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AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Shehata's lucky strike helps Rayyan beat Pakhtakor

'I'm happy to score the winning goal, but the most important thing is Rayyan have won the match'

By Sports Reporter
Tashkent

Qatar's Al Rayyan claimed the first win of their AFC Champions League Elite campaign yesterday when Hazem Shehata's fortunate strike from distance was the only goal of the game at the JAR Stadium in Tashkent to earn Younes Ali's side a 1-0 win over Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor.

The victory, which came after the defender beat Vladimir Nazarov with a miss-hit punt forward in the 51st minute, earns Al Rayyan their first points of the campaign and moves the Qatar Stars League side off the bottom of the standings in the league phase.

Pakhtakor, meanwhile, remain on two points after four games and are still waiting for their first win in the competition as the club from Tashkent slipped out of the top eight places in the table that guarantee progress to March's knockout rounds.

Shehata was delighted to have helped Al Rayyan secure three valuable points.

"I'm happy to score the winning goal, but the most important thing is Al Rayyan have won the match. We've climbed to seventh in the standings and now we'll aim to improve our position in the next game," he said.

Al Rayyan coach Younes Ali said victory over Pakhtakor has given his team a renewed hope of qualifying for the next stage. "The competition has truly begun for us now. This is a crucial victory that has revived our hopes. Every single point will count in the race for the knockout stage," he said

"They played very well in the first half and created numerous chances. We improved in the second half and managed to score the winner. The pitch was particularly challenging for us, especially in the opening half," Ali added.

The home side had started brightly with Sardor Sabirkhodjaev seeing his perfectly executed volley in the sixth minute tipped spectacularly over bar by goalkeeper Paulo Victor as the Uzbek side pressed their visitors from the opening whistle.

Pakhtakor went even closer in the 17th minute as Muhammadrasul Abdumajidov's header thumped against Victor's right post while Khojiakbar Alijonov's 27th minute ball across the face of goal should have been tapped in by Otabek Jurakuziyev.

Three minutes into injury time the home team were frustrated again, Alijonov forcing Victor to push the ball away after Dragan Ceran flicked on goalkeeper Nazarov's long punt forward.

Pakhtakor continued to dictate the tempo after the interval before being caught out with a 51st minute sucker punch when Shehata's attempt from deep to find Roger Guedes in the penalty area was overhit, instead flying over Nazarov's head and into the top corner.

Muhammadali Urinboev almost levelled the scores two minutes later but Victor blocked his first-time effort from seven yards out after Umar Adhamzoda's low centre from the left found the substitute in space to strike.

Mahmoud Trezeguet's header was just off target and David Garcia flashed a ball across goal that should have been converted as Al Rayyan sought a second while Abdumajidov volleyed over the bar with the Al Rayyan goal at his mercy from six yards moments later.

Ceran was given the chance to level with two minutes remaining but the Pakhtakor captain's tame header of Kimi Merk's cross was easily collected by Victor and Al Rayyan secured the three points.



Al Rayyan's Hazem Shehata (right) celebrates with captain Abdulaziz Hatim after scoring against Pakhtakor during the AFC Champions League Elite match in Tashkent yesterday.

GULF CLUB CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Arabi go down to Rifaa

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rifaa struck once in each half to beat Qatar's Al Arabi 2-0 in the Gulf Club Champions League at the Khalifa Sports City Stadium in Manama yesterday.

Abbas al-Asfoor scored the opening goal for the Bahrain side in the 42nd minute while substitute Mohammad al-Hallaq doubled the lead in the 59th minute.

Their first win of the tournament saw Al Rifaa move to second spot in Group B with three points while Al Arabi slipped to fourth place with a solitary point. Saudi Arabia's Al Ettifaq are on top with six points, and Kuwait's Al Qadsia are third with one point.

The hosts made a robust start to the game even before Al Arabi could find their rhythm. In the very fourth minute of the match, Al Rifaa's Brazilian midfielder Vinicius Vargas broke through and went on to hit the crossbar.

