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SPOTLIGHT

Weary Nadal calls time on 'incredible' tennis career

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2026 FIFA WORLD CUP QUALIFIER

Courageous Qatar beat Kyrgyzstan

The Asian champions post a resounding 3-1 victory at Al Thumama Stadium



Almoez Ali (right) and teammate Edmilson Jr celebrate a goal.



Qatar's Akram Afif in action at Al Thumama Stadium in Doha yesterday. **Pictures:** *Noushad Thekkayil*



Qatar players celebrate after their 3-1 win over Kyrgyzstan in Doha yesterday. **Below:** Qatar players after scoring a goal against Kyrgyzstan.



By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Asian champions Qatar yesterday added key points in their 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign as they beat Kyrgyzstan 3-1 at Al Thumama Stadium.

Winless prior to arriving for yesterday's home clash, Qatar saw striker Almoez Ali score from close range in 39th minute before Kyrgyzstan's Tamirlan Kozubaev deflected one into his own net while stopping an Akram Afif cross from the flank in the 63rd minute.

Despite being overwhelmed in the first half and less effective in the second, Kyrgyzstan pulled one back after a powerful strike into the top of the net in the 76th minute by Alimardon Shukurov.

Five minutes later, a Kyrgyzstan defender fumbled with an easy clearance close to the corner flag. The ball landed at Almoez's feet and the Qatari quickly sent in a through ball to unmarked 18-year-old Ibrahim al-Hassan who beat keeper Erzhan Tokotaev with a slick shot.

The 3-1 win, somewhat fortuitous, was a much-needed relief for coach Marquez Lopez, the man who guided Qatar to the Asian Cup title win just eight months ago.

Last month, UAE shocked hosts Qatar 3-1 before Al Annabi dropped points against DPR Korea in a 2-2 draw in an away tie on Sept 10.

Lopez yesterday sounded thrilled after the 3-1 win.

"The team played well. We made sure we had early dominance and control over the game. The players' dedication and determination to achieve the desired result was good to see," Lopez said yesterday.

"A win was our primary objective from the outset. I was impressed by the team's ability to maintain pressure on Kyrgyzstan throughout the first half," he said.

"The three points earned in this match provide a crucial boost to Qatar's qualification hopes. The importance of these points can't be understated. The team's goal is to avoid dropping any points and strive for positive results in every match we play. We need to maintain our focus in each encounter given the challenging nature of the qualifiers.

"The upcoming match against Iran is a particularly difficult test. Hard work and dedication to secure the necessary points is what we want," Lopez said after the match.

Qatar dominated the early stages of the match yesterday, with several close attempts to break the deadlock. Almoez and Abdulaziz Hatem had a chance to deflect a cross in the second minute while Afif's shot from inside the box was blocked for a corner in the third.

Abdelkarim Hassan's left-footed drives from long range in the fifth and seventh minutes failed to find the target, and Edmilson Jr's shot from a distance in the ninth also went wide.

Afif's free-kick narrowly missed the goal post in the 12th minute and Hassan's sliding tackle on a cross from inside the Kyrgyz box in the 16th lacked pace.

Kyrgyzstan's first real attack came in the 16th minute when Joel Kojo's powerful shot went off target. Qatar continued to press forward, with Ismail Mohammed finding Edmilson in the 19th minute, but the latter failed to connect properly. Bualem Khoukhi's snap-header from inside the Kyrgyz box in the 23rd minute narrowly missed the goalmouth.

Keeper Meshaal Barshim made a crucial save at the half-hour mark, stopping a deflected shot by Kojo from close range following a long run into the Qatar box. The match remained scoreless until the 39th minute with hosts Qatar dominating possession but struggling to convert their chances.

The breakthrough came in the 39th minute. Almoez, Qatar's talismanic striker, capitalized on a fortunate deflection off the crossbar after a header by Abdelrahman Fahmi. Almoez used his thigh to deflect the ball into an unguarded net.

The second half saw a more physical and intense battle between the two sides. Kyrgyzstan increased their attacking efforts, but Qatar's defence remained resolute. The visitors had a few promising moments, but they were unable to break down Qatar's organised rearguard.

Despite numerous attempts from both teams, the score remained unchanged until the final whistle. Qatar's better finish proved to be decisive, securing a vital three points in their quest for future success.



Fans at the Al Thumama Stadium watch the Qatar vs Kyrgystan match in Doha yesterday.



