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CRICKET | Page 2

Head slays
Scotland in
rapid Australia
T20 victory



US OPEN | Page 3

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reach semis

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SPORT

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar's Sara aims for another Paralympic Games medal today in Paris

Page 4

FOOTBALL

Buoyant Qatar raring to go against UAE in WC qualifiers

'The journey to the 2026 World Cup will be difficult but we can make progress from this group'



Coach Marquez Lopez looks on as Qatar players train at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday, on the eve of the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match against the United Arab Emirates. **PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil**



By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Coach Marquez Lopez yesterday said Asian champions Qatar have put in the hard yards in the buildup to their 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match against the UAE.

The two sides clash today at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium where Qatar will be looking to stretch their unbeaten streak against the UAE since 2015.

"We will begin a whole new phase to qualify for the World Cup. We have done enough preparations and we have had enough time to do it," Lopez said yesterday at a pre-match press conference. "In fact we had a good time (while preparing for the match)," the 62-year-old Spaniard added.

Qatar, ranked 34 in the world, are tagged along with the UAE, Asian giants Iran, North Korea, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in Group A. Five days later, Qatar will face North Korea in Laos. UAE are ranked 69.

Lopez, who took over from veteran Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz in a shock Qatar Football Association move in December last year, was confident Qatar can progress from Group A. "This group is difficult. There are no easy teams. All teams have good play-

ers. But we trust the capability of our players. It will be a difficult mission. We know the journey (to the next World Cup) will be difficult but we can make progress from this group," Lopez said.

Lopez said his side is not daunted by the fact that Qatar have never directly qualified for the FIFA World Cup. "When selecting the players for any phase of matches, we expect them to be best for this phase. We know our team very well. I have seven years experience of coaching in Qatar. You use different formations. We trust them all," Lopez said.

Qatar, Lopez said, is ready for the UAE clash. "It is going to be a football game. We have analysed our rivals. We have previous experiences of playing against them. They have a very organised set up. They have a good coach. They are not an easy team to play," Lopez said without elaborating.

When reminded about Qatar dominating UAE in the last nine years, Lopez played down the statistical ascendancy over their neighbouring rivals. "In football there is no such thing as overconfidence when you look at some useless stats. If you think on those lines then it will be stupid. Overconfidence is bad for players and teams," he said.

"I have tried to give the same mentality to my players. We see them working hard. They are trying to qualify for the World Cup. They

are doing everything so there can't be a bigger motivation," Lopez said.

"I want to thank our fans who backed us during our Asian Cup campaign. We hope they come in droves again," he quickly added.

UAE coach Paulo Bento sounded wary of Qatar threat in today's clash. "It will be a difficult game against a very good team. They are a well organised side with an experienced coach. He (Lopez) knows the context of this match. He knows our team. They have good quality on their side. They won the last two Asian Cup events," Bento said yesterday.

"We must perform really well. We must try to have a good organisation until the end of the game. We have to try to get the best possible result," the Portuguese added. "This game will demand a lot of things - in the tactical and mental aspects for sure.

"It's important we remain in the game from the start until the end. To make this happen, it is important the players follow the team strategy in the entire game regardless of the result.

"We have to show a personality against a strong team. We have to show the desire to get the best result. As I said before, the team that performs well and the team that follows the strategy will do well in this match," he added.



UAE have not beaten Qatar since their 4-1 triumph in the Asian Cup in 2015.

FOCUS

Qatar players passionate about qualifying for World Cup: Almoez



Qatar forward Almoez Ali speaks at a press conference yesterday.

By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Fearful striker Almoez Ali said yesterday Qatar players are 'passionate' about qualifying for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Qatar, currently ranked 36 on the FIFA rankings, have never directly qualified for the game's biggest spectacle held every four years. As hosts, Qatar featured in the last edition of the FIFA World Cup held in late 2022.

The next FIFA World Cup will be jointly staged by the US, Canada and Mexico in the summer of 2026.

"Everyone knows how important the qualifying matches are for every side. This will be a tough road. We gathered 10 days ago. All the players are passionate about going through the qualifiers," Almoez said during a press conference yesterday.

Qatar, who are playing the UAE in a Group A clash at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today, will be looking towards Almoez and fellow forward Akram Afif to lead the team's attack.

"I think, for us players, we all have one goal and that is to qualify for the World Cup. This is an important year for us. We have achieved a lot too," Almoez added.

Remaining unbeaten in seven matches, Qatar defended their Asian Cup title in Jan-Feb this year. Five years earlier, Qatar beat Japan in the final of the 2019 Asian Cup for their maiden continental success.

"But there is something missing for this generation of players," Almoez said in reference to Qatar seeking a direct entry to the 2026 FIFA World Cup. "We have to achieve positive results in the qualifiers. We have to do it for Qatar," Almoez said.

"We are playing the UAE and we are fully ready for them," the 28-year-old Al Duhail skipper said yesterday.

"Our fans are the main motivation for the players. During the Asian Cup, we had the fans backing us and that feeling of fans supporting us was very good for the entire squad," Almoez recalled.

