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FOOTBALL

Young Qatar side aims to dash India's qualification dreams

India need to beat Qatar to be sure of booking their spot in the third round of the World Cup qualifiers



Qatar players train at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday, on the eve of their FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup qualifying match against India. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

By Sports Reporter
Doha

India face a tough task against hosts Qatar in the final preliminary joint qualification match for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium today. Qatar have already sealed top spot and are sitting pretty at the top of group with 13 points so far. Today, India need to defeat Al Annabi to be absolutely sure of booking their spot in the third round of the FIFA World Cup qualifiers for the first time. Igor Stimac's side are tied on five points with Afghanistan, with Kuwait one adrift but India have a superior goal difference. The South Asian side would have been boosted by Afghanistan holding Qatar to a goalless stalemate on Thursday, with the reigning AFC Asian Cup champions fielding a young side. It will be India's first match since Sunil Chhetri's retirement from international football and Stimac will be hoping his players rise to the occasion. India have had a lukewarm qualification campaign for the World Cup thus far, with a 1-0 victory away in Kuwait giving them a



Qatar coach Marquez Lopez (right) and defender Homam al-Amin address a press conference yesterday.

lot of hope, before draws against Afghanistan (0-0 away) and Kuwait (0-0 at home), and defeats against Qatar (0-3 at home) and Afghanistan (1-2 at home) left them with a bit of a mountain to climb. If they get a draw against their hosts, the

Blue Tigers will hope for the same in the game between Kuwait and Afghanistan. The equation will be simpler for India if they defeat Qatar, however, though the task of achieving that feat is anything but elementary.



India are tied on five points with Afghanistan, with Kuwait one adrift but Igor Stimac's side have a superior goal difference.

Stimac is banking on the mentality that he has cultivated in his players, to get them through in the game against Qatar. He said, "Over the last five years, we have created hope within the team, which was never there before. I am proud of the boys, of how confident they are when they take the pitch. "I've told them that the only thing they need to do is enjoy the game, be proud of their country, and take the opportunities that will make the 1.4 billion people back home happy," he said. "It's all about the 90 minutes for us tomorrow, and we are prepared to die on the pitch, if required." India midfielder Brandon Fernandes echoed his coach's words, stressing on the importance of hard work to gain the desired results. "We know how important this game is for us, so every player will fight for the nation. We are here to represent the country, and we will go out there as a team and give it our best shot," he said. "It's 11-vs-11 tomorrow, and anything is possible in football. We have to put in the hard yards, and if we do it, we could get something out of it in the end." For India, this match will mark the beginning of a new era, one where Chhetri will not be part of their plans. The talis-

manic striker and captain called it a day on his 19-year-long international career after the World Cup Qualifier against Kuwait in Kolkata last week. Stimac, however, averted much talk about the former India captain, choosing to focus on the team, rather than an individual. "We are not thinking about it (Chhetri's absence). We've played several games over the last five years without him, and we have shown that we can play in a composed manner. We've got other leaders in the side, who now need to step up," he said. "Of course Sunil has some great qualities - his personality, leadership skills, football quality, but I am not going to go back to it. This is about the team, not about any individual." Meanwhile, Qatar coach Marquez Lopez said his team would go for a win. "Our goal is to achieve victory in tomorrow's match, and we are happy with the performance that the team showed in the previous match against the Afghan team," he said. Defender Homam al-Amin said, "A difficult match awaits us. India seek to win in order to secure qualification to the next round. Our team is ready and everyone is looking forward to the match."

FOCUS

Afghanistan face Kuwait, chase milestone on road to 2026 World Cup

AFP
Hong Kong

Afghanistan hope to achieve a footballing milestone yesterday by snatching a spot in the third and final phase of Asian qualifying for the 2026 World Cup. The team ranked 151 in the world are on the brink of history and a place at the 2027 Asian Cup under their English coach Ashley Westwood. Once on the books of Manchester United, he took over the Afghan team seven months ago and has masterminded a significant upturn in fortunes for the footballing minnows. They play away at Kuwait today in the final round of games in the second qualifying stage knowing they need to better India's result at Qatar to progress further. Afghanistan held already qualified Qatar, the Asian champions, to a precious 0-0 draw on Thursday in a "home" game for the Afghans that was played in Saudi Arabia. "When we took over in November just before the first game against Qatar, which we lost 8-1, (if) you told us that we'll be

giving ourselves a chance of qualifying with one game to go, we wouldn't have believed it," Westwood said afterwards. "The players are excited and we believe that we have a genuine chance of making history for Afghanistan in reaching the Asian Cup and third round of the World Cup qualifiers." India are also trying to reach the final stage of World Cup qualifying for the first time. Igor Stimac's side currently occupy the second qualifying berth from Group A on goal difference from the Afghans. Just to complicate things, Kuwait are also in with a shot of progressing, with the group going right down to the wire. Elsewhere, it is a straight shootout between China and Thailand for the second qualifying berth out of Group C. China are in the driving seat in second place and needing only a point from their final game to guarantee advancement. However, they must travel to Son Heung-min's table-topping South Korea while Thailand have a far easier task when they host basement side Singapore in Bangkok. China, looking to qualify for the World Cup for the first time since their debut