Qatar vs Iran to be played in UAE, says AFC

KUALA LUMPUR: The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) confirmed yesterday that the World Cup qualifier Group A match on October 15 between Iran and Qatar will be played at a neutral venue in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The decision to host the match at a neutral venue was taken after careful consideration of the prevailing security situation and in consultation with FIFA and the relevant stakeholders. The match will kick off at 8pm local time and details regarding the specific venue in the UAE will be updated in due course.

CRICKET

MATCH REPORT

Records tumble as Brook, Root guide England to 823 before Pakistan collapse

Pakistan's top order fails to get going in the second innings and the hosts end day four on 152-6





England's Harry Brook acknowledges the spectators as he walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal during the fourth day of the first Test against Pakistan at the Multan Cricket Stadium yesterday. **Right:** England's Gus Atkinson (centre) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Pakistan's captain Shan Masood. *(AFP)*

Reuters
Multan

England notched up their highest total in 86 years thanks to Harry Brook's triple century and Joe Root's double ton, declaring on 823-7 before Pakistan collapsed to a perilous position on the fourth day of the first Test yesterday.

Pakistan's top order failed to get going in the second innings and the hosts ended day four on 152-6, trailing England by 115 runs as the tourists set themselves up for a famous win after a Herculean batting effort.

"There's very much a chance of a result in this game. We've got still got a lot of hard work to do but off the back of the way that we've played so far in this test match, we've got a real opportunity tomorrow if we get things right," Root said.

Pakistan's Salman Agha (40) and Aamer Jamal (27) were at the crease at stumps, with England in the driver's seat heading into the final day in Multan.

With England leading by 267, Chris Woakes steamed in and took a wicket off the first ball as a fatigued Abdullah Shafique, who had been on the field for 150 overs, played a tired shot as the fast bowler rattled his off stump.

Gus Atkinson then got in on the act with the wickets of skipper Shan Masood and Babar Azam, whose poor form continued with the batsman not having scored a fifty in nine tests.

Brydon Carse also dismissed Saim Ayub with his first ball when the set batter played a poor shot for a catch before the debutant cleaned up Mohammad Rizwan with a delivery that nipped back in to leave Pakistan reeling at 59-5.

Saud Shakeel was caught behind off Jack Leach before Agha and Jamal stitched together an unbeaten 70-run stand.

FOURTH-HIGHEST SCORE

Resuming on 492-3, England went past Pakistan's 556 to build a handy first innings lead of 267 runs thanks to Brook's 317 after Root's 262 as they ground the tired hosts to dust on another hot day.

It was the highest score for both batsmen during a 454 run-partnership – the fourth-highest in tests – on the flat track at the Multan Cricket Stadium while also the highest partnership in England's test history.

"The way Harry's played, how quickly he was able to score once he got past 200, has put us in such a strong position so it was great fun out there," Root added. "We're dealing with conditions that are still alien to us, we don't play in heat like this very often, there are different skills that you need to manage – like reverse swing – slightly different balance to what you get back in the UK."

Root eventually departed lbw during the second session to one that kept low from Agha.

Brook, however, moved through the gears to score the second-fastest triple ton of all time in 310 balls and he became the sixth Englishman to achieve the milestone.

He is also England's first triple centurion in 34 years. Six bowlers conceded more than 100 runs for only the second time in test history.

The record-breaking partnership also marked only the third time two players scored more than 250 in a test innings.

MARATHON INNINGS

Brook's marathon innings finally ended when a miscued sweep off Ayub went straight to Masood.

Root, who eclipsed Alastair Cook as England's top test runscorer on Wednesday, picked up from where he left off and became the first batsman from his country to make 20,000 international runs in the morning session with a driven boundary.

The former captain was dropped on 186 and he made the most of it to reach his sixth double century with a single before celebrating by kissing the badge on his helmet.

In reaching the milestone, Root went past Cook again with only Wally Hammond ahead of him in England's list with seven double tons.

Brook then became the latest member of the club to delight the visiting fans, who were then cheering when Root eased to his 250 with a scooped boundary in the same over bowled by Naseem Shah.

Replays showed that the ball had struck the flap of Root's back pad but the 33-year-old did not complain and went on to better his previous best of 254 before he went shortly after lunch.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 4)
Pakistan 556 and 152 for 6 (Salman 41*, Atkinson 2-28) **trail England 823 for 7 dec** (Brook 317, Root 262, Duckett 84, Crawley 78) **by 115 runs**
Toss: Pakistan

COMMENT

England runs record will mean lot more with Test victory in Multan, says record-breaker Root

Reuters
Multan

Joe Root became England's all-time top run scorer after he surpassed batting great Alastair Cook during the first Test against Pakistan but the former captain put celebrations on the back-burner yesterday as they wait to seal a famous victory.

