chin and was out the next ball off Karn Sharma for 61.

He hit three sixes and nine fours in his 27-ball innings.

After Rossouw's dismissal in the ninth over, none of the Punjab batsmen could stand up to the challenge, with the team being bowled out for 181 in 17 overs.

Earlier, Kohli stitched a 76-run partnership with Patidar for the third wicket after Bengaluru were put in to bat.

Patidar looked in fine touch, hitting six sixes and three fours before being caught behind off Curran.

The leading run-getter of the season, Kohli went on to play some delectable shots including an imperious one-handed six over the long off boundary.

Kohli also put on 92 runs with Green but fell short of a century after he was caught at deep extra cover off Arshdeep Singh.



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli watches the ball after playing a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Punjab Kings at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium in Dharamsala yesterday. (AFP)

He smashed six sixes and seven fours during his 47-ball 92 at a strike rate of 196.

Bengaluru, who registered their fourth win in a row, saw their innings being interrupted briefly by a spell of rain and hailstorm that stopped play for a short while.

BRIEF SCORES
Royal Challengers Bengaluru 241 for 7 (Kohli 92, Patidar 55, Green 46, Harshal 3-38, Kaverappa 2-36) **beat Punjab Kings 181** (Rossouw 61, Shashank 37, Siraj 3-43, Swapnil 2-28, Ferguson 2-29, Karn 2-36) **by 60 runs**

ANNOUNCEMENT

Mathews named in SL T20 World Cup squad

Reuters
Colombo

Sri Lanka have included veteran all-rounder **Angelo Mathews** and uncapped bowler Dunith Wellalage in their 15-man Twenty20 World Cup squad, which will be captained by Wanindu Hasaranga, the country's selection committee said yesterday.

The 36-year-old Mathews, who lifted the trophy in 2014, will make his sixth T20 World Cup appearance at the biennial tournament, which will be co-hosted by twice champions West Indies and the United States from June 1-29.

Mathews made his T20 comeback for Sri Lanka in January after a three-year gap.

Hasaranga, meanwhile, returns after missing last year's Asia Cup and 50-overs World Cup, as well as the current Indian Premier League (IPL), due to a heel injury. Fellow all-rounder Charith Asalanka has been named as his deputy.

Bowler Matheesha Pathirana is also part of the squad, although the 21-year-old is nursing a hamstring injury he picked up playing for the Chennai Super Kings in the IPL.

Sri Lanka, who will leave for the World Cup on May 14, kick off their campaign against South Africa in New York on June 3.

They also face Bangladesh, Nepal and Netherlands in Group D.



SRI LANKA SQUAD

Wanindu Hasaranga (captain), Charith Asalanka (vice-captain), Kusal Mendis, Pathum Nissanka, Kamindu Mendis, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Angelo Mathews, Dasun Shanaka, Dhananjaya De Silva, Maheesh Theekshana, Dunith Wellalage, Dushmantha Chameera, Nuwan Thushara, Matheesha Pathirana, Dilshan Madushanka
Travelling Reserves Asitha Fernando, Vijayakanth Vijaykanth, Bhanuka Rajapaksa, Janith Liyanage

Lord's ground to get £61mn upgrade to two stands



A computer-generated image of the refurbishment of stands at Lord's Cricket Ground in London. (www.lords.org)

London: The historic Lord's Cricket Ground will have its capacity raised by 1,100 as part of a £61.8mn project to redevelop the Tavern and Allen stands. Plans for the upgrades to the ground have been approved by the 18,000 members of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), a statement said yesterday. "The redevelopment of the Tavern and Allen stands will complete our stand development programme, in which we have modernised facilities at Lord's to continue to ensure the Ground remains a world-class venue for cricket," Robert Ebdon, MCC Estates Director, said. The existing Allen Stand, dating back to the 1930s, will be demolished entirely, with the new

structure having an extra tier, while the Tavern Stand will get a new cantilevered fourth floor seating level above the retained existing structure. The MCC say the existing steel structure of the Tavern Stand will be retained in keeping with its sustainability commitments, saving 613 tonnes of CO2. The new roof, designed by architects WilkinsonEyre, is inspired by the shape and ribbed construction of a series of upturned traditional slip cradles - the piece of equipment players use for catching practice. Construction is expected to start in September at the end of the current season with completion in 2027. There will be pauses for the 2025 and 2026 seasons.