in 2002, remain in a strong position to progress after Behram Abduweli's late equaliser against Thailand on Thursday. "For us the qualifying tournament isn't over yet," said coach Branko Ivankovic after the 1-1 draw in Shenyang. "We will go all out in the next match and try to qualify for the next round." As well as Qatar and South Korea, also already into the last qualifying round are: Japan, Oman, Iran, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Australia and Palestine. Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia and Indonesia are all bidding to join them in the third Asian qualifying round for the first time. It is between Indonesia and Vietnam to take the second qualifying place out of Group F. Indonesia will be favourites to progress because they are a point in front and host already eliminated Philippines in Jakarta. Vietnam travel to table-toppers Iraq. Syria face Japan hoping for a positive result as they attempt to hold off North Korea in Group B. Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, will confirm their progress to the third round ahead of Malaysia if they do not fall to a heavy defeat against Group D leaders Oman in Muscat.



Afghanistan held Qatar to a precious 0-0 draw on Thursday.

MATCH REPORT

Klaasen, Maharaj shine as Proteas beat Bangladesh

SOUTH AFRICA PRODUCE THE GOODS AFTER BEING RESTRICTED TO 113/6 BY BANGLADESH BOWLERS

AFP
New York

South Africa defeated Bangladesh by just four runs in another low-scoring game at the T20 World Cup yesterday, a result likely to spark fresh debate over the suitability of the pitch being used in New York.

A powerful South Africa side was restricted to 113-6 in their 20 overs with Heinrich Klaasen top-scoring on 46 while fast bowler Tanzim Hasan Sakib returned a career-best 3-18.

However, Bangladesh could only manage 109-7 in reply as South Africa wrapped up a third win in three Group D games.

Chasing just 114 to win on the controversial drop-in strip at the Nassau County International Cricket Stadium, Bangladesh initially struggled in the face of the Proteas' pace battery.

They were 50-4 at the 10-over mark having lost Tanzid Hasan (nine) to Kagiso Rabada while Anrich Nortje accounted for skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto (14) and Shakib Al Hasan (three).

Spinner Keshav Maharaj sent back Liton Das for just nine.

However, Towhid Hridoy, who top-scored with 40 when Bangladesh defeated Sri Lanka in their opener, and 38-year-old Mahmudullah steadied the ship for the Tigers.

The pair put on 44 for the fifth wicket before Hridoy was lbw to Rabada for 37, an innings which took up 34 balls and featured two fours and two sixes.

Bangladesh took seven off the penultimate over but still needed



Keshav Maharaj of South Africa celebrate with teammates after dismissing Liton Das of Bangladesh during the ICC T20 World Cup match against Bangladesh at Nassau County International Cricket Stadium in New York yesterday. (AFP)

11 off the last to be bowled by Maharaj. That became seven off four balls. With the pressure building both Jaker Ali and Mahmudullah were caught going for big heaves over long on.

Needing six off the final ball, Taskin Ahmed could only produce a scrambled single.

Earlier, Bangladesh restricted South Africa to 113-6 with Tanzim backed up by Taskin's 2-19 after

Proteas skipper Aiden Markram won the toss and opted to bat.

South Africa were struggling at 23-4 at one stage before Klaasen and David Miller, celebrating his 35th birthday, came to their team's

rescue with a partnership of 79 for the fifth wicket.

Klaasen's quickfire 46
Klaasen's 46 came off 44 balls with two fours and three sixes before he

was clean-bowled by Taskin, slog-ging across the line in the 18th over with the score on 102.

Miller, who made a match-winning undefeated 59 in the nervy win over the Netherlands, went four runs later, bowled by Rishad Hossain.

His innings of 29 came from 38 deliveries with a boundary and one six.

The Proteas had been 12-4 against the Dutch on the same pitch on Saturday.

Yesterday, they were quickly four down for just 23 runs in the fifth over thanks to Tanzim and Taskin.

Tanzim, playing in only his eighth T20 international, started the collapse, having out-of-form opener Reeza Hendricks lbw for nought off his first ball.

Star batsman Quinton de Kock was the next to go, clean-bowled by the 21-year-old for 18 with the total on 19.

Taskin uprooted the stumps of Markram (four) before Tanzim grabbed the third of his opening spell when he forced Tristan Stubbs to spoon a catch to Shakib Al Hasan in the covers without scoring.

Miller could have been dismissed on 13 but wicket-keeper Liton Das dropped an edge off slow bowler Mahmudullah's first ball.

BRIEF SCORES
South Africa 113-6 in 20 overs (Heinrich Klaasen 46; Tanzim Hasan Sakib 3-18) **v Bangladesh 109-7 in 20 overs** (Towhid Hridoy 37; Keshav Maharaj 3-27)
Toss: South Africa
Result: South Africa won by four runs

Pakistan coach Kirsten defends New York surface

Pakistan coach **Gary Kirsten** defended the playing surface at New York's T20 Cricket World Cup venue on Sunday following his team's defeat to India in a low-scoring contest.