Root's patient 262 in the first innings, combined with Harry Brook's blockbuster near-run-a-ball 317 propelled England to a mammoth total of 823-7 before they declared – their highest test total since the second World War.

Root's knock has placed him fifth on the all-time list with 12,664 runs and Cook also backed his former teammate to surpass Indian icon Sachin Tendulkar's record of 15,921 runs.

But Root's first priority is the Test match with Pakistan reeling at 152-6. A result, that once looked improbable after nearly 1,400 runs were scored in the first innings on a flat track, now seems possible after Pakistan's top order collapse.



England's head coach Brendon McCullum (second right) and other teammates greet Joe Root at the end of first session during the fourth day of the first Test against Pakistan at the Multan Cricket Stadium yesterday. *(AFP)*

"They (records) are pretty cool things. It would mean a lot more if we can win this Test match. You look at the situation where they had 556 on the scoreboard and to be ahead in the game is the best thing," Root told the *BBC*.

"It doesn't mean a lot at the moment. I feel like I am going to play a lot more cricket for England. It's obviously nice and I am sure when I finish my career, I will look back and feel good about it.

"It will be a nice thing to look back on at the right time. I want to contribute for a long while and make big scores like this one and hopefully win more Test matches for England."

The celebrations were muted and the 33-year-old said there was a lack of emotion partly due to the heat.

"Just the amount of energy that is taken out of you playing in these conditions is huge. It's been quite pleasing to acclimatise and just drawing that mental resilience," Root added.

"I make sure I do the work and put myself in some really tough situations in training so that I am really ready for these conditions. I know I can bat for long periods of time and when it gets tough, I can get through it."

His 454 run-partnership with Brook is the fourth-highest in Tests and Root said his fellow Yorkshireman was 'outstanding' with his triple-ton.

"Everyone who spends time on the wicket has looked good and made the most of a good batting wicket. It was nice for us to get together and keep the partnership going," he said.

"I think we keep each other going," he said.

"We have a good laugh out there in the middle. We've played a lot of cricket together whether it be for Yorkshire or for England. He's fun to play with."

FOCUS

Triple centurion Brook 'happy' to break Dad's club record score of 210

AFP
Multan, Pakistan



England's rising batting star **Harry Brook** said he was delighted he had finally eclipsed his father's highest club score, when he hit a triple hundred against Pakistan in Multan yesterday.

The 25-year-old smashed a career best 317 that, coupled with Joe Root's 262, helped visitors pile 823-7 declared – fourth highest total in all Test cricket – England's third best.

With a big 267-run lead over Pakistan in the first innings, England then caught the home team napping at 152-6.

At close, Pakistan still needed 115 to avoid an innings defeat on the final day today.

Brook said his father's highest score was the target.

"I just wanted to get past my dad's high score 210," said Brook of his father David's score in a club match for Burnley in 2001.

Brook had missed a chance of surpassing dad's best when he scored 186 against New Zealand at Wellington last year.

"I said that to you guys before, I was pretty happy when I got past his score, to be honest."

Brook said he was satisfied to contribute in team's strong position.

"I am lost for words, to be honest," Brook said.

"I'm just happy that the team's in a in a strong position to win the game tomorrow morning. It's an incredible thing."

Brook and Root enjoyed a run feast on a flat Multan stadium pitch, adding a big 454 for the fourth wicket, England's highest partnership in Tests.

It eclipsed the 411-run fourth-wicket partnership by Peter May and Colin Cowdrey against the West Indies at Birmingham in 1957.

"It was wonderful batting with Rooty," said Brook. "We spoke about the game moving forward and going out there after lunch to try and put the foot down and get a decent lead."

"It makes you feel so comfortable when you're watching him at the other end, he makes the game look so easy, and he's playing the ball so late and making the balls look slow."

Brook completed his triple century with a boundary off part-timer Saim Ayub, reaching the mark off 310 balls before he top-edged a sweep off the same bowler and was caught by Shan Masood.

Brook cracked 29 fours and three sixes in his 439-minute stay at the crease.

It was Brook's sixth Test century and his fourth against Pakistan following his three in as many Tests when England routed Pakistan 3-0 in 2022.