Buoyed by the charge, Al Rifaa kept attacking but were met with resistance. Their repeated efforts however bore fruits three minutes before half time when al-Asfoor slotted home on a volley after Vargas had back flipped a cross from Hussain Al Eker.

In the second half, Al Rifaa substituted Mohammad al-Hallaq and he also soon paid dividends seizing on a chance inside the danger area to move right and past three Al Arabi defenders before striking to rattle the net. In the 68th minute, Al Rifaa almost scored a third goal but a forward stumbled over the ball after being in front of an empty goal. Substitute Abdulaziz Khalid, who came in in the 90th minute, also found the crossbar in closing moments as he floated one from the left.

Al Arabi were off-colour and failed to make any threatening attack. They did make sporadic forays but lacked in finish. In the 66th minute, they earned a free from just outside the box but the attempt sailed just over.

The third round matches of the tournament will be played round on November 26th and 27th. The tournament has returned after a gap of nine years since the last edition in 2015 when UAE's Al Shabab emerged as the champions. This time, eight teams, divided into two groups, are competing on a home-and-away basis. The top two sides from each group will qualify for the semi-finals.



Al Arabi's Ahmed Alaaeldin attempts to get past Al Riffa players during the Gulf Club Champions League match at the Khalifa Sports City Stadium in Manama yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

PSV Eindhoven ease to 4-0 victory over 10-man Girona

Reuters
Eindhoven, Netherlands

Ryan Flamingo and Malik Tillman scored first half goals as a dominant PSV Eindhoven picked up a first win of their Champions League campaign with an impressive 4-0 victory over 10-man Girona at the Philips Stadion yesterday.

Flamingo netted his first Champions League goal when he turned in Tillman's long throw, though replays suggested the latter's foot was in the field of play and the effort should have been disallowed.

Tillman added a second when he burst into the box unopposed and produced a fine finish, before Johan Bakayoko's low drive from the edge of the box and an own goal from Ladislav Krejci sealed an emphatic victory for the Dutch club, who move into the play-off places with five points.

Girona, who are outside of those knockout places in 26th position with three points, were not helped by a second yellow card for captain Arnau Martinez 10 minutes into the second half and might have lost by a greater margin as PSV hit the post and missed several other opportunities.

Girona offered little threat going forward but forced a superb early double save from PSV goalkeeper Walter Benitez. He pushed away Krejci's low shot and seconds later denied Bojan Miovski at the near post. That was against the run of play and PSV went in front on 16 minutes with a fortunate goal.

Tillman's long throw towards the six-yard box was turned into the net by Flamingo, who had got in front of his marker. But none of the officials spotted the fact the American had a foot in the field when he launched the ball towards goal.

The home side doubled their advantage after some poor Girona defending allowed Tillman to surge into the box unopposed and sweep the ball into the far corner of the net from eight yards.

PSV's Luuk de Jong should have made it 3-0 when he was teed up perfectly by the excellent Tillman, but his effort from in front of goal struck the post and Girona were able to clear.



Girona's Bryan Gil (left) vies for the ball with PSV Eindhoven's Noa Lang during the UEFA Champions League match in Eindhoven. *(AFP)*

The evening got worse for the visitors when Martinez collected a second yellow card on 55 minutes for an unnecessary foul, and PSV were able to add two more goals. Bakayoko's jinking run on the edge of the box ended with a perfectly placed shot low into the bottom corner, before the ball ricocheted off Krejci and into the net two minutes from fulltime.

Meanwhile, Dinamo Zagreb eased to a convincing 4-1 victory at Slovan Bratislava, recovering from an early scare to dominate the match. It took five minutes for David Strelec to put Bratislava ahead, but the visitors quickly took control of the contest.

Dario Spikic equalised five minutes later, and Petar Sucic turned the tide in Dinamo's favour with a goal on the half-hour mark. The visitors maintained their dominance in the second half as Sandro Kulenovic netted a quick double with goals in the 54th and 72nd minutes.