India were bowled out for 119, their lowest ever score against Pakistan in a T20 game but won by six wickets after their rivals fell just short.

All five games at the Nassau County International Cricket Stadium, which features a 'drop in' square, laid a month before the tournament, have been low-scoring affairs.

There had been criticism of the surface after India's win over Ireland last week with former Zimbabwe international and ex-England team director Andy Flower calling it "dangerous" because of the uneven bounce. But Sunday's wicket, while hard to score on, provided only the occasional ball which 'popped' off a length and Kirsten said it had made for an interesting game. "I think it wasn't dangerous. I mean the odd one rose up, but not many. Generally it kept a little bit lower, it was difficult to score from both batting sides and also a fairly slow outfield so it was never going to be a big total," said Kirsten. "I would have said 140 would have been a really good score on that pitch, so India didn't get that and so

I thought we had the game," added the South African.

Kirsten said that while boundaries had been at a premium, unusually for the big-hitting T20 format, that simply made for a different kind of contest. "We knew it was going to be tight, but you know sometimes it's fun seeing games like that as well, it's not always about sixes and hitting, getting 260 and 240's, you can actually have a really entertaining game on a T20 chase, so I don't think it's bad for the game," he said.

Last week's complaints led the International Cricket Council (ICC) to accept that the wickets hadn't been up to standards for the opening games at the venue.



"T20 Inc and the ICC recognise that the pitches used so far at the Nassau County International Cricket Stadium have not played as consistently as we would have all wanted," the ICC said in a statement.

"The world-class grounds team have been working hard since the conclusion of yesterday's game to remedy the situation and deliver the best possible surfaces for the remaining matches," they added.

Three games remain at the venue with the last coming tomorrow when India face co-hosts USA.



India's Jasprit Bumrah celebrates after taking a wicket during the ICC Twenty20 World Cup match against Pakistan at Nassau County International Cricket Stadium in East Meadow, New York, on Sunday. (AFP)

'Genius' Bumrah does it again for India

Jasprit Bumrah appears blissfully unaware of the popular perception that T20 cricket is a batter-friendly format as India's pace spearhead delivered another match-winning performance in Sunday's World Cup blockbuster against Pakistan.

Bumrah may not enjoy the rock star status afforded to batters Virat Kohli and skipper Rohit Sharma back home but the 30-year-old is the go-to man when India's batsmen flounder.

Like they did in the Group A contest against arch-rivals Pakistan, who bundled out India for 119 with one over left in their innings.

Babar Azam's team looked on course for victory at 80-3 after 14 overs before Bumrah intervened.

The seamer bowled a well-set Mohamed Rizwan (31) to bring India back into the contest, though Pakistan still looked in charge needing 21 runs from 12 balls with five wickets in hand.

The right-arm seamer with a sling-shot action then returned to send down a decisive penultimate over. Bumrah conceded only three runs in that over while removing If-

ikhar Ahmed, Pakistan's final hope, to set up India's six-run victory in the low-scoring thriller.

Bumrah's 24 deliveries included 15 dot balls, illustrating the accuracy which makes him such an asset especially in this format.

"We've seen him over the years what he can do," Rohit said after India went 7-1 against Pakistan in the history of the tournament.

"We want him to be in that kind of mindset till the end of the World Cup. He's a genius with the ball..."

Pakistan, finalists in the last edition of the tournament, risk an early exit having also lost to the United States in their opener.

Bumrah, who finished with 3-14, said there was less assistance for the bowlers in the second innings but he did not have trouble adjusting to conditions.

"Even when there is help, you can be desperate and...try to pull off that magic delivery," he told reporters after claiming his second successive player-of-the-match award.

"We had to be accurate because if you go for magic deliveries and try to be too desperate, run making becomes easy."

(Reuters)

ANNOUNCEMENT

Nepal spinner Lamichhane to join World Cup squad in Windies

AFP
Kathmandu

Sandeep Lamichhane will join Nepal's T20 World Cup squad in the West Indies after missing matches in the United States because his visa was denied, the cricket association said yesterday.

Nepal had originally wanted to select former skipper Lamichhane, who had an eight-year sentence for rape quashed on appeal, but his US visa was denied twice despite intense lobbying.

The T20 World Cup is being co-hosted by the United States and West Indies.

"Nepali player Sandeep Lamichhane will leave for the West Indies for the ongoing ICC T20 World Cup and join the Nepali national cricket team," association secretary Paras Khadka said in a statement.

Spin bowler Lamichhane, 23, was once the poster boy for cricket in Nepal, but was convicted for raping a young woman in a Kathmandu hotel in 2022. That was quashed last month.

"I am now joining the national team for the last two matches in the

West Indies and looking forward to fulfilling my dreams and the dream of all cricket lovers," Lamichhane posted on X, formerly Twitter.