WEST INDIES BEAT BANGLADESH BY 8 WICKETS AT WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

Sharjah, UAE: Off-spinner Karishma Ramharack took four wickets as West Indies cantered to an eight-wicket win over Bangladesh yesterday to strengthen their chances of making it to the semi-finals of the Women's T20 World Cup.
Ramharack, 29, struck at regular intervals to help West Indies restrict Bangladesh to a below-par 103-8 off 20 overs in Sharjah.
West Indies raced to the target in just 12.5 overs on a slow track in Sharjah.
"It was quite slow early on and I felt like you had to vary your pace as much as possible," said Ramharack, named player of the match. "We knew that they have a couple of batters who could hit the ball really well, we just had to stay patient."
Skipper Hayley Matthews gave West Indies a flying start as they raced to 48-0 off the first six overs of powerplay. Her quickfire 34 runs came with the help of six fours before she was bowled by pacer Marufa Akter. Stafanie Taylor retired hurt on 27 but by then West Indies had the game firmly in their control. Deandra Dottin (19 not out) smashed two sixes in the 13th over to seal the key game for her team. Put in to bat, Bangladesh struggled against some disciplined bowling.

BRIEF SCORES
Bangladesh 103-8 in 20 overs (Nigar Sultana 39, Dilara Akter 19; Karishma Ramharack 4-17) **v West Indies 104-2 in 12.5 overs** (Hayley Matthews 34, Stafanie Taylor 27; Marufa Akter 1-20)
Result: WI won by 8 wickets

SHANGHAI MASTERS

Machac knocks out Alcaraz, sets up Sinner semis

Sinner scored a straightforward win over an injured Medvedev

AFP
Shanghai

World number two Carlos Alcaraz was knocked out of the Shanghai Masters in straight sets by 33rd-ranked Tomas Machac yesterday, losing 7-6 (7/5), 7-5.

The Czech will face world number one Jannik Sinner in the semi-finals, after a surprisingly straightforward 6-1, 6-4 victory over an injured Daniil Medvedev earlier. Alcaraz's match came shortly after his idol and compatriot Rafael Nadal announced he would retire after the Davis Cup finals in November.

"Honestly I couldn't believe it," said Alcaraz, but insisted it hadn't affected his playing. "Thankfully I saw it one hour before the match, so I had time to accept it and forget it."

The 21-year-old said to see Nadal "leave tennis, which is what he loves, is painful", adding it was "difficult news for everyone".

Alcaraz was stunned by 23-year-old Machac's hard-hitting pace. "His level was so high, I thought he was going to give me a window of opportunity, but he didn't... It was unbelievable. It was crazy for me," the four-time Grand Slam champion said afterwards.

The Czech edged him out in a closely fought first-set tiebreak after neither player was able to break their opponent's serve. The Spaniard looked like he might make a comeback when he broke in the sixth game of the second set to level.

However, Machac powered through and broke Alcaraz again in the 11th game to claim the shock victory and progress to the semi-finals. "I knew that against Alcaraz I have to play at this level to have a chance to win," said Machac, saying there were "no other options".

He said he would try more of the same against Sinner. "He's playing unbelievable tennis... but I'm really looking forward to the challenge, so I will enjoy it," Machac said.

Sinner, who Alcaraz beat in the China Open final last week, looked strong from the beginning of his match against Medvedev. This was the fifth time the two have met in the latter stages of tournaments this year, and the Italian has won four of those clashes.

In the first set, which lasted only 25 minutes, the Italian broke Medvedev in the second and sixth games to murmurs of surprise from the crowd. The Russian kept holding his shoulder, which he had said the day before had "some niggles", and received medical attention several times during the match.



Czech Republic's Tomas Machac reacts after winning against Spain's Carlos Alcaraz at the Shanghai Masters yesterday. *(AFP)*

"The energy of a winner, I would say today I didn't have it unfortunately because of my physical condition," said Medvedev. "And that's going to be the focus to try to get it back. He didn't play at his best," said Sinner, acknowledging the injury. But this can happen and I took advantage of that today. I felt like I was playing some good tennis, especially the first set, trying to keep going in the second set. It was a good performance from my side."

HOME HOPES ZHENG AND WANG THROUGH TO LAST-EIGHT IN WUHAN

Zheng Qinwen and Wang Xinyu kept Chinese hopes alive as they swept into the last eight of the WTA Wuhan Open at home yesterday.

Fifth seed Wang ousted US Open finalist Jessica Pegula 6-3, 7-5 while Olympic champion Zheng rallied past Canada's Leylah Fernandez 5-7, 6-3, 6-0. Top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka, a two-time Wuhan champion, and freshly-crowned China Open champion Coco Gauff also advanced to the quarter-finals.

Zheng has had an incredible stretch of results since losing in the Wimbledon first round in July, winning 22 of the 25 matches she has contested. The 22-year-old was made to work in her last-16 clash, needing two hours and 29 minutes to see off Fernandez, also 22.

Zheng, who is inching closer to a qualification spot at the season-ending WTA finals in Riyadh, will square off with Italian third seed Jasmine Paolini for a semi-final berth.