PAKISTAN, IRELAND T20I SERIES STARTS TODAY



Pakistan captain Babar Azam (right) and Ireland skipper Paul Stirling pose with the T20I series trophy in Dublin yesterday. The three-match series gets underway with the first match to be played in Dublin today. (@TheRealPCB)

Dublin: The Pakistan cricket team will kick off its Europe tour with the first of three T20Is against Ireland today. The remaining two matches will also take place at the Castle Avenue on Sunday and Tuesday, before the team heads to Headingley, Leeds, on Wednesday for a series of four T20Is against England. Following the England series, with matches scheduled at Headingley (22 May), Birmingham (25 May), Cardiff (28 May), and The Oval, London (30 May), both England and Pakistan will head to the ICC T20 World Cup 2024. England will face Scotland in Barbados on 4 June in their opening match, while Pakistan will launch their campaign against the USA in Dal-

las on 6 June. This marks the first time Ireland will host Pakistan for a T20I series. Pakistan head coach, Azhar Mahmood said: "Our preparations for the ICC T20 World Cup 2024 began with the home series against New Zealand and now it's all about putting the final touches on those preparations. We have clarity on our game plans, strategies and combinations. It's about bringing everything together before we arrive in the United States." He added: "We've only played Ireland once, so they will be a relatively new opponent for us. However, any team in T20 cricket can be dangerous as the match can swing in one over."

SPOTLIGHT

Shakib is in for the last two Zimbabwe T20s

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh yesterday recalled all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan and pace bowler Mustafizur Rahman for the final two Twenty20 internationals of the five-match series against Zimbabwe.

Former captain Shakib has not played a T20 since July 2023, and was this year elected as a member of parliament for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ruling party.

Shakib has refused to draw the curtains on his cricket career, and his participation in this series is the strongest indication yet he will compete in next month's Twenty20 World Cup.

"We expect him to play in the World Cup. This is why he is back

in the squad for this series," Jalal Yunus, the cricket operations chief of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), told AFP.

Left-arm pace bowler Mustafizur was rested for the first three matches after returning from the Indian Premier League, where he was the season's joint-highest wicket taker for the Chennai Super Kings. Bangladesh have already sealed the series 3-0, with the last two matches scheduled in Dhaka today and Sunday.

Squad: Najmul Hossain Shanto (capt), Liton Das, Tanzid Hasan Tamim, Shakib Al Hasan, Towhid Hridoy, Mahmudullah Riyad, Jaker Ali Anik, Mahedi Hasan, Rishad Hossain, Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Soumya Sarkar, Tanvir Islam, Mohamed Saifuddin.

CYCLING

Sanchez wins Giro stage six, Pogacar retains lead

Reuters
Turin

Spain's Pelayo Sanchez claimed victory on stage six of the Giro d'Italia yesterday as he out-sprinted two other breakaway riders at the uphill finish at Rapolano Terme.

Sanchez (Movistar), France's Julian Alaphilippe (Soudal-QuickStep) and Australian Luke Plapp (Jayco AlUla) kept clear of the chasing peloton at the climax of the 180km ride. But the 24-year-old Sanchez had the legs to hold Alaphilippe and fellow Giro debutant Plapp at bay.

Race leader Tadej Pogacar finished safely in the peloton to retain the Maglia Rosa ahead of today's time trial.

A fast and furious stage featuring two of the gravel sections used at this year's Strade Bianche took the riders on an undulating route



Team Movistar's Spanish rider Pelayo Sanchez crosses the finish line to win the 6th stage of the 107th Giro d'Italia cycling race, 180km between Torre del lago Puccini and Rapolano Terme, yesterday. (AFP)

through the Tuscan countryside. After a day of constant attacks, a lead group was eventually established but that was whittled down to just three as the dusty gravel sections began to take their toll.