"To all our cricket fans and people back home everywhere who prayed for me, I will forever be grateful for your blessings."

His social media posts with the announcement were welcomed by fans and filled with congratulatory messages.

Nepal lost to the Netherlands by six wickets in their World Cup opener.

They play Sri Lanka tomorrow in Florida, before group matches

in the West Indies against South Africa and Bangladesh.

Before his rape trial, Lamichhane's success as a leg-spinner had dramatically boosted the sport's profile in the Himalayan republic.

In 2022, when an arrest warrant was first issued, Lamichhane initially failed to return from Jamaica, where he was playing in the Caribbean Premier League.

He was dismissed as national captain and arrested, but Nepal lifted his playing ban when he was freed on bail.

It allowed him to keep playing,

including at last year's Asia Cup in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, until he was convicted in January. The conviction was quashed in mid-May.

Cricket does not enjoy the same attention in Nepal as it does elsewhere in South Asia.

But the sport has been growing in popularity, with Nepal given one-day international status by world governing body the ICC in 2018.

Lamichhane was a major part of the rise as the most sought-after Nepali cricketer in lucrative T20 leagues around the world.



ATHLETICS

Duplantis leads raft of stars into Euro finals in Rome

‘MY FIRST AIM HERE IS TO WIN THE GOLD MEDAL AND OF COURSE, I AM TRYING TO JUMP HIGH’

AFP
Rome

Swedish pole vault world record holder Armand ‘Mondo’ Duplantis led a raft of stand-out athletes safely through qualifiers into finals at the European championships in Rome yesterday.

The morning session at the Stadio Olimpico featured a host of global stars, with France’s world decathlon record holder Kevin Mayer also competing in the hope of accruing the points needed to ensure qualification for the Paris Olympics that begin next month.

Mayer timed 10.72 seconds for the opening 100m before going out to 7.37 metres in the long jump.

Duplantis, the Olympic and two-time world champion, is bidding for a third successive European title and it would take a brave punter to bet against the US-born Swede.

He currently dominates the pole vault. This season alone, he has already won a second world indoor title and bettered his own world record to 6.24m. No other vaulters come close.

The 24-year-old only vaulted once, clearing 5.60m to ensure his place in tomorrow’s final.

“My first aim here is to win the gold medal and of course, I am trying to jump high,” said Duplantis. “I was very focused on today’s qualification.

“And then it is about jumping as high as possible. My big focus, of course, is on the Olympic Games. I always want to jump high so we will try to do something good on Wednesday.”

Norway’s Karsten Warholm, a three-time world 400m hurdles champion and two-time European gold medalist, coasted through his heat in 48.75sec, easing up a full 50



Sweden's Armand Duplantis in action during the men's pole vault qualification at the European Athletics Championships at Stadio Olimpico in Rome yesterday. (AFP)

metres from the line in front of a sparse crowd.

“I love athletics. And to do it in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, that is a privilege,” said Warholm. “I just want to make sure that the crowds will make some noise for the final.”

Keeping composure

The women’s 400m hurdles saw defending champion Femke Bol, who won bronze as part of the Dutch mixed 4x400m relay team on Friday, also comfortably win her heat in 54.16sec.

Both hurdles finals will be held today evening, with Warholm and Bol clear favourites to win as they fine-tune preparations for the Paris Olympics.

Warholm’s teammate Jakob In-

gebrigtsen made equally light work of his heat in the 1500m, reeling in the field from 300 metres in indomitable style to win in 3:37.65.

The Norwegian, already winner of Saturday’s 5,000m, will line up in tomorrow’s 1500m final as hot favourite to land gold, which would represent a triple double having already won both events in Berlin and Munich in 2018 and 2022.

“If you watched the race, you could see that I really did not do much,” said Ingebrigtsen, twice beaten to gold at the last two world championships by Britons Jake Wightman and Josh Kerr – both absent from this championships.

“It was all about keeping the composure and I tried to stay out of trouble.

“I could test my fitness and my

legs felt pretty good in the last lap. So it was a good race and I am ready for the final.”

It was a similar tale for defending champion Keely Hodgkinson of Britain in the women’s 800m as the world and Olympic silver medalist safely negotiated her heat to advance to tomorrow’s final.

“Heats are always a bit of a reality check to be honest, because you never really feel that great,” said Hodgkinson.

“It is just hard because some people are trying to run their best race ever and you are trying to conserve the energy.

“So it is just a case of do not get complacent, do not get caught out at the wrong moment, do not get tripped up and also try and save as much energy for the next round.”

EUROPEAN TITLE A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION FOR PARIS, SAYS ASHER-SMITH



Britain's Dina Asher-Smith celebrates winning the women's 100m final during the European Athletics Championships at the Olympic stadium in Rome on Sunday. (AFP)

Rome: Britain’s double Olympic bronze medalist Dina Asher-Smith said winning 100m gold at the European Athletics Championships in Rome on Sunday was a step in the right direction towards the Paris Games. Asher-Smith, who had not won a major title since taking 200m gold at the 2019 World Championships, got off to a slow start before surging past her rivals to win in 10.99 seconds. “It’s just a step towards Paris, a step in the right direction,” she told British media.