Earlier in the day, Wang upset second seed Pegula to reach her first ever WTA 1000 quarter-final. Wang, 23, punished Pegula's second serve, breaking the American four times for just the second top-10 victory of her career – both against Pegula this season.

Belarus' Sabalenka avoided an upset, pulling through 1-6, 6-4, 6-0 against Kazakh Yulia Putintseva, to maintain her perfect record at the tournament with a 14th straight win. The No. 2 set up a last-eight showdown with Magdalena Frech, who beat Beatriz Haddad Maia in straight sets. Gauff extended her current winning streak to eight matches with a routine 6-4, 6-1 victory over Ukrainian 13th seed Marta Kostyuk. Fourth-seeded Gauff next plays Poland's Magda Linette.

SPOTLIGHT

QREC's Start-Of-Season Auction at Al Uqda

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) is organising the Start-Of-Season Auction at Al Uqda Equestrian Complex today. The auction will start at 3:30pm.

Ninety-four horses will be exhibited for sale during the auction and they will be inspected by the interested bidders, starting 1pm today. Then, the bidders will receive numbers to use during the auction for purchases according to their individual requirements and the quality of the horses on offer.

The auction coincides with the approaching local season of both Arabian horse shows and the race meetings at both Al Rayyan and Al Uqda racecourses.

It is, therefore, represents an opportunity for horse owners and trainers to acquire horses for the shows and the race meetings of the new approaching season, following the races sponsored by QREC overseas.

The horses, which will be exhibited during the auction, include both purebred Arabians for shows as well as other Arabians and thoroughbreds for racing. The minimum price at the beginning of the sales is QR2,000.

QREC Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club does not bear any responsibility towards any seller or buyer in any auction procedure as the QREC's role is limited to regulatory procedures only. The conditions of the Auction apply in the event of any dispute between a seller and a buyer.

The Start-Of-Season Auction catalogue is ready and will be available for everyone present at the Auction today. It contains full details of all the horses exhibited for sale to owners or trainers according to supply and demand and their respective opportunities to benefit from such horses in the coming horse shows and race meetings.



Ninety-four horses will be exhibited for sale during the auction.

Qatar Olympic Committee to host Community Boxing Championship

Doha: The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), in collaboration with the Qatar Boxing Federation, will host the first edition of its community boxing championship today at Oasis Square in Mall of Qatar. The event, scheduled from 4pm to 7pm, will feature participants in three age categories: Juniors (ages 15-16), Youth (ages 17-18), and Seniors (ages 19-40).

Alongside the boxing matches, there will be engaging competitions and prizes for the public, including activities for children.

Salah al-Saadi, Assistant Director of the Sports Events Department at the QOC, noted that the championship aims to promote sports for all and foster connections between various segments of Qatari society and residents, in line with the committee's vision: "To Become a Leading Nation in Bringing the World Together Through Sustainable Sports Development."

"Boxing is a vital sport for building self-confidence and self-discipline. It enhances muscle endurance, reduces stress, and offers numerous physical and health benefits," al-Saadi added.

This tournament is part of the Qatar Olympic Committee's 2024 community events program, designed to raise awareness of the importance of inclusive sports and to promote boxing as a valuable self-defence sport. The QOC's calendar features over seventy local and international events each sports season, reaffirming Doha's status as a global sports capital.

TRAGIC

Football mourns Greek defender Baldock's shock death at 31

AFP
Athens

Greek football was in shock yesterday at the death of Panathinaikos and Greece international **George Baldock**, with tributes uniting even the country's usually hostile rival fans. The 31-year-old English-born right-back – a former Sheffield United stalwart in the Premier League – was found dead on Wednesday evening in a swimming pool at his home in the southern Athens suburb of Glyfada. "We can confirm that George has sadly passed away. As a family we are in shock at this terrible loss," his family said in a statement.

An autopsy showed that Baldock had died by drowning. Toxicology tests are still pending. News of Baldock's death dominated social media with the top-flight Super League and clubs sending condolences even before Panathinaikos posted their own statement. Even fans from clubs hostile to Panathinaikos expressed grief at the loss of a genuinely well-liked player. ERT reported that Baldock was "at the bottom of the pool" and that a bottle of vodka was found at the scene.

Panathinaikos owner Giannis Alafouzos urged media to show "respect" after one morning talk show aired drone footage of Baldock's pool, and another described the house's size and its monthly rent. "We hope we will not find ourselves in the unpleasant position of taking legal action to protect George's memory," Alafouzos said in a statement.