At one point Plapp was the virtual race leader but the peloton,

powered at the front by the Ineos Grenadiers, gave chase and finished only 29 seconds behind.

"This is amazing, a crazy day for me," Sanchez said of his biggest career win. "I could never imagine winning this stage. It was full gas all day and I waited for my

moment to do my move and in the end I was with Plapp and Alaphilippe and luckily I was the fastest in the sprint."

Slovenian GC favourite Pogacar resisted any urge to go for the stage victory, but looked rock solid in the peloton on a day when average speeds reached 44kph over four hours of racing.

Pogacar leads the overall battle by 46 seconds from Ineos Grenadiers' Geraint Thomas with Dani Martinez (Bora-Hansgrohe) in third a further second back.

"For us it was perfect if (the breakaway) stayed away," Pogacar said. "We didn't want to spend too much energy. Ineos were riding super fast on the gravel but for me it was a good stage, happy it's over, it was an enjoyable day!"

Pogacar's Giro debut could not have gone any better so far and he will look to build his lead in today's time trial - a 40.6km test from Foligno to Perugia.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Wimbledon offers up more public land

Reuters
London

Britain's All England Lawn Tennis Club (AELTC) is offering up extra parkland for public use in a bid to get massive expansion plans over the line, which it says will protect the Wimbledon Championships for years to come.

The offer of an extra four acres of parkland, announced by Greater London Authority (GLA) planners yesterday, means the host of the world famous grasscourt Grand Slam event now plans to make some 27 acres of parkland accessible to the public.

The land had previously been part of a private members' golf club, bought by the AELTC to enable development.

"I am delighted that ... we are now proposing even more green space for Londoners to enjoy, on land that has been inaccessible to the public for more than 100 years," All England chair Debbie Jevans said.

She added that the club had conducted some 100 tours of the proposed parkland and engaged with more than 7,000 people as part of a consultation process.

"Our plans to transform the former

Wimbledon Park Golf Course will deliver one of the greatest sporting transformations for London since the 2012 Olympic Games.

"We are committed to delivering significant social and environmental improvements, as well as creating hundreds of jobs and generating millions of pounds in economic benefits."

Opponents of the development say, however, that the club's plans will cause environmental damage, major disruption for the best part of a decade, and are unnecessarily ambitious in scale.

An online petition started by a group called Save Wimbledon Park has more than 18,000 signatures.

The group was not immediately available for comment when contacted by Reuters, but concerns listed on its website include what it calls "Unacceptable Environmental Impact", fears that protected open space once built on could become completely developed, and that public access to the parkland could be withdrawn "as commercial priorities change".

Jevans rejected the notion that access to the land could be revoked by the club.

"We have been clear that access to the new parkland is offered permanently for the enjoyment of everyone. It is our sin-



A general view of one of the courts at the fabled All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, London, Britain. (Reuters)

cere hope that these newly accessible spaces become treasured assets for people and nature to thrive," she told Reuters.

The club wants to expand its footprint on land it owns to build 39 new grass courts - including an 8,000-seater show-

number four, Tim Henman, said: "Wimbledon is the only Grand Slam that doesn't play its qualifying event on the same site as the main tournament."

"Transforming the former golf course to bring the qualifying event on site will provide world class facilities for the players and will enable more fans to get closer to the action, it really is a win-win!"

Wimbledon's plans got the green light from the London Borough of Merton last year, but part of Wimbledon Park - landscaped by 18th century English gardener Capability Brown - also stretches into Wandsworth Borough and that authority rejected the plans.

The decision was referred to the GLA and deputy mayor of London Jules Pipe has taken on the responsibility for the application after mayor Sadiq Khan recused himself because of his public support of the plan three years ago.

The GLA announced yesterday that a public consultation will now take place until June 5, after which it will conduct a public hearing before making a decision.

At the hearing, the GLA will be provided with a detailed update on the proposals, will hear views from Merton and Wandsworth councils, the AELTC and any objectors or supporters who register to speak.