"Of course our team is fully ready and as a player I am fully confident. We will give our 110 percent. The fan support on our soil will give us great hope and backing," he added.

UAE centre-back Khalifa al-Hammadi said his side was aiming to pick up three points from their clash at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today.

"I would like to thank the Qatar Football Association for their hospitality. We are ready for this match. The players know the importance of this game since Qatar is a good team. We hope to perform well and take the three points," al-Hammadi said at a press conference held at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday.

"It's a big dream for any player to qualify for the World Cup. The solidarity of our players and the support of the fans are also key ingredients. We hope to take game by game," he added.

"Let me assure you, we are ready for Qatar. They are very strong in the forward lines. We know the importance of these games. We hope to be ready physically and mentally.

"Every game has a different context. We will try our best to get three points. We don't have to think about the past results and focus on our game and only on this match," the 25-year-old Al Jazira player explained.

SPOTLIGHT

McCullum can work magic with white-ball teams: Pope

AFP
London

Stand-in Test captain Ollie Pope said **Brendon McCullum** can transform the fortunes of England's limited-overs teams in the same way he has reinvigorated the red-ball side.

England cricket chiefs on Tuesday announced the New Zealander would take charge of all formats from January and that he has extended his contract until the end of 2027. "We've seen the impact he's had on us as a Test team and as individuals, which I think he can then transfer into the white-ball stuff as well," said Pope, speaking ahead of the third Test against Sri Lanka, starting tomorrow.

"He brings the best out of each other. He's a real optimist and I think that's really good in the cricket world. So, very exciting for English cricket overall."

McCullum, 42, inherits white-ball teams that have surrendered titles in the 50-over and 20-over world cups in the past 12 months.

When the former New Zealand captain took charge of England's Test side in May 2022 they were at a low ebb, with just one win in 17 games. But under his leadership they have won 19 of their 28 Tests, playing an exciting attacking game that has been labelled "Bazball".

Pope, who has struggled with



the bat in recent matches, said McCullum had given him confidence and freedom in his personal game. "He's got a great outlook on the game in general and just being able to kind of draw a line under your best and your worst weeks as well," said the batter, who is deputising as skipper for the in-

jured Ben Stokes. "I think that's probably one of his biggest skills as a player, but now he's sort of got that into his coaching as well. He's a massive optimist."

England, 2-0 up in the three-match series against Sri Lanka, have brought in left-arm seamer Josh Hull for the final Test at The

Oval. The two-metre tall 20-year-old, who only made his first-class debut last year, replaces Matthew Potts. England are just one win away from completing a clean sweep of home Test triumphs for the first time since 2004, having moved on emphatically from a disappointing 4-1 defeat by India

6'7" tall Hull to make England debut

Left-arm seamer Josh Hull will make his England debut in the third Test against Sri Lanka, the England and Wales Cricket Board said yesterday. Hull, 20, will replace Matthew Potts in the final test of the Sri Lanka series, which begins tomorrow at The Oval. England are seeking to secure a 3-0 series sweep in their final home test of the summer after Sunday's 190-run win in the second test at Lord's. Leicestershire's Hull was also called up for the second test following Mark Wood's thigh injury but did not play. Hull, six feet and seven inches tall, played for the Lions in a warm-up match against Sri Lanka in August.

England squad for third Test: Dan Lawrence, Ben Duckett, Ollie Pope (captain), Joe Root, Harry Brook, Jamie Smith (wicketkeeper), Chris Woakes, Gus Atkinson, Olly Stone, Josh Hull, Shoaib Bashir.

in the winter. Before the Sri Lanka series they beat West Indies 3-0.

"It'd be special to win 6-0 this summer," said Pope. "And I think winning's a habit, isn't it? So I think going forward it'll put us in good stead. And obviously we've got a lot more cricket to come."

Pope was asked whether taking on the captaincy was affecting his batting - he has mustered just 30 runs in four innings against Sri Lanka so far. "To be honest, I don't know," he said. "I think last week I played a pretty average shot in the first dig (innings), which could happen. But that's nothing to do with the captaincy."

England Test captain Ben Stokes has also welcomed McCullum being given additional charge of the country's limited-overs sides.

"I think it's an unbelievable move for English cricket to go back

to having one coach in charge of all the teams. You look at what Baz has achieved with the test side, it's been amazing," Stokes told *ESPNcricinfo*. McCullum, 42, has extended his contract to the end of 2027 and will take charge of the limited-overs sides when England tour India in January next year.

"I'm really excited for the white-ball team to have the opportunity to be able to work with Baz, listen to him speak, his opinions," Stokes said.

"All the new faces who are coming into that white-ball team now, I couldn't think of a better person for them to come in and work under at international level for the first time. I'm an England cricket fan and I couldn't think of a better person to be appointed to be the new coach of the white-ball team as well."

TWENTY20

Head slays Scotland in rapid Australia win

'THAT'S WHAT YOU EXPECT AGAINST ONE OF THE BEST SIDES IN THE WORLD'

AFP
Edinburgh

Travis Head smashed 80 off 25 balls as Australia chased down Scotland's 154 to win yesterday's T20 international in Edinburgh inside 10 overs.