State news agency ANA said Baldock's wife, who is abroad, alerted the owner of the residence after unsuccessfully trying to reach the player on the phone. As police cars and an ambulance were dispatched to the scene, several Panathinaikos players gathered outside the building and a coroner was called.

ERT said that the player had been dead for about five hours when he was found, and that foul play was not suspected as the body showed no injuries. The apartment also showed no evidence of forced entry. Baldock joined Panathinaikos in May after a seven-year spell with Sheffield United, relegated from the English Premier League to the Championship last season. Of Greek origin through his father, he was called up by the Greek national team in 2022 by then-manager Gus Poyet.

Poyet said he was "devastated" by the news. UEFA said the European football community was "deeply saddened". Baldock had 12 caps, but had not been selected for the team's Nations League match against England at Wembley because of injury, ERT said.



The Greek federation called Baldock "one of our own" and has requested that Greece's players wear black armbands for the game. Baldock had featured for Panathinaikos in a 0-0 draw with Olympiacos in a Greek Super League match on Sunday where he played for 75 minutes.

The club's training sessions were cancelled. Both the Greece team's official website and his club's social media sites on X and Facebook, were blackened in tribute to the player. Messages of support poured in from Premier League clubs including Manchester City, Liverpool and Chelsea, who face Panathinaikos in Conference League action later this month.

Manchester United's England international defender Harry Maguire, a former Sheffield United player, posted "RIP" and a heartbreak emoji alongside an image of Baldock on Instagram. Sheffield United changed their homepage to a black and white photo of their former player with the words: "RIP George Baldock."

"Sheffield United Football Club is shocked and extremely saddened to learn of the passing of former player, George Baldock," said the club.

Baldock's boyhood club MK Dons said they were "deeply devastated and saddened" while Northampton, where he had a loan spell in 2011, also paid tribute. Baldock was nicknamed "Furious George" by Sheffield United fans in tribute to his uncompromising style. "I just love winning. I hate losing and I even hate drawing," he told local media.

FOOTBALL

Japan beat Saudi Arabia to stay perfect in World Cup qualifying



Japan's Daichi Kamada (right) celebrates after scoring during the 2026 World Cup qualification match against Saudi Arabia at King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Dubai

Japan maintained their 100 percent record in the third round of qualification for the 2026 World Cup with a 2-0 win against Saudi Arabia in Jeddah yesterday. Asia's top-ranked side took the lead on 14 minutes in front of more than 56,000 fans at King Abdullah Sports City, when Crystal Palace midfielder Daichi Kamada finished from close-range following good work from Brighton's Kaoru Mitoma.

Japan then made the result safe eight minutes from time, substitute Koki Ogawa heading home Junya Ito's corner. The victory lifts Japan, who have qualified for the past seven World Cup finals, to nine points from three games in Group C. They host Australia in Saitama on Tuesday. Saudi Arabia, managed by the under-fire Roberto Mancini, slip to third.

Earlier, the Socceroos came from behind to defeat China 3-1 and resurrect their qualifying campaign to ensure Tony Popovic's reign as coach got off to a winning start. Goals from Lewis Miller, Craig Goodwin and debutant Nishan Velupillay sealed the win for the hosts, who had gone behind in the 20th minute through Xie Wenneng's goal.

Australia jumped above Bahrain into third in the group on goal difference, after the 2019 Gulf Cup champions were held to a 2-2 draw at home by Indonesia. Only the top two in the six-team group secure direct passage to the 2026 World Cup, with the third- and fourth-placed countries facing another qualifying phase.

In Group B, South Korea were not deterred by the absence of captain and superstar Son Heung-min as they won 2-0 against Jordan in Amman to maintain their unbeaten start to the third round. Son, who sustained an injury last week for Tottenham in the Europa League, did not travel with his national team to Jordan.

But his absence was not keenly felt as South Korea prevailed through goals from Mainz midfielder Lee Jae-sung and Genk forward Oh Hyeon-gyu. The win, which offered coach Hong Myung-bo some much-needed relief, moved South Korea to seven points from nine in the group.

South Korea are top of the pool on goal difference ahead of current Gulf champions Iraq, who defeated Palestine 1-0 in Basra. Aymen Hussein got the game's only goal to move into the top five in Iraq's all-time scoring charts, with 29 goals.

Meanwhile, Oman stunned Kuwait 4-0 in Muscat to get off the mark in the group. In Group A, Uzbekistan held the much-fancied Iran to a goalless draw in Tashkent to lead the standings, with Amir Ghalenoei's side second. The UAE are third after they were held to a 1-1 draw at home to North Korea.