TENNIS

Nadal battles past Bergs at the Italian Open

A stiff test for Nadal in a match that lasted almost three hours

Reuters
Rome

Ten-time champion Rafa Nadal overcame losing the opening set to defeat Belgian qualifier Zizou Bergs 4-6 6-3 6-4 and reach the Italian Open second round in Rome yesterday, as the Spaniard's steady progress continued.

Nadal, who last won the title in Rome in 2021, was given a stiff test by the 24-year-old in a match which lasted almost three hours on centre court, and now faces Polish seventh seed Hubert Hurkacz.

"That was not my best match, I was practising better than I played today, but I found a way to win," said Nadal.

The 37-year-old former world number one broke first to make it 3-1 in the opening set, but Bergs bounced back immediately with a break of his own, and broke again to make it 5-4 before holding serve to take the set.

Nadal steadied himself and made an impressive start to the second set, taking a 3-0 lead after an early break and winning both service games to love, and although Bergs forced break points in two later games, Nadal held on.

The deciding set brought another early break for Nadal to take a 2-1 lead. Bergs then had four break points when 4-2 down, but



Spain's Rafael Nadal celebrates after winning his match against Belgium's Zizou Bergs at the Men's ATP Rome Open tennis tournament at Foro Italico in Rome yesterday. (AFP)

lost his chance to get back into the match and Nadal finished off the job.

After spending most of last year out with a hip injury, his return in January was cut short after a muscle tear in Brisbane, but

last month he reached the second round in Barcelona and the fourth round in Madrid, as he builds up to the French Open.

"My game is more unpredictable than before, I didn't play much tennis for the last two years so

have had some ups and downs, on and off, but I think I can do much better than today and I hope to do it next round," Nadal said.

Nadal's second round tie with Hurkacz will be his first match against the Polish 27-year-old.

WADA must repair trust, says US athletes' commission head

Montreal: Some athletes have lost trust in world anti-doping agency WADA after the body's handling of failed drug tests in Chinese swimming, according to Team USA Athletes' Commission executive director Elizabeth Ramsey.

Ramsey told Reuters Television there were concerns about the independence of an investigation into what had happened and called for further steps to be taken to ensure full transparency. WADA has been under pressure since confirming media reports that 23 Chinese swimmers tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine (TMZ) before the Tokyo Games.

China's anti-doping agency cleared the swimmers of wrongdoing, deciding they tested positive after contamination from the kitchen of a hotel where they were staying. WADA's science department then determined that scenario was plausible. Ramsey, signatory to a letter to WADA last week, said trust was "a little broken" because policies and procedures appeared not to have been followed as in the past.

"I think right now, because of what's happened, they need to earn that trust back," she added in an interview from Indianapolis. "Once that trust is broken, or it feels compromised in any sort of way, it takes a lot to earn that back. And so I think right now there is a bit of a broken trust to make sure the system is operating as it should."

Ramsey said WADA needed to show its operating independence to build back trust and there were plenty of questions to be answered as athletes prepared for Paris.

'What else is going on? What else don't we know'

"Do we know this has happened any other time? What else is going on? What else don't we know?," she said.

"When there's not transparency, then that just raises a lot of questions because now people are questioning a bunch of things



Elizabeth Ramsey, the Team USA Athletes' Commission executive director. (www.canisius.edu)

because it appears like the rules weren't applied consistently in this case like they had been previously.

"The main thing is these athletes that are going into Paris want to know, 'hey, what's being done to ensure that these athletes are getting tested the same way, same way I am.' And so those are some of the concerns we've heard from athletes."

A WADA spokesman said the body had "transparently explained the exact process it followed at all stages. 'The fact is that WADA reviewed this case diligently and managed it in accordance with the rules and processes of the World Anti-Doping Code.'"

WADA said independent prosecutor Eric Cottier had been tasked with handling its case and submitting a report within two months. The US Anti-Doping Agency called last month for WADA to be overhauled to restore confidence ahead of the 2024 Paris Olympics.