“I’m in a great place. That’s not normally my style of race but I’m happy I was able to run another sub-11 performance in a different way.” The 28-year-old, who won bronze in the women’s 4x100m relay in

Rio and Tokyo, split with coach John Blackie after 19 years in October last year and moved to Texas to prepare for Paris under the guidance of Edrick Floreal. “We’ve worked really hard on my top-end speed, on my form and relaxation.

“I didn’t panic in my running,” said Asher-Smith. The athletics competition at the Paris Olympics will take place from Aug 1-11 at the Stade de France.

Asher-Smith maintained her form perfectly after a poor start to claim her second European 100m title. Poland’s Ewa Swoboda claimed silver in 11.03sec in a photo finish with Italian Zaynab Dosso.

“I can definitely run faster than that,” said Asher-Smith.

BOXING

Filipino star Pacquiao in talks over comeback but title fight is ‘far away’

AFP
Tokyo

Boxing great Manny Pacquiao said yesterday that he is in negotiations to make a comeback but cautioned that a potential world title fight against Mario Barrios was “far away”.

The 45-year-old multiple world champion from the Philippines quit the sport in 2021 and made a failed tilt at his country’s presidency.

He has signed up to fight a three-round exhibition bout against Japanese mixed martial artist Chihiro Suzuki next month in Saitama, north of Tokyo.

Pacquiao said he was in talks to face the American Barrios for the WBC welterweight world title but said the potential fight was still “far away”.

“We’re still in negotiations and we’re talking about that. The fight has not materialised yet,” Pacquiao, who has hinted at comebacks before, said in Tokyo.

“That negotiation is ongoing. It’s going to be by December – November or December.

“There’s still a lot of things to discuss and talk about.”

Pacquiao in February admitted defeat in his bid to fight at next month’s Paris Olympics when the International Olympic Committee



Retired multiple world boxing champion Manny Pacquiao of the Philippines (left) and Japanese mixed martial artist (MMA) Chihiro Suzuki pose during a photo session at the end of a press conference in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

rejected a special request for him to take part.

The IOC has an age limit of 40 for Olympic boxers.

Pacquiao retired weeks after losing to Cuban Yordenis Ugas in Las Vegas in his final professional fight.

He ran for the Philippines presidency but lost the May 2022 election by a huge margin.

He returned to the ring for an exhibition in Seoul in Decem-

ber 2022 against a South Korean YouTuber.

He will fight Suzuki on July 28 in a 68kg boxing match of three rounds at three minutes each, with no judges’ decision.

Pacquiao insisted the bout was “not an exhibition, this is a fight”.

“We are looking for a knock-out for this fight,” he said.

“There’s going to be a lot of action in the ring and of course I’ll do my best to win by knock-out.”

FORMULA ONE

‘One of my worst races,’ says Hamilton after missing podium

AFP
Montreal

Seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton said he had driven “one of the worst races” of his long career on Sunday when he finished fourth behind Mercedes teammate George Russell in the Canadian Grand Prix.

Hamilton said he believed his car was capable of winning, but that he had made a lot of mistakes in his 34th race, in which Russell passed him in the closing laps to snatch away his first podium finish this year on one of his favourite tracks.

“Over the weekend, it’s a poor performance from myself,” he said. “Some other things came into it yesterday, mostly myself, but then today, it’s one of the worst races I’ve driven. Lots of mistakes.

“Of course, if I qualified better, I would have been in a better position. But it is becoming a car we can fight with and that’s a real positive, going into the next part of the season.

“It’s going to be a close battle and if I get my head on right, I’ll get better results.

“I think this weekend the car was capable of winning. That’s such a great feeling so we’ll take the points and keep on trying.”

Hamilton holds the joint record of seven wins and six poles at the Circuit Gilles Villeneuve where he claimed his maiden victory, with McLaren, in 2007.

Russell, who had started from the second pole position of his career and the team’s first since Hamilton’s pole at Hungary last year, said: “This feels like a missed opportunity. We were really quick at the beginning on the inters and then Lando came through really fast, but then we jumped back onto the slicks and made a couple of mistakes, pushing the limits and paid the price.

“Nevertheless, it was our first podium of the year, we had a really fast car and to be back in the mix fighting for a victory, that’s



Lewis Hamilton of Great Britain and Mercedes rides his scooter in the Piltane prior to the start of the F1 Grand Prix of Canada at Circuit Gilles Villeneuve in Montreal, Quebec, on Sunday. Hamilton finished fourth behind Mercedes teammate George Russell. (AFP)

what F1 is about.” Asked about his two late bold passing moves on McLaren’s Oscar Piastri and Hamilton, Russell added: “It was pretty tight with Oscar and Lewis at the end. It was hard, but fair racing. It’s so difficult when there’s only one dry line, so you have got to be committed and trust your rivals.” Team boss Toto Wolff said despite missing out on a first win since the Sao Paulo Grand Prix

in 2022, he was satisfied with the team’s recent progress.