LEGEND

Weary Nadal calls time on 'incredible' tennis career

The 38-year-old is set to end his two decades as a professional with 92 titles and $135mn in prize money

AFP
Paris

Rafael Nadal yesterday announced he will retire after the Davis Cup finals in November, ending a career which brought 22 Grand Slam titles, global respect and inspired epic, iconic rivalries with Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic.

"I am retiring from professional tennis. The reality is that it has been some difficult years, these last two especially," Nadal said in a video on social media. "It is obviously a difficult decision, one that has taken me some time to make. But in this life everything has a beginning and an end."

The 38-year-old Spaniard is set to end his two decades as a professional with 92 titles and prize money alone of $135mn, indisputably one of the greatest tennis players in history. "What a career, Rafa! I always hoped this day would never come," said 20-time Grand Slam champion Federer. "Thank you for the unforgettable memories and all your incredible achievements in the game we love. It's been an absolute honour!"

Current world number one Jannik Sinner said Nadal's departure from the sport was "tough news for the tennis world", but it comes after another injury-plagued season. After being limited to four matches in 2023, Nadal returned from a year out in January but missed the Australian Open with a muscle tear.

He made his comeback at Barcelona in April and reached his first final in two years on the clay of Bastad in July. Nadal though lost in the first round of the French Open to Alexander Zverev, making an emotional goodbye to Grand Slam tennis, before he was swept aside on the same Philippe Chatrier court by Djokovic at the Olympics.

His last appearance was a doubles quarter-final loss alongside Carlos Alcaraz at the Paris Games. "Thank you so much for being an example on every level, your legacy is incomparable," Alcaraz wrote on social media.

Nadal's farewell will come next month in Malaga, teaming up again with Alcaraz in the Spain squad as he bids to sign off with a sixth Davis Cup triumph. "I think it's the appropriate time to put an end to a career that has been long and much more successful than I could have ever imagined," said Nadal. "But I am very excited that my last tournament will be the final of the Davis Cup and representing my country. I think I've come full circle," added Nadal, who won the Davis Cup for the first time as a teenager in 2004.

Nadal dominated the French Open where he won 14 of his majors, his first arriving just days after his 19th birthday in 2005, his last in 2022 briefly making him the event's oldest champion before Djokovic broke the record. On the famous crushed brick of Roland Garros, he lost just five times in 118 matches.

He was also a four-time champion at the US Open and a two-time winner at the Australian Open, his first triumph coming in 2009; his second 13 years later. Nadal also won Wimbledon twice, in 2008 and 2010 even though grass seemed to be the surface most likely to expose any shortcomings in his game.

His five-set victory over Federer in the 2008 championship match, which ended in almost complete darkness at the All England Club, is widely regarded as the greatest Slam final ever played. Nadal claimed a career Golden Slam when he took Olympic gold in 2008.

He was a five-time year-end world number one and never left the top 10 from 2005 until March last year. In total, he spent 209 weeks in top spot and between 2004 and 2022, won at least one title every year. In his long rivalry with close friend Federer, who retired two years ago, he enjoyed a 24-16 edge. Nadal surpassed Federer's mark of 20 majors in Australia in 2022.

He and Djokovic, the all-time leader with 24 men's Grand Slam titles, met 60 times with the Serb ahead by two. Despite his record-breaking career, Nadal was plagued by injuries, a painful by-product of his all-action, brutal-hitting style.

Ankle, wrist, knee, elbow and abdominal problems caused him to sit out 18 Grand Slam tournaments and withdraw mid-event on five occasions at the majors. Nadal has for years suffered from a problem in his foot called Muller-Weiss syndrome, a rare and degenerative condition affecting bones in the feet.

At the 2022 French Open, he admitted that his title charge would have been impossible without daily pain-killing injections in his foot. Nadal then underwent a medical procedure which required nerves in the foot to be burned to allow him to extend his career.

However, the creaks in the body were getting louder. An abdominal strain forced him out of Wimbledon where he had made the semi-finals. He was then struck down with a hip injury at the Australian Open the following January as he crashed out in the second round – his earliest exit at the majors in seven years.

Nadal possibly sensed the writing was on the wall at the 2022 Laver Cup in London when he played alongside Federer in the great Swiss star's final tournament. The two men wept and even grasped each other's hands as the Federer era ended. "When Roger leaves the tour, an important part of my life is leaving too," said Nadal.