Opener Head blitzed five sixes and 12 fours as Australia set the highest-ever T20 international first powerplay score of 113/1 for the opening six overs.

The tourists had lost a wicket without a run on the board as Jake Fraser-McGurk fell to a three-ball duck. But Head and captain Mitchell Marsh bludgeoned the Scotland attack.

Marsh smashed 30 off one over from Jack Jarvis, while Head reached his half century from just 17 balls.

Both fell to Mark Watt in the seventh over but by then the damage had already been done.

Wicketkeeper Josh Inglis was able to pick up the baton as his quick-fire unbeaten 27 helped earn Australia a seven-wicket victory with 62 balls to spare.

"It was nice for me and the captain to get some runs," Head told the BBC.

"It was a tricky start losing Jake, but always nice to have Mitch at

the other end, and my role is to maximise the powerplay - we did that."

Scotland came close to shocking the Aussies in the T20 World Cup in June, but struggled to build on a positive start with the bat.

George Munsey top scored for the hosts with 28, while Sean Abbott was the pick of the Australia bowlers with three for 39.

"That's what you expect against one of the best sides in the world," said Scotland captain Richie Berrington.

"We started pretty well with the bat, but unfortunately a few of us got in and didn't kick on. Credit to the Australian bowlers, they made it hard to get away and capitalise on that good start."

BRIEF SCORES
Scotland 154/9 in 20 overs (George Munsey 28; Sean Abbott 3-39) lost to **Australia 156/3 in 9.4 overs** (Travis Head 80, Mitchell Marsh 39; Mark Watt 2-13) by **7 wickets**.

Australia's batsman Travis Head hits the ball during the first Twenty20 International against Scotland at the Grange Cricket Club in Edinburgh, Scotland, yesterday. (AFP)



Bangladesh revels in 'Tigers burning bright' after Pakistan triumph

Bangladesh's new leader led the celebrations after a first-ever Test series win over Pakistan, with commentators calling it a victory to savour a month after unrest ousted the autocratic former premier. "Heartiest congratulations on behalf of the government and myself," 84-year-old Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohamed Yunus told captain Najmul Hossain Shanto in a phone call after the win on Tuesday. "The whole nation is proud of you," he added, according to a statement from the office of Yunus, after the 2-0 clean sweep over Pakistan was sealed with a tense six-wicket victory in Rawalpindi.

Yunus took over after Sheikh Hasina fled to India as protesters marched on her palace in Dhaka to end 15 years of iron-fisted rule. *The Dhaka Tribune* splashed across its front page a photograph of the grinning team above a signboard with the simple message: "Winners". "The Tigers are burning bright," the newspaper commented, praising an "emphatic victory." "There is genuine hope that, much as Bangladesh is experiencing a new beginning after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government on August 5, this could be the dawn of a new era for Bangladesh cricket," it added.

"This series win is emblematic of broader transformation within Bangladesh," it read, saying the victory embodied the "resilience, determination, and the spirit of a nation that wants to achieve more than what was expected of it".

Bangladesh won independence from Pakistan in 1971.

It was Shakib al Hasan, 37, who lost his job as a lawmaker for Hasina's Awami League party after the student-led revolution, who hit the winning runs on Tuesday to spark jubilation.

"We can't express feelings with words, we are really happy," said captain Najmul. "I think before we came here we were looking to win, and the way everyone did their job made me really happy." Dhaka's *Daily Star* newspaper called it a "surreal series victory" and "watershed moment." "A triumph spurred by belief," the *Star's* headline read.

"Inside two weeks, Bangladesh dragged themselves out of seemingly unwinnable positions, not once but twice, in foreign conditions against an opponent whom they had lost to 12 times out of 13 previous encounters in Tests," it added.

Bangladesh next travel to India for a two-match Test series beginning on September 18. Bangladesh have never won a Test against India in 13 attempts with Najmul calling it a "challenging series." But Bangladesh had similarly never beaten Pakistan in 14 matches before their first Test win by 10 wickets, which was also in Rawalpindi.

(AFP)

FOCUS

Pakistan cricket hits rock bottom with home defeats

AFP
Karachi

Pakistan cricket was reeling yesterday after its first-ever Test defeats against Bangladesh, the latest in a string of poor performances which have seen the game hit rock bottom.

The cricket-mad nation was left in despair after losing the second Test in Rawalpindi by six wickets on Tuesday as Bangladesh swept the series 2-0. It was the 10th winless home Test in a row for former powerhouses Pakistan and came hard on the heels of failing to get out of their groups at both the 50-over and T20 World Cups in the past year.

"It's a huge setback and our cricket is at a crossroads," former Pakistan captain and legendary fast bowler Wasim Akram told AFP. "For a former player and captain, and a lover of the game, I was left embarrassed at the way they have lost from good positions. I

simply don't get it. "We are losing consistently on home turf and that says a lot about the quality of our cricket," added Akram, who played 104 Tests and 356 one-day internationals for Pakistan. The defeat to Bangladesh comes hard on the heels of chastening losses against Afghanistan and the USA in the ODI and T20 World Cups respectively.