“A victory was maybe a long-shot, or a short dream, but you must not be too greedy. The car has made a good step forward and the development direction is true.” He added that he was not sure if Red Bull had “made a step backwards” but that “the most important thing” is that their performance advantage was shrinking.

Sinner takes over No.1 spot from Djokovic

Janik Sinner’s anticipated rise to world No.1 was officialised yesterday when the ATP released its new rankings, making him the first Italian ever to hold the top spot.

Sinner reached the semi-finals of the French Open where he was beaten by eventual champion Carlos Alcaraz who climbs to second, nudging 37-year-old Djokovic, who has been No.1 since last September, down to third.

Djokovic holds the record for the number of weeks spent at No.1 – his tally of 428 is 118 weeks more

than next best Roger Federer. The German Alexander Zverev, who was runner-up to Alcaraz in Paris, remains in fourth place.

ATP rankings

1. Jannik Sinner (ITA) 9525 pts (+1), 2. Carlos Alcaraz (ESP) 8580 (+1), 3. Novak Djokovic (SRB) 8360 (-2), 4. Alexander Zverev (GER) 6885, 5. Daniil Medvedev (RUS) 6485, 6. Andrey Rublev (RUS) 4710, 7. Casper Ruud (NOR) 4025, 8. Hubert Hurkacz (POL) 3995, 9. Alex De Minaur (AUS) 3845 (+2), 10. Grigor Dimitrov (BUL) 3775,



Unstoppable at 53, combat sports legend Ritch gears up for fight in Qatar



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Shannon 'The Cannon' Ritch's career is a tapestry woven with various threads – combat sports, military service and acting. The American, who is going strong at the age of 53, has fought an incredible 237 Mixed Martial Artist (MMA) fights – the longest active fight streak on record.

Though he has never fought in the hugely-popular Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), Ritch is the most active fighter in the world and is well versed with various combat sports styles like boxing, judo, taekwondo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, karate, wrestling and Muay Thai.

The combat sports fans in Qatar will finally be able to see the MMA legend in action as Ritch gears up for an electrifying bout against Darrill Schoonover in Doha. In the past few days at the Doha Sports and Arts Academy, Ritch has offered a glimpse into the rigorous training that keeps him at the pinnacle of his sport.

The pupils of the Doha Sports and Arts Academy and its general manager Master Rami al-Banna were left in awe of Ritch, who continues to inspire many children and teens to follow and pursue their dreams.

In an exclusive interview with *Gulf Times*, Ritch reflects on a career that has spanned decades, continents, and countless battles both inside and outside the ring. His story is one of resilience, passion, and an unyielding drive that has seen him rise to legendary status in the combat sports world.

Ritch's entry into MMA was driven



Shannon 'The Cannon' Ritch (left) with Doha Sports and Arts Academy's general manager Master Rami al-Banna.



by a desire to overcome personal adversity. "I got into MMA fighting at an early age because I was bullied. I had a lot of people picking on me. I was the smallest kid in school, and I learned martial arts. I learned karate, then Muay Thai, kickboxing, Brazilian jiu-jitsu," he recounts.

"In 1993, I saw the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and I was hooked. I mean, that is something I really wanted to do. I was like, are you kidding me? You get paid to fight. So if I can fight and get paid for, then sign me up. I'm ready to go. And I've been doing it ever since 1991," he adds.

Ritch's first professional fight took place in Mexico, under circumstances that were far from glamorous. "I had my first professional fight in Mexico. We had the chicken fights, then the dog fights, and then the people fight. At this time it was totally illegal. And if you were to get caught, obviously you would go to jail. But it was in Mexico, so they let it go," he recalls.

Soon, Ritch was fighting in MMA sanctioned events, which has taken him around the globe, fighting in various countries and in front of massive

audiences. "I have fought in professional MMA sanctioned events in front of 100,000 people in Japan, Russia, China, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico – you name the country, I've probably fought there. Now it's my chance to fight in Qatar and I'm very excited," he says.

Ritch's multifaceted career extends beyond the ring. Having already acted in 20 movies, he will next be seen in action thriller *Boneyard* with Mel Gibson releasing on July 5th.

Balancing numerous roles is no small feat, yet Ritch manages it with grace, crediting his wife Lara for her unwavering support. "I wear a lot of hats, but my wife is my cornerstone. She's the one that drives me. So I do everything for her and for myself," he says.

For his upcoming fight in Qatar, Ritch's preparation has been nothing short of intense. "I'm really looking forward to the fight," he shares. "I've been training for 12 weeks, had a very intensive training camp, and I have lost 10 kilos. Yeah, I'm ready to go. When a company here in Qatar called Future Sports offered me to fight here in Qatar, I was thrilled to come here."