China won six medals in swimming, including three golds, at the Tokyo Olympics to finish fourth on the medal table behind the United States, Australia and Britain.

Recent Olympic trials in Shenzhen indicated China will have plenty of medal contenders in the pool at the July 26-Aug. 11 Paris Games.

SPOTLIGHT

Italian tennis star Giorgi, 32, calls it a day

AFP
Rome

Italian tennis player Camila Giorgi, a four-time winner on the WTA circuit, has retired at the age of 32, Italy's tennis federation (FITP) has announced.

Giorgi most recently played in the second round at the Miami Open in March when she was swatted aside in straight sets by world number one Iga Swiatek.

She made no personal announcement of her retirement, the FITP releasing a short statement on Wednesday saying that Giorgi "has said goodbye to tennis".

Meanwhile the International Tennis Integrity Agency, the game's anti-corruption and doping watchdog, lists Giorgi as having retired on Tuesday.



Among Giorgi's four WTA tour wins was her Masters 1000 title at Montreal in 2021, while she peaked at 26 in the world rankings in October 2018.

Her best result in a Grand Slam tournament was a run to the quarter-finals at Wimbledon in 2018, while she reached the same stage at the Tokyo Olympics three years ago.

FOCUS

Qatar Airways Group is 'Official Airline Partner' and 'Official Cargo Airline Partner' of MotoGP

Qatar Airways has commenced its three-year partnership as the 'Official Airline Partner' and Qatar Airways Cargo as the 'Official Cargo Airline Partner' of MotoGP.

The multi-year partnership is built upon the success of the first Grand Prix title sponsored by Qatar Airways, which took place in 2023, and the most recent 2024 edition which took place from March 8 to 10.

As Official Cargo Airline of the MotoGP, Qatar Airways Cargo, the world's number one cargo carrier, will provide air transport of race and bike equipment for all MotoGP races around the world.

Announced on the eve of the 2024 French Grand Prix, the partnership builds on the success of the season opener at Qatar's Lusail International Circuit.

The signing ceremony took



place prior to the start of the Qatar Airways Grand Prix 2024, featuring HE the Minister of Sports and Youth Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, Qatar Airways Group CEO Badr Mohamed al-Meer, Carmelo Ezpeleta, CEO of Dorna Sports (MotoGP rights holder), Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai, President, Qatar Motor and Motorsport Federation and Lusail International Circuit.

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of Dorna Sports (MotoGP rights holder), Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai, President, Qatar Motor and Motorsport Federation and Lusail International Circuit.

Al-Meer said: "Qatar continues to demonstrate its commitment

to being a prominent hub for motorsports, and our new partnership with MotoGP only propels us forward. The Qatar Airways Grand Prix of Qatar was the perfect season opener for us to welcome this unique partnership that combines the worlds of aviation and motorsports."

Mark Drusch, Chief Officer (Cargo) at Qatar Airways Cargo added: "As the largest air cargo carrier in the world, operating an extensive global network on a young modern fleet and bespoke charter solutions in place, we meet the requirements to be dedicated air cargo carrier for the MotoGP."

Ezpeleta said: "MotoGP is a global sport and to move across the world as we do, a partner like Qatar Airways has overwhelming value for our personnel, our freight and the whole paddock. There is no better partner to become the official airline of MotoGP."

AMIR CUP: AL SADD, AL RAYYAN AND AL WAKRAH IN QUARTERS



Al Sadd yesterday beat Al Markhiya 3-2 at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium to reach the last-eight of the Amir Cup. Baghdad Bounedjah (16th minute), Paulo Otavio (34 and Abdullah al-Yazidi (60) scored the goals for Al Sadd. Al Markhiya's goals were scored by Driss Fettouhi (84) and Naoufal Banns (89). In another match, Al Rayyan defeated Al Khor 4-1 at Al Janoub Stadium to enter quarter-finals. In the day's final match, Al Wakrah edged past Al Muaither 5-4 on penalties after both teams were tied at 3-3 in regulation time at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. With the victory, Al Wakrah also qualified for the quarter-finals. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

FOOTBALL

Comeback king Real continue Champions League love affair

'WE SAW OURSELVES IN THE FINAL AND NOW I'M LOST FOR WORDS'

AFP

Madrid

Real Madrid turned to the same old story in the Champions League and even though Bayern Munich knew all of the words, they were powerless to stop the kings of Europe pulling off another improbable and yet inevitable comeback.