Pakistan also have a dismal record in Tests at home in the past three years - six defeats and four draws, including England's first-ever 3-0 series sweep there in 2022. Ominously, in-form England are Pakistan's next visitors and will play three Tests beginning in Multan on October 7.

Pakistan are not faring any better away from home, they lost all three Tests in Australia earlier this year - their sixth successive whitewash there since 1999.

"People have started to hate cricket," former international player and regional coach Basit Ali told AFP. "Bangladesh has shown us the mirror of what we are at in-

Pakistan fall to 8th in Test rankings

Pakistan fell to their worst Test ranking in nearly six decades yesterday, the International Cricket Council said, after their shock 2-0 series defeat to low-ranked Bangladesh. Bangladesh inflicted a six-wicket defeat on the home team in the second Test in Rawalpindi on Tuesday, their first series win against Pakistan. "Pakistan dropped two places - from sixth to eighth - in the Test rankings after suffering a shock series loss at home to Bangladesh," the International Cricket Council (ICC) said. The ICC said it was "their lowest rankings since 1965" in the 12-team table, which is topped by Australia followed by India and England. Bangladesh are ninth in the latest rankings.

international level. It's a cliché that wins and losses are part of the game, but this is a seismic shock."

Ali, who played 19 Tests and 50 ODIs for Pakistan, echoed the consensus among fans and commentators that the international team seems disjointed on the field. "Pakistan did not play as a unit and players looked scattered," he said. "It is sad and embarrassing to say that this is Pakistan's team."

The loss also saw the Pakistan side battered by the national press, which said disunity stemmed

from problems at the very top. "Pakistan team's rapid downward spiral has been alarming, to say the least," said the *Express Tribune* newspaper yesterday. The sequence of high-profile losses "makes the mind boggle," it added. The PCB is currently chaired by Mohsin Naqvi. "Since 1998, hand-picked favourites of the respective ruling regimes in the country have taken turns as PCB chairmen to run the game in their own clueless manner, only to ruin it," the *Express Tribune* said. Other

analysts also say frequent changes at the top of the PCB, which has had five chairmen in the past three years, have impeded progress.

"With the PCB's top management changing with every change of guard at political level, there is has been no consistent framework," said the *Dawn* newspaper.

There have also been constant switches of captains and coaching staff while the domestic system of tournaments has had countless overhauls. PCB chairman Naqvi himself called for "surgery in the system" after the T20 World Cup exit. "We need to fix our problems," he said last month. But when we look at how to resolve them, we don't have any solid data or player pool which we can draw from."

Akram echoed Naqvi's analysis. "The quality of our cricket has gone down with no grassroots activity, so we do not have proper back-ups," he said. "We have a lot to work on," Akram said. "As a cricket nation we have to be patient, that's the key. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix."

TENNIS / US OPEN

Muchova beats Haddad Maia to book semis berth

FRITZ STUNS FOURTH-SEEDED ZVEREV TO REACH SEMI-FINALS

Reuters
New York

Unseeded Czech Karolina Muchova, in only her sixth tournament back after suffering a wrist injury at the 2023 US Open, beat Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia 6-1 6-4 yesterday to reach the New York semi-final for a second consecutive year.

Muchova, who returned to action in June, needed medical treatment on multiple occasions during the second set but held on to dispatch the Brazilian 22nd seed in 85 minutes.

"A little weird match, I have to say," Muchova said in her on-court interview after reaching her fourth career Grand Slam semi-final.

"I had little problems, I wouldn't like to comment on it actually if it's fine. But I'm happy I managed it, to run to the bathroom and back. Sorry if it disturbed anyone, but I had no other choice."

Muchova made a fast start as she grabbed a 4-0 double break lead, held to love and, after Haddad Maia finally got on the board, closed out the opening set on serve.

Haddad Maia improved in the second set but Muchova, who suddenly began grabbing her hip between points, unleashed a backhand winner to break for a 3-2 lead before leaving the court with the physio.

The players exchanged breaks over the next two games before Muchova, after having the physio and doctor at her chair, held to reach 5-3 before taking advantage of new balls and sealing victory on her serve with an ace on her first match point.

"The new balls, it goes faster. You can put more spin so when I heard it was new balls (in the final game) I was actually pretty happy," said world number 52 Muchova after improving to 4-0 in career meetings with Haddad Maia.

"I was trying to put the first serves in. I knew it could make some problems so it was nice in the last game."

Haddad Maia, the first Brazilian woman to make the US Open quarter-finals since Maria Bueno in 1968, also required medical attention late in the match when she appeared to be having difficulty breathing.

TIAFOE, FRITZ BOOST HOME HOPES

Frances Tiafoe and Taylor Fritz set up an all-American US Open semi-final to boost home hopes of a title sweep. The 20th seed Tiafoe progressed when ninth-ranked Grigor Dimitrov suffered an injury in the third set of their quarter-final and quit in the fourth with the score at 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 4-1.