When asked how long he plans to fight in combat sports, he says with a laugh: "I'm going to keep fighting until they stop paying me."

Before adding on a serious note: "Ah, I love what I do. A long time ago, someone told me 'If you hate your job, if you hate your work, then you're not going to go far! I love my job. I love what I do. So to me, it's not work, it's something I enjoy!'"

Ritch offers invaluable advice to those aspiring to follow in his footsteps. "If you want to be a fighter or want to have confidence, have self-defence, and not get bullied at school, find a good coach and school where you fit in. Make sure you get proper training. Your coach should be a black belt or someone who understands the sport, and you can train without getting hurt. You don't have to train and get punched in the face. There are many ways to train: you can hit the bag, you can hit the mitts, you can learn technique. Fighting is a totally different area of training. But I suggest everybody from age five and up to go out and train and learn something new," he advises.

FOOTBALL

Ancelotti denies Real Madrid will skip Club World Cup

AFP
Madrid

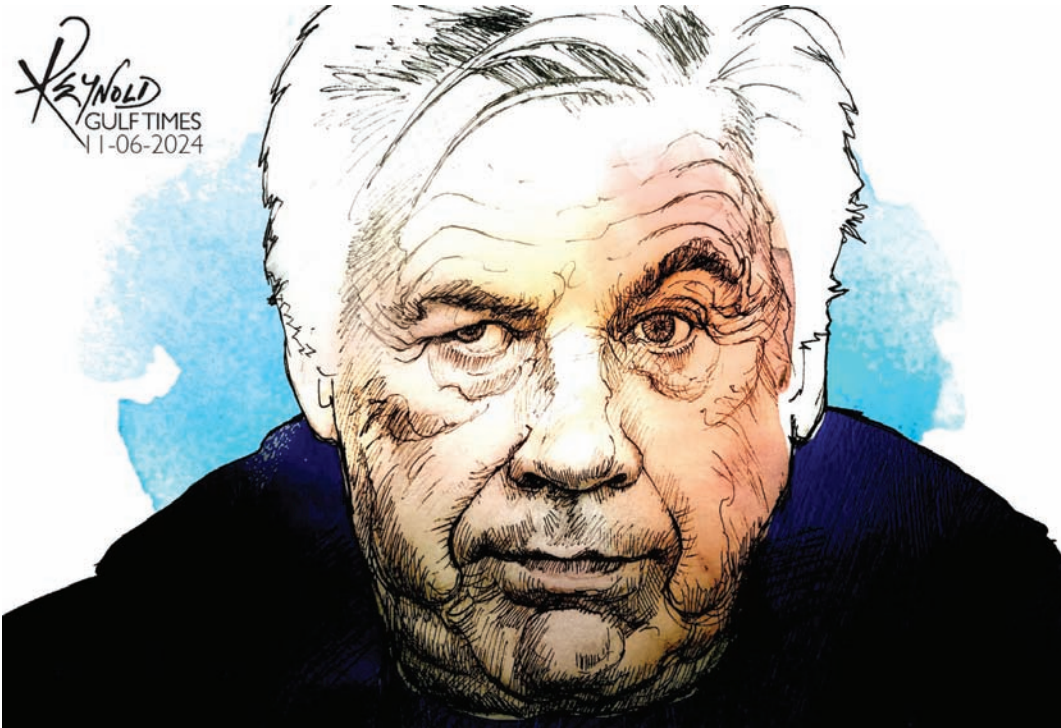
Real Madrid coach **Carlo Ancelotti** denied yesterday that the Champions League winners would refuse to play in next season's expanded Club World Cup, claiming comments he made to an Italian newspaper had been misinterpreted.

"In my interview with *Il Giornale*, my words about the FIFA Club World Cup have not been interpreted in the way I intended," Ancelotti posted on X.

"Nothing could be further from my interest than to reject the possibility of playing in a tournament that I consider to be a great opportunity to continue fighting for great titles with Real Madrid."

Ancelotti had been quoted in Monday's edition of *Il Giornale* saying that "players and clubs will not participate" in the new tournament. "A single Real Madrid match is worth 20 million euros and FIFA wants to give us this amount for the entire Cup," he is quoted as saying. "So no. Like us, other clubs will refuse the invitation."

Real Madrid, who last season won the La Liga title under Ancelotti as well as a 15th European Cup and Champions League title,



were also quick to distance themselves from the remarks.

"Real Madrid C. F. would like to announce that at no time has there been any question regarding our participation in the new Club World Cup to be organised by FIFA in the coming 2024/2025 season,"

the club said in a statement on its website. "Our club will therefore take part, as planned, in this official competition and we are proud and excited to be involved in it and we will once again inspire our millions of fans all over the world with another trophy."

The expanded 32-team Club World Cup is proposed to take place next summer, adding to an already congested calendar for players. England's Professional Footballers' Association has warned FIFA that players could go on strike.

FOCUS

Vinicius welcomes jail sentence for racially abusive fans

AFP
Madrid

Vinicius Junior welcomed the eight-month prison sentences handed down yesterday to three Valencia fans for racially abusing him during a La Liga match last year.