Joselu's late double fired the record 14-time winners into the Wembley final on June 1, just as it seemed Bayern had set up another all-German battle as in 2013.

Madrid's Jude Bellingham will face his former team Borussia Dortmund in search of the 15th, after Los Blancos returned from what he described as "dead and buried" to triumph.

"We saw ourselves in the final and now I'm lost for words," said shellshocked Bayern goalkeeper Manuel Neuer.

"Madrid are immortal," wrote Spanish newspaper *Marca*. "The eternal miracle," proclaimed another capital publication, AS.

Madrid will be firm favourites to extend their dominance in Europe after reaching their sixth Champions League final in the last 11 years and winning five of the last 10.

Regardless of whether they are outplayed, as by Manchester City in the quarter-finals, or on the verge of elimination, as against Bayern, Madrid so often find a way where other teams would wither.

Alphonso Davies' second-half strike had Bayern dreaming of a 2013 final rematch against Bundesliga rivals Dortmund, but journeyman forward Joselu intervened in the dying embers of the match.

"It's happened again - it's hap-



Real Madrid's players celebrate their victory in the Champions League second leg semi-final against Bayern Munich in Madrid on Wednesday night. (AFP)

pened so often," marvelled Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti, a four-time winner of the trophy as a coach.

"Fans who push us on, a fantastic stadium, players who never stop believing - it's simply something magical."

Madrid have enjoyed many spectacular comebacks over the years but the last time they lifted the trophy, in 2022, their run to the final defied belief at every step.

Two goals down on aggregate against Paris Saint-Germain in the last 16, an 18-minute Karim Benzema hat-trick sent them through.

Despite trailing Chelsea 3-0 in the semi-final second leg, a majestic Luka Modric pass and Rodrygo's finish forced extra-time, and Madrid went on to win.

Thomas Tuchel was Chelsea coach at the time and even with

that first-hand experience, the Bayern boss could not prepare his team for Madrid's penchant for European magic.

Two injury-time goals in just over a minute from Rodrygo rescued Madrid in the semi-final against Manchester City - and even though Liverpool outplayed them in the Paris final, Los Blancos triumphed.

However the match which sprang to mind most readily was Madrid's previous victory over Bayern in 2018, when goalkeeper Sven Ulreich made an inexplicable error to allow Benzema in.

This time it was veteran Neuer, who had excelled throughout, who suddenly found himself spilling a shot he would usually contain comfortably and Joselu pounced.

Fellow goalkeepers Gianluigi Donnarumma, Loris Karius and

Edouard Mendy will have sympathy after they all committed high-profile errors against Madrid in recent years, contributing to Los Blancos' burgeoning trophy cabinet. AC Milan, with seven Champions League wins, are Madrid's closest contenders on exactly half the Spanish giants' tally.

Final opponents Dortmund have lifted the trophy on just one occasion, back in 1997, and few will give them a chance against the might of Madrid.

Since ending an 11-year dry spell by winning their 10th Champions League during Ancelotti's first spell at the helm a decade ago, Madrid have not looked back.

"We always believe in ourselves... it happened again and we're going for the 15th," said Vinicius Junior, who scored the goal that won Madrid's 14th.

FOCUS

Forest have 'moved on' from failed points deduction appeal: Nuno

AFP
London

Nuno Espirito Santo says Nottingham Forest have "moved on" from their failed appeal against a points deduction as his struggling side focus on securing their Premier League survival.

Forest were docked four points in March for breaching the Premier League's profitability and sustainability rules.

An appeal board upheld the independent commission's decision on Tuesday, leaving Nuno's team three points above the Premier League relegation zone.

Forest have two games left to preserve their top-flight status, starting with Chelsea's visit to the City Ground on Saturday.