Tiafoe also made the last four in 2022 while Fritz reached his first Grand Slam semi-final by defeating fourth-seeded Alexander Zverev 7-6 (7/2), 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7/3).

With Tiafoe and Fritz clashing tomorrow, the US is guaranteed a home men's finalist for the first time since 2006 when Andy Roddick was defeated by Roger Federer. Roddick remains the last American man to capture a Grand Slam when he claimed the 2003 US Open.

"It's not the way I wanted to win even if I'm happy to get through to the semi-finals," said Tiafoe of Dimitrov's injury.

"It was a very high-level match. You're going to see me against another American, it's going to be great."



Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic reacts during her US Open quarter-final against Beatriz Haddad Maia of Brazil at USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center yesterday. (AFP)

"It will be the biggest match of our careers," Dimitrov, 33, sought treatment off court after the third set but was reduced to walking pace in the fourth as his hopes slipped away.

The Bulgarian was reluctant to discuss the specifics of his injury after a thigh problem forced him to also quit his last-16 match at Wimbledon in July.

"I think it's a combination from everything. I think there's really no point to talk about that. It's just the game, and I need to keep my head up," he said.

Zverev's defeat to Fritz means world number one Jannik Sinner is the only top-four player left in the men's draw following the shock early exits of Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz.

"I have had a few looks at Grand Slam quarter-finals over the years so I felt it was my turn to take a step further," said the 26-year-old Fritz, who cracked 12 aces amongst his 45 winners in his victory.

"It's cool I'm in the semis. But I very much have the mindset of the job's not done."

Germany's Zverev had been attempting to reach his ninth semi-final at the Slams and third in New York.

"Terrible. Just absolutely terrible by me," he said of his performance. "I did nothing to deserve the win, simple as that."

Meanwhile Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen was bidding to become the third Chinese woman to reach the US Open semi-finals after Li Na in 2013 and Peng Shuai in 2014. However, she was completely outplayed by Sabalenka in a 73-minute loss in which she hit just nine winners. Zheng said the record late finish to her last-16 clash which finished at 2:15am on Monday had impacted her performance. She said she only went to bed at 5:00am.

"I couldn't sleep after I finished the match 2:30 in the morning. I'm not able to practice yesterday because I was feeling terrible," said Zheng. The 26-year-old Sabalenka, runner-up to Coco Gauff in New York last year, will be playing in her fourth successive US Open semi-final and ninth at the Slams.

The Belarusian also defeated Zheng at the same stage of the US Open in 2023 before going on to beat the 21-year-old again in the Australian Open final in January. "It was important that I got the early break, that was an advantage because it's tough to face her," said Sabalenka.

CYCLING

Aussies reign in rainy Spain as Groves wins stage, O'Connor in lead

AFP
Santander, Spain

Kaden Groves won a thrilling sprint finish to take the 17th stage of the Vuelta a Espana as Australians dominated a rain-drenched day of racing through northern Spain yesterday.

Groves' fellow Australian Ben O'Connor of the Decathlon team held the overall race lead with a five-second advantage on Slovenian three-time champion Primoz Roglic. A third Australian Jay Vine of UAE Team Emirates held on to the polka-dot jersey for the best climber.

Groves, riding for the Alpecin Deceuninck team, piped Pavel Bittner of DSM with Belgian Vito Braet of Intermarche-Wanty third after the 142km run from Arnuero to Santander.

For Groves it was his third stage win in this year's race and seventh on the Vuelta.

With Belgian Wout Van Aert out of the race after suffering a painful knee injury on Tuesday, Groves is the favourite for the top sprinters green jersey.

"It was quite a tough day, starting dry and then the ma-

ajority of the finish wet," Groves told Eurosport at the finish.

"It made it quite dangerous out there. My team were so strong. They had a really super day. To repay them with win number three is pretty special."

Four riders had led the peloton for a long time, but Frenchmen Thomas Champion and Thibault Guernelec, Dane Jonas Gregaard and Spaniard Xavier Isasa were caught three kilometres from the line.

The fight for the leader's red jersey remains tight with O'Connor only five seconds ahead of Roglic with Spaniard Enric Mas third at 1min 25sec and Colombian Richard Carapaz fourth at 1:46.

"Tomorrow, even if we're talking about a transition stage again, we will surely have to control the race more because of probable breakaways but the final suits me rather well," said O'Connor.

Today's 18th stage heads east towards the Basque country for a medium mountain stage covering 179.5km to Maeztu before the decisive mountain top finishes tomorrow and Saturday and the final time-trial in Madrid on Sunday.