NADAL FACTFILE

Name: Rafael Nadal
Date of birth: June 3, 1986
Place of birth: Manacor, Spain
Professional debut: 2001
Career earnings: $134.9 mn

CAREER
ATP titles: 92
Grand Slams: 22
Australian Open (two titles) 2009, 2022
French Open: (14 titles) 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022)
Wimbledon: (two titles) 2008, 2010
US Open: (four titles) 2010, 2013, 2017, 2019
Olympic gold: 2008 (singles), 2016 (doubles)
Davis Cup: (five titles) 2004, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2019
Weeks as world No 1: 209
No 1. in the world at the end of 2008, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2019



This combination of pictures shows Spain's Rafael Nadal posing with the trophies of his 22 Grand Slam victories. *(AFP)*

Al-Attiyah closes in on World Rally-Raid title



Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah took another step towards securing his third FIA World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC) title, finishing fourth in the penultimate stage of the 2024 Rallye du Maroc yesterday while maintaining his overall lead. Driving their new vehicle, al-Attiyah and French co-driver Edouard Boulanger, representing Dacia Sandriders, extended their lead to 9:12 seconds over their nearest rival Guillaume de Mevius of the X-raid Mini JCW team.

Yesterday's Stage 4 victory went to Ford's Carlos Sainz, with Saudi driver Yazeed al-Rajhi of Toyota Overdrive taking second place, and Guerlain Chicherit of the X-raid Mini JCW team finishing third.

Al-Attiyah, the current FIA W2RC leader, is on the verge of claiming his seventh Rallye du Maroc victory. Reflecting on the stage, he said, "Today was a very good day. We played it safe throughout the race. We caught up with de Mevius, who was tough to overtake in the dust, but we made our move in the camel grass. Our Sandrider is performing really well, and it seems we're on track for the final stage. We've been leading since Monday, and we'll give it our best tomorrow. Honestly, I'm surprised everything's going so well with a brand-new car."

Heading into the final day of the season, al-Attiyah holds a 32-point lead over his closest challenger, al-Rajhi, with 35 points still up for grabs. The overall Rallye du Maroc winner will earn 30 points, while today's stage winner will secure an additional five points. Additionally, the top five W2RC competitors will receive points (5 for first place, 4 for second, 3 for third, 2 for fourth, and 1 for fifth).

While al-Attiyah is in a strong position to clinch his third W2RC title, al-Rajhi could still take the championship if he wins the final stage and al-Attiyah finishes outside the top five.

In the Challenger category, Qatar's Khalifa al-Attiyah and navigator Enio Bozzano finished fourth yesterday while Abdulaziz al-Kuwari and Nasser Saadoon al-Kuwari came in 11th position. Ahmed al-Kuwari was 14th.

TRIBUTE

"Thank you for the unforgettable memories", Federer on Nadal

Rafael Nadal's old adversary and friend Roger Federer led an outpouring of good wishes from across the sporting world after the Spaniard announced his retirement.

"What a career, Rafa! I always hoped this day would never come. Thank you for the unforgettable memories and all your incredible achievements in the game we love. It's been an absolute honour."
— Roger Federer

"Well, it's tough news for... all the tennis world, and not only the tennis world...he's an unbelievable person. We all saw how good he has been as a player, and the lessons he taught us, the young players, how to behave on the court, how to handle situations on the court, tough situations...to stay humble...not changing with the success."
— Current world number one Jannik Sinner

"From the boy who watched you on television and dreamed of becoming a tennis player to the one who had the immense gift of playing by your side at Roland Garros representing Spain in an Olympic Games. Thank you so much for being an example on every level, your legacy is incomparable."
— Carlos Alcaraz on Instagram, accompanied by a photo of him as child alongside Nadal and another of the pair in action at Paris Olympics

"We had our differences but you were one hell of a warrior. Damn. I've had nightmares that have woke me up about Rafa I'm gonna miss them. ...it's true – people do bring the best out of you. You were one of those people damn..."
— Injured Australian star Nick Kyrgios posted twice on X, with trademark obscenities

"Thank you @RafaelNadal for inspiring me and all of us You will be missed."
— Tunisian tennis star Ons Jabeur on X



Roger Federer on Instagram posted a photo alongside of him and Rafael Nadal sitting side by side, both in tears, as the Swiss great announced his own retirement two years ago. *(AFP)*

"Forever a champion."
— The official Wimbledon account

"King".
— Roland Garros

"Your dedication, passion and incredible talent have inspired millions of people around the world. It has been an honour to follow your journey and to be able to consider you a friend. Congratulations on an exceptional career and happy retirement."
— Cristiano Ronaldo, former star of Nadal's beloved Real Madrid

"One of the greatest athletes our country has ever produced. Thank you for your titles, your values...VAMOS RAFA!."
— The Spanish football team with a photo of Nadal holding the football World Cup

"THANK YOU RAFA, for being a benchmark for everyone!!!"
— Six-time MotoGP champion Marc Marquez