Nuno admitted the club were frustrated not to succeed in their bid to have the punishment quashed or reduced. "We were all disappointed. We had the hope and the belief, because we conquered those points on the pitch, that they can give us back," he said on Thursday.

But the former Tottenham

and Wolves boss made it clear he would not dwell on the situation any further as he looks to save Forest from relegation.

They will be guaranteed safety if they beat Chelsea and third-bottom Luton fail to take three points at West Ham.

"The decision is over, so there's no point in continuing to speak on this issue," Nuno said.

"We just have to focus on ourselves and our job. We have already moved on."

Looking to extend their stay in the Premier League to a third season, Forest took a big step towards survival by defeating relegated Sheffield United at Bramall Lane last week.

Nuno said he has held talks with his players after the appeal was rejected to keep their minds on the relegation battle.

"Yes, to speak to the players is normal," he said. "It's simple. This is the reality, this is what we have, this is what we have to face and let's focus on ourselves because it's in our hands."

"It's our last game at home at the City Ground. It's important for our main goal and for our fans too that we finish in a nice way."

FIFA claim Club World Cup schedule 'harmonious' as legal threat looms

Warned of legal action over their plans for the 2025 Club World Cup, FIFA said yesterday they would guarantee player welfare in a harmonious schedule.

FIFA is however facing the threat of legal action from domestic leagues and player unions if there is no rescheduling of the 2025 Club World Cup. A letter to FIFA president Gianni Infantino, seen by AFP, claims the sport's worldwide schedule is now "beyond saturation".

FIFA were swift to react. "The FCWC tournament dates (15 June - 13 July) have been set to ensure that the scheduling of the tournament is harmoniously aligned with the IMC to allow sufficient time between the tournament final and the start of the season in many domestic leagues globally, and considering that a minimum of three days of rest between matches should be guaranteed in order to safeguard player welfare," a FIFA statement said.

The original letter sent by the World Leagues' Association (WLA) and FIFPRO, the international players' union, which include the Premier League and England's Professional Footballers' Association among their respective memberships warns changes are needed. These include the new 32-team Club World Cup - scheduled to take place in the United States in June and July 2025 - have created "economic harm" to domestic leagues and pushed players "beyond their limits". The letter urges FIFA's ruling council to reschedule the Club World Cup and re-open talks on the international calendar for the years up to 2030.

"Should FIFA refuse to formally commit to resolving the issues, as set out above, at its upcoming council, we shall be compelled to advise our members on the options available to them, both individually and collectively, to proactively safeguard their interests," the letter said. "These options include legal action against FIFA, on which we have now commissioned external expert advice."

The football schedule will already expand next season, with the Champions League and Europa League to have eight first phase games compared to six this term. The Champions League, Europa League and UEFA Conference League will all be increased to 36 teams. WLA and FIFPRO accused world football's governing body of "continually and consistently making unilateral decisions that benefit its own competitions and commercial interests, while negatively affecting national leagues and players".

They added: "Over a significant period, FIFA has ignored repeated attempts by leagues and unions to engage on this issue. "Leagues and players cannot simply be expected to 'adapt' to FIFA's decisions, which are driven by FIFA's business strategy. We have reached the point where this situation must immediately be addressed both from a procedural and substantive perspective."

Premier League chief executive Richard Masters said last month: "It is getting to a tipping point. The feedback we have from players is that there is too much football being played and there is constant expansion.

(AFP)

Al-Yafei triumphs at Qatar Karting Championship opening round



Faesal al-Yafei won the opening round of the Qatar Karting Championship at the Lusail Karting Track. In the 12-lap Group 2 race, which saw 20 drivers in action at the 1.072 kilometre track, al-Yafei finished 6.957 seconds ahead of Taha Hassiba, who came second. Tameem Hassiba was third after finishing the race 6.975 secs adrift of the winning driver. Earlier, in Group 1, Bader al-Sulaiti secured first place ahead of Jad Alawar and Victor Litaudon, who finished second and third respectively. The second round of the championship takes place next Monday and Tuesday.