Team Alpecin's Kaden Groves (left) competes with Team DFP's Pavel Bittner and Team Intermarche's Vito Braet (centre) ahead of the finish line of the stage 17 of the Vuelta a Espana, a 141.5km race between Arnuero and Santander, yesterday. (AFP)

Messi missing from Ballon d'Or nominees, Spanish stars dominate

Lionel Messi will not win another Ballon d'Or this year after being left out of the nominees revealed by organisers yesterday, as stars of Spain's Euro 2024-winning team and Real Madrid's Champions League victors feature heavily. Messi claimed the eighth Ballon d'Or of his glittering career last year. Now aged 37, he is not among the 30 contenders this time despite winning another title with Argentina at the Copa America in July. The former Barcelona superstar, now playing club football in MLS for Inter Miami, was also missing from the nominees in 2022 when Karim Benzema took the honours. However, he returned to win last year after leading Argentina to glory at the World Cup in Qatar. The most prestigious individual award in football is voted for by a jury of journalists from each of the top 100 countries in FIFA's world ranking. Brazil forward Vinicius Junior is among the favourites and is one of six members of the Madrid team that won La Liga and the Champions League last season to be nominated. Jude Bellingham, Dani Carvajal, Toni Kroos, Antonio Ruediger and Fede Valverde are the others, while Kylian Mbappe - who left Paris Saint-Germain for Real over the close season - features too. Carvajal is among the contenders from the victorious Spain team alongside Alejandro Grimaldo, Dani Olmo, Rodri, Nico Williams and Lamine Yamal. Manchester City's Norwegian star Erling Haaland and England and Bayern Munich striker Harry Kane are on the list as well, but there is no place for five-time winner Cristiano Ronaldo, now 39. Xabi Alonso, who won the Bundesliga in an unbeaten season with Bayer Leverkusen, is among the favourites for best coach. His rivals include Real Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti and Spain's Luis de la Fuente. (AFP)

DIAMOND LEAGUE

Collisions and variables, 1500m stars ready to jockey for Zurich win

AFP
Zurich

Norway's Jakob Ingebrigtsen resumes his rivalry with Briton Josh Kerr at today's Diamond League meeting in Zurich, and the race promises to be a humdinger.

Rarely has an event been as keenly contested in recent seasons as the men's 1500m, Ingebrigtsen and Kerr accompanied in Switzerland by the American pair of Cole Hocker and Yared Nuguse.

Going into the Paris Olympics, the narrative had all been about Ingebrigtsen avenging his world championships loss to Kerr.

Even World Athletics president Sebastian Coe, himself a two-time Olympic 1500m champion and whose career involved an intense rivalry with Steve Ovett, dubbed the tug-of-war between the two tremendous for the sport.

"It has an added piquancy because this is probably not a friendship made in heaven," Coe said.

Kerr and Ingebrigtsen have traded barbs since the Scot swept past the Norwegian to snatch world gold in Budapest last year.

Ingebrigtsen has said that Kerr

"is known as the Brit who never competes".

Kerr for his part has said he thinks that Ingebrigtsen has some "major weakness" and flaws in the "manners realm".

Either way, both were upstaged at the Paris Games as the unheralded Hocker surged home for gold ahead of Kerr, Nuguse taking bronze ahead of Ingebrigtsen.

All four are present in Zurich in what will be one of the most hotly-anticipated post-Olympics showdowns.

"What makes it exciting is that we come out of our lanes and anything can happen," said Kerr.

"For the crowd, there's a lot of variables that can come into play with our distance. It's slightly longer than the 800m, a little more tactical, but also kind of pretty fast and pretty hard."

"It's the perfect distance to watch!"

Despite being twice pushed into world silver, Ingebrigtsen has long been the marked man when it comes to the 1500m.

"That's the position that everybody wants to be in," he argued.

"At the same time it's a unique position to be in where we can be quite a lot of runners all fighting for the same thing... have some



Britain's Josh Kerr celebrates after winning the men's 1500m final ahead of Norway's Jakob Ingebrigtsen during the World Athletics Championships in Budapest on August 23, 2023. (AFP)

good fights. That's what everybody wants to see."

Hocker added that it was "fas-

inating to see in the 1500m, no matter what race it is but even at the global stage, that everyone has

a different strength and a different way that they want to set themselves up best."

"It's interesting to see everyone come together and collide, and everyone just tries to win."

Ingebrigtsen, who beat Hocker in the Lausanne Diamond League, then went on to smash the 3,000m world record in Silesia.

But he picked up a virus after that, something he admitted did not make for great preparation for an all-out battle with three of his closest rivals. "Everyone told me I shouldn't be here," the Norwegian said. "I'll do as good as I can and do a good race."

"I'm here and I'm going to spend the next hours wisely and hopefully I'll be as good as I can tomorrow."

With Kerr and Ingebrigtsen barely able to look at each other during the pre-meet press conference, the Briton risked the wrath of the Norwegian when asked what the latter's strengths were.

"His dress sense," the Scot glibly deadpanned to a silent room.

Ingebrigtsen at least responded with a more humble answer, saying that Kerr gave "100% when it matters".

"Josh has been doing that since at least the Tokyo Olympics. So being able to make your best race when it really matters."

SPOTLIGHT

Sara aims for another Paralympics medal today in Paris

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's Sara Masoud will compete in the Women's Shot Put (F33 category) today at the Paralympic Games in Paris. The event will take place at Stade de France at 8:30pm Doha time. Sara, one of Qatar and the region's brightest stars in Paralympic sports, aims to add another accolade to her impressive record. She had previously secured a silver medal in shot put at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games.