"This first criminal conviction in Spanish history is not for me. It's for all black people," the Real Madrid and Brazil attacker posted on social media.

"But, as I've always said, I'm not a victim of racism. I'm a destroyer of racists. Let the other racists be afraid, ashamed and hide in the shadows. Otherwise, I'll be here to collect the debt," he wrote.

"Thank you to La Liga and Real Madrid for helping to bring about this historic verdict. There's more to come..."

The defendants, who were not identified, were convicted of an offence against moral integrity with the aggravating factor of racially motivated discrimination, the Valencia court said.

They were also slapped with a two-year match ban. With no previous criminal record, none will serve jail time as judges habitually suspend prison sentences of less than two years for first-time offenders.

Spain's La Liga hailed the ruling as "the first sentence handed down for racist insults in a Spanish football stadium".

"This sentence is very good news for the fight against racism in Spain," said La Liga president Javier Tebas. "It sends a clear message to anyone who goes to a football stadium to hurl insults that La Liga will find and prosecute them and that they will face criminal consequences."

Gianni Infantino, the president of world football's governing body FIFA, posted on Instagram that the decision was "a positive step".

"Our message to people anywhere in the world who behave in a racist way when they are dealing with football is clear: we don't want you," Infantino wrote.

The incident took place on May 21, 2023 at Valencia's Mestalla stadium when home fans hurled abuse and made monkey noises at the Real Madrid forward.

Play was halted as Vinicius stood in front of fans and pointed at those responsible, prompting stadium officials to demand



an end to racist insults before the match could resume.

All three "shouted and chanted at the player with... evident contempt for the colour of his skin... making racist gestures of contempt and causing him to feel frustration, shame and humiliation", court documents showed. It said they were "simulating the gestures made by primates and repeatedly making... the sound made by monkeys" in front of a full stadium and a "massive" TV, radio and media audience.

In a statement, Real Madrid said the trio had admitted their wrongdoing and sent a letter apologising to Vinicius, the club and to everyone else "who felt belittled or offended by their behaviour", urging fans to avoid all expressions of "racism and intolerance".

The incident, the latest in a string of racist attacks on the player, sparked an international outcry with Brazil lodging a diplomatic protest and turning off the lights on Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer statue in solidarity. Real Madrid filed a criminal complaint and within days, police arrested three youths for "insults and gestures with racist overtones" at the Valencia match on suspicion of "an alleged hate crime" – an offence which includes racist behaviour.

Now 23, Vinicius has been taunted by opposition fans since joining Real Madrid in 2018, suffering racist abuse at several Spanish stadiums.

In January 2023, a dark-skinned effigy wearing a Vinicius shirt was found hanging from a bridge near the club's training ground alongside a banner saying: "Madrid hates Real".

In December, four Atletico Madrid fans were charged over the incident, with prosecutors pushing for jail terms of four years. No date has yet been set for a trial. The Valencia incident sparked a fierce debate about whether Spain is doing enough to stamp out racism in football.

SPOTLIGHT

England can 'do something special' at Euro: Rice

AFP
London

Declan Rice says England can "do something really special" at Euro 2024 as Gareth Southgate's team jetted to Germany following a royal send-off yesterday.

England are among the favourites to win the European Championship, three years after falling agonisingly short in the final of the last edition of the tournament at Wembley.

Midfielder Rice says there is a belief in the group that they can be crowned kings of Europe for the first time and win England's first major trophy since the 1966 World Cup.

"We want to make history," said the Arsenal midfielder. "We say it all the time, but genuinely we have a group, a manager, that really believes."

"We have a confidence that we can go there and do something really special and, of course, with that comes hard work."

"That is going to be the main thing – the hard work as a team, unity, togetherness and with everyone behind us at home."

"We're going to feel that for sure, so stick with us, be positive and let's see what happens."

Rice was speaking before heading to the airport from St George's Park, England's national football centre, where flag-waving children gave the team a lively send-off.

"We're about to go and play a tournament for our country," said Rice.

"It's a privilege, an honour and it feels very real now. When you start to do things like this, it starts to feel real."

"You can have all the build-up in the world, but when you know you're travelling and that, it's



proper now."

Prince William, the president of the Football Association, travelled to St George's Park yesterday to wish the players luck and present them with their shirts.

England, who kick off their Euro 2024 campaign against Serbia on Sunday, suffered a shock 1-0 defeat to Iceland in their final friendly last week.

But Rice said the disappointment does not detract from what was a beneficial 10-day training camp.

"It's obviously difficult when you finish the league," the 25-year-old said on England's departure show on YouTube. "Your body completely shuts down when you have a break, because we're made to just play all the time."

"When we have a rest, our body shuts down and it's hard to get going again. But last week was really beneficial, to be honest with you, I think for everyone."

"We've got another full week now until the game, so we'll be in a really good spot."

Euro 2024 begins on Friday, when Germany play Scotland in Munich.