The result left Bratislava in a spot of bother, searching for their first point after four matches. Dinamo are comfortable in the playoff section of the table, with seven points after four matches.

SPORT

CYCLING

Britain's Froome eyeing one last Tour de France

'MY CHALLENGE IS TO TRY TO RUN IN A BIG ONE AGAIN'

Reuters
London


Yellow jersey leader and overall winner Team Sky rider Chris Froome of Britain reacts on the podium after completing Stage 21 from Chantilly to Paris in France on July 24, 2016. *(Reuters)*

Four-times Tour de France champion Chris Froome says he dreams of competing in the world's greatest cycling race once more before calling time on his glittering career.

The British rider, who will be 40 next year, has one year left on his contract with the Israel-Premier Tech team.

"It's not crazy to think that I can return to the Tour," Froome, who won the race in 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2017, said in an interview with Spanish daily *Marca* yesterday.

"I keep dreaming about it. I still don't know what my schedule will be for next year. We will see it in the next training camp in 2025.

"But my challenge is to try to run in a big one again."

Froome, who has won a total of seven Grand Tours, has struggled get back to anywhere near his best form since suffering serious injuries in a horrific high-speed crash during training for the Criterium du Dauphine in 2019.

"I had never been as strong in training as before my fall in that Dauphine. Such is life. I thought the 2019 Tour was the one that really got away from me," he said.

"I have to be honest and realise that I can no longer have the same challenges that I had before that crash, but I still enjoy the bike."

While Froome was once the king of the peloton, the landscape is now dominated by Slovenia's Tadej Pogacar and Denmark's Jonas Vingegaard who have shared out the last five editions of the Tour de France between them.

Froome describes Pogacar, who claimed a third Tour title this year and also triumphed at the Giro d'Italia, as a phenomenon.

"They have been very good for two years, dominating in the Tour and elsewhere. But Remco (Evenepoel) is also there at a high level. There are other things to look at," he said.

"Even though they win a lot, cycling is a fun sport with them. I believe that Pogacar, after winning two majors and several other things (this year), is the best rider of the year and of the century."

While Froome says men's cycling is in a golden era, accidents have continued to overshadow the sport with the death of Norway's Andre Drege at the Tour of Austria again highlighting the risks. "There are several factors, not everything is for the same reason. I don't know why it happens," Froome said. "I don't think the fault lies with the cyclists alone or with the organisers. Now there is a lot of stress in the peloton. It's going faster now than it was 10 or even five years ago. It's another cycling. It's much more explosive. "A lot has evolved in terms of equipment, nutrition, material, training."

Kenya-born Froome played down his chances of competing at next year's road world championships in Rwanda - a first for Africa. "That the cycling World Cup is coming to Rwanda and a continent like Africa is good news," he said. "I would like to be there but, to be honest, I'll find it very difficult to achieve it. But I may be there for other reasons."

CRICKET

Rohit may quit Tests if India fail in Australia, says Srikkanth



Reuters
Bengaluru

India must start planning for **Rohit Sharma**'s successor if the team do not play well in their five-Test series in Australia as the captain could well retire from the longest format, former skipper Krishnamachari Srikkanth has said.

Rohit retired from Twenty20 internationals after delivering India's second World Cup trophy in June but the 37-year-old has struggled for form and admitted to his leadership lapses in the recent 3-0 home Test whitewash by New Zealand.

India head to Australia needing to win four out of their five Tests to reach a third successive World Test Championship final next year and could be without Rohit for the opener in Perth starting on Nov. 22 for personal reasons.

"You have to start thinking ahead. If Rohit Sharma doesn't do well, I think he himself will retire from Test cricket, for all you know," Srikkanth said on his *YouTube* channel.

"He'll play ODIs only. He has already left T20I cricket. We have to keep in mind that he's also ageing."