Sara's successes extend beyond the Paralympics. She followed her Rio silver with another at the 2017 World Para Athletics Championships in London. At the 2014 Asian Para Games in Incheon, she claimed gold in both shot put and discus, and later won a silver medal in shot put at the 2018 Asian Para Games in Jakarta.

Her global achievements continued with silver medals in discus and javelin, along with a bronze in shot put, at the 2022 West Asian Para Games in Bahrain. In the 2024 edition held in Sharjah, Sara secured silver medals in discus and shot put, and a bronze in javelin. Ahead of her competition, Sara said she was determined to win another medal. She acknowledged that the competition will be tougher this time, with more athletes performing at a high level. However, Sara emphasised her readiness, having undergone an intensive training programme to prepare for this global event.

Meanwhile, her coach Walid Maghmoul stated that the training programme Sara underwent was successful by all measures and that she greatly benefited from participating in several championships held in recent months.



Sara Masoud with her coach Walid Maghmoul in Paris yesterday.

He added that his athlete is fully prepared to compete in the Paralympic Games and strongly contend for a medal. Regarding his expectations for the competition, Maghmoul pointed out that it will be extremely challenging due to the participation of many talented athletes

in this edition of the Games. Nevertheless, Maghmoul expressed his confidence in Sara's readiness to compete for another medal to add to her illustrious record.

He explained that Sara has shown significant improvement in her techniques and performance during recent training



Mohamed bin Yousef al-Mana, First Vice-President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, hosted a luncheon yesterday, in honour of the Qatar delegation participating at the Paris Paralympic Games. The luncheon was attended by Dr Hassan al-Ansari, Secretary-General of the Qatar Sports Federation for Special Needs and head of the delegation, athletes Ali Arshad and Sara Masoud, coaches Nabil al-Musalman, Walid Maghmoul, physiotherapist Anis Boughmoura and technical expert Mohamed Suhail.

sessions, which boosts her presence and chances of achieving positive results. He emphasised that the accompanying technical and medical staff are working hard to provide all the necessary conditions and environment to enable our athletes to deliver their best possible performances

during the Games. Dr Hassan al-Ansari, Secretary-General of the Qatar Paralympic Committee and head of the Qatari delegation at Paris Paralympics, expressed his confidence in Sara's ability to win a medal, especially given the great experience the athlete has in major championships.

MOTORSPORT

QMMF to host FIA and FIM Qatar Baja Cups

Sixth round of both the events will be held from October 30 to November 2

By Sports Reporter
Lusail

The 2024 Qatar International Baja has moved from March to new dates from October 30th to November 2nd and will play host to both the sixth rounds of the FIA World Baja Cup and the FIM Bajas World Cup and round two of the FIA Middle East Baja Cup.

The event is being organised by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) and will run under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai, Executive Director Amro al-Hamad and board member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari.

Clerk of the Course Pedro Almeida and his deputy Rashid al-Sulaiti have tweaked the timetable and laid on a challenging route across some of the most demanding desert terrain in Qatar. Administration and technical scrutineering will again be based at the Lusail Sports Complex.

The 9.9km Prologue stage will kick off the competitive action from 13.15hrs onwards on Thursday, October 31st before the ceremonial start takes centre stage from 19.20hrs. The spectacular Katara Amphitheatre – the gem of Katara Cultural Village – will host the start, pre and post-event press conferences and the final prize giving, as has been the case on one occasion in the past. As per the new regulations for FIA events, times set on the Prologue stage will merely determine starting positions for the following day and will not count towards the general classification.

FIA competitors will then tackle stages of 122.48km and 122.04km through the Qatar deserts separated by a regrouping on Friday, November 1st. FIM entrants will cross the same terrain for one stage in total with the two sections run in reverse order and separated by a neutralisation zone for refuelling.

All competitors will then tackle a 249.68km stage on Saturday (November



Qatari driver Nasser Saleh al-Attayah and his co-driver Mathieu Baumel won the Qatar International Baja with Toyota in 2023.

2nd), split by transfer zones, with the first of the motorcycles and quads starting 1hr 45min ahead of the leading FIA vehicles. There will be a refuelling point for FIM competitors after 125km with the second part of the stage being held entirely in the picturesque Sealine region to the south of Doha. In a compact route of 856.43km, FIA competitors will tackle 494.20 competitive kilometres. FIM entrants will follow a route of 888.50km with 504.64km timed against the clock.

The Baja replaced the longer Qatar Cross-Country Rally in 2022 and has become an integral member of both the international FIA and FIM calendars. Nasser Saleh al-Attayah and Mathieu Baumel claimed overall victory in the car category last year in a Toyota Hilux, young Pole Konrad Dabrowski won the motorcycle section for a second year in a row and Arnoud Dom of Belgium prevailed in the quads.

Meshari al-Thefiri (MCE-3 T3M) and Jeremie Warnia (Polaris) won the FIA T3 (now Challenger) and T4 (now SSV) categories.

Entries opened yesterday (September 4th) and will close at reduced rates on October 2nd with a final cut-off set for October 16th. The QMMF is offering generous concessions to competitors who pass both administration and scrutineering checks. Entrants in the FIA categories from the GCC will be offered a shipping allowance of \$3,000, with international entrants receiving \$6,000. Economy class air tickets will also be supplied by the QMMF for international entrants after entry fees have been paid, in addition to a twin room for five nights with breakfast.

FIA entrants who register before October 2nd will also be eligible for a QR10,000 start prize, provided they pass both administration and scrutineering checks with the figure reducing to QR8,000 thereafter until

October 16th. GCC motorcycle and quad riders will be eligible for \$1,500 and \$3,000 will be offered to international riders. FIM entrants who register before October 2nd will also be eligible for a QR5,000 start prize, provided they pass both administration and scrutineering checks with the figure reducing to QR4,000 thereafter until October 16th. Similar flight and hotel concessions will also be offered to FIM entrants.

For further event information, competitors and teams can contact Davy Patterson, Competitor Liaison Officer (CRO), E-mail: davyppatterson777@gmail.com and WhatsApp: +44 7980 613944.

For general information about the 2024 Qatar International Baja, contact the Qatar Motor and Motor Cycle Federation (QMMF), PO Box 8708, Doha, Qatar, Tel: + 974 443 79885, Fax: + 974 443 79732, E-mail: info@qmmf.com.qa, registration@qmmf.com.qa and www.qmmf.com

Napoli outcast Osimhen joins Galatasaray on loan

Istanbul: Napoli outcast Victor Osimhen has agreed a season-long loan with Galatasaray without an option to buy, the Turkish champions and the Italian club confirmed.

The 25-year-old Nigerian forward, who was welcomed by a crowd of fans on his arrival at Istanbul airport early this week, will be paid a salary of 6mn euros, the Turkish club said.

Napoli confirmed the loan until June 30, 2025, specifying that they had reached an agreement with Osimhen for a possible renewal of his contract until June 2027.

Osimhen had been agitating for a move away from Napoli after the club descended into chaos almost immediately after claiming their third league crown in 2023.

The team he fired to Serie A glory with 26 league goals left him off their squad list for this season, his place and number nine shirt taken by new arrival Romelu Lukaku.

Napoli went through three coaches last season and finished 10th in Serie A but Osimhen still managed to score 17 times in 32 appearances in all competitions.

Napoli looked set to cash in this summer after inserting a 130mn euro release clause when renewing Osimhen's contract in December. That deal, which gave Osimhen a reported net salary of 11mn euros, expires at the end of June 2026.

But neither Chelsea nor Paris Saint-Germain, nor Saudi Pro League outfit Al Ahli, came close to both meeting Napoli's valuation and satisfying Osimhen's wage requirements.

Meanwhile, Napoli have been building the team for new coach Antonio Conte, bringing in seven players to revamp a stale squad.

The Nigerian international will join former Napoli player, Belgian Dries Mertens, in Istanbul and will fill in for injured Argentinian Mauro Icardi.

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Palestine short on readiness for tough South Korea clash: Coach

Reuters
Seoul

Palestine remain hopeful of a positive result despite their disrupted preparation to face one of the best teams in Asia, coach Makram Daboub said ahead of today's World Cup qualifier against South Korea in Seoul.

Palestine are playing in the third stage of the 18-nation World Cup qualifiers for the first time and have a chance to claim one of Asia's eight guaranteed berths at the 2026 finals. Palestine finished second in their group behind leaders Australia in the previous round. They are required to play all their games abroad due to the ongoing Israel-Hamas war and have been training in Malaysia ahead of

the third round of qualifiers. Coach Daboub and Denmark-born forward Wessam Abou Ali raised concerns about their readiness, saying the suspension of Palestine's local leagues and constantly being on the road for training and matches has taken a toll on the squad.

"It's a big challenge, and our goal is to achieve a positive result. We faced difficulties in preparing for these games," Daboub told reporters yesterday ahead of their Group B opener.

"Most notably due to the delayed arrival of many players to the training camp and the lack of friendly matches. We have incomplete squad numbers and most players have not played with their clubs due to the league suspension."

The Palestine Football Association said at least 92 Palestinian players have been killed

in the war and their football infrastructure has been completely destroyed. "We resorted to closed camps to prepare the players physically and psychologically for the qualifiers and maintain their usual level of performance," Daboub added. "We are relying on the available best skilled players to get the points."

Daboub hailed South Korea, who have played in the last 10 editions of the World Cup and were semi-finalists when they co-hosted the tournament in 2002. "We will rely on our fighting spirit, passion and organisation to stop talented players such as Son Heung-min," he added. "I think the most important thing for us players is to create happiness for fellow Palestinian people who suffer more than some of us," Abou Ali added.

Palestine face Jordan next on September 10 in Kuala Lumpur.

Palestine coach Makram Daboub.