Rohit has scored 4,270 runs in Test cricket at an average of 42.27 but his recent form has come under the microscope.

He has made only one half-century in his last 10 innings, with six single-digit scores, and was guilty of playing reckless shots at important moments against the Black Caps.

Srikkanth, also a former chief selector, said the skipper was right to accept his shortcomings in a press conference.

"Hats off to Rohit for accepting the fact that he played badly throughout the series and captained badly. That's a great thing," Srikkanth added.

"That's the first move of a player to get back to rhythm. Accepting your fault is very important. That's a very important quality of a human being. He accepted it openly. That means he's on the road to recovery, that's my opinion."

Hazlewood fears India's series loss might work against Australia

Melbourne: Australia quick Josh Hazlewood is concerned that New Zealand's stunning series sweep of India might "awaken a sleeping giant" when Rohit Sharma's touring party arrive Down Under for their blockbuster five-Test series.

New Zealand became the first team to sweep India 3-0 at home when they won the third test in Mumbai by 25 runs on Sunday, a reverse that Indian batting great Sachin Tendulkar said should be the trigger for "introspection".

Hazlewood, who was on the losing side when India triumphed on their last two visits to Australia in 2018-19 and again in 2020-21, was full of praise for New Zealand's remarkable feat but cautious about what it might mean for the upcoming series.

"It might awaken a sleeping giant, so to speak. We'll see that when they come out," the 33-year-old told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "It's obviously better them losing 3-0 than winning 3-0, easily. The confidence might have taken a bit of a hit. "A lot of them have been out here, but there's a few batters who haven't, so they'll be a bit unsure of what to expect. I don't think you can read too much into it. The results are obviously good for us in a way."

Hazlewood's fellow quick Scott Boland also thought the India side that turned up on the opening day of the first Test at Perth on Nov 22 could be an altogether tougher proposition to the team that meekly folded against the Black Caps.

"I think the conditions are so different," he told reporters yesterday. "Obviously, the last couple of times India's come to Australia, they've done really well. Yeah, there's so much more bounce here.

"I think the way they'll structure up their team (might) be completely different to what you see over in India."

Boland will play for Australia A against their Indian counterparts in the second four-day match starting in Melbourne tomorrow, during which he will press his case for inclusion in the Test team.

DECISION

Kenya court jails two men for 35 years after killing of Olympian steeplechaser Kiplagat

AFP
Nairobi

A Kenyan court yesterday sentenced two men to 35 years in prison for murdering Ugandan Olympic athlete Benjamin Kiplagat last year.

After a nine-month trial, the High Court in the northwestern city of Eldoret last week found Peter Ushuru Khalumi, 30, and David Ekai Lokere, 25, guilty of stabbing the 34-year-old steeplechaser to death.

In his ruling yesterday, judge Reuben Nyakundi said overwhelming evidence from CCTV cameras showed the pair "intentionally killed" the athlete, adding that they had not shown any remorse for the "premeditated crime" and deserved a harsh sentence. "Your actions were cruel to a defenceless person whose life you cut short contrary to God's plan, where God intended man to live for a minimum of 70 years," Nyakundi said, announcing the 35-year sentence for each defendant.

The judge rejected a plea from Kiplagat's mother Elizabeth Chemweno and his two brothers who wanted Khalumi and Lokere to be given life sentences.

The pair were arrested a day after the athlete's body was found in his car on the outskirts of Eldoret on New Year's Eve with a deep wound to his neck.

The killing shocked the country - a powerhouse for long-distance running - and prompted a flood of tributes.

During a career spanning almost two decades, the Kenya-born Kiplagat had represented Uganda internationally in the 3,000m steeplechase, including at several Olympic Games and World Championships.

He won the silver medal in the 3,000m steeplechase at the 2008 World Junior Championships and bronze at the African Championships in 2012.

He made the semi-finals of the event at the 2012 Olympics in London and also competed in Rio in 2016.

In 2007, he shaved more than eight seconds off the Ugandan national 3,000m steeplechase record set in 1977.

Kenya has witnessed a number of deaths and killings of prominent athletes in recent years.

SPOTLIGHT

A series of Kenyan athletes' deaths expose painful mental health struggles

AFP
Nairobi

The mental health struggles of Kenyan athletes and a lack of support have come under the spotlight in the East African running powerhouse following a spate of deaths in the past few weeks.

The country is home to some of the world's top long-distance runners, but the athletics community has struggled with deadly domestic violence and entrenched doping.

Internationally, sports bodies have come to recognise the huge impact of mental health following gymnast Simone Biles and tennis player Naomi Osaka's public discussion of their own struggles.

While venerated globally, Kenyan athletes face intense pressure to succeed and financially provide for their immediate and extended families, further adding to their mental strain.

Since 2017, more than 80 Kenyan athletes have been sanctioned for doping, according to the World Athletics Integrity Unit, leaving them grappling with the financial, physical, and mental fallout of years-long bans.

On October 6, Kipyegon Bett, who was the 800 metres world bronze medallist in 2017, died in hospital in his home town of Kericho in western Kenya from kidney and liver failure brought on by alcohol.

He was just 26.

Bett, one of Kenya's most promising middle distance runners, had been slapped with a four-year ban in 2018 after testing positive for a performance-enhancing drug.

"He went into a depression and started drinking heavily," his grieving sister Purity Kirui told AFP after his death.

Kirui said Bett had ignored the family's calls to resume training after his ban ended in 2022, and failed to make a significant return to competitive sport.

On the same day Bett's death was announced, the body of steeplechaser Clement Kemboi was found some 250 kilometres (155 miles) away in Iten, the famous high-altitude training hub in western Kenya.

"We cannot ignore that there's a problem," Athletics Kenya (AK) executive member Barnaba Korir told AFP.

"The recent deaths show the athletes are facing major challenges including financial and mental health issues."

'Alarming' issue

In the aftermath of the deaths, 2016 Olympic javelin silver medallist Julius Yego urged action to better protect Kenyan athletes.

"The issue of mental health among the athletes who have served suspensions for doping is alarming," Yego told AFP.

"These athletes feel isolated and have had to battle their problems literally alone without any support from Athletics Kenya or their former managers and coaches."

Many denied they had ever used drugs, he said, adding that he was in touch with a struggling former long distance runner currently serving a four-year ban.

The death of Bett and Kemboi came as the close-knit Kenyan athletics community was already reeling following the loss of three other athletes.


A group of runners takes part a training session on March 13, 2019 in Iten, Kenya. The mental health struggles of Kenyan athletes and a lack of support have come under the spotlight in the East African running powerhouse following a spate of deaths in the past few weeks. *(AFP)*

Killed in burtal assault

Also in October, celebrated 53-year-old marathon runner Samson Kandie was killed in a brutal assault and in September another marathoner, Willy Kipruto Chelewa, was found dead.

The circumstances of their deaths remain under investigation. Four people - including Kandie's wife - appeared in court this week.

But in a country where a third of the 52 million population lives in poverty, athletes' earnings also made them targets of attack, retired 1,500m Olympic champion Asbel Kiprop told AFP.

"Tragically it is becoming rampant. It calls for the athletes to be more vigilant," he said, citing Kandie's case, who was killed after men assaulted him outside his house in Eldoret.

Kiprop, who now works as a police officer, said being a member of the forces was often the only way athletes could ensure their overall safety.

"Otherwise, good personal discipline is essential."

TENNIS

Gauff beats Swiatek in straight sets to reach semi-finals

KREJCIKOVA ENDS PEGULA'S LAST-FOUR HOPES AT WTA FINALS

AFP
Riyadh

Coco Gauff posted a rare victory over Iga Swiatek to punch her ticket to the semi-finals of the WTA Finals in Riyadh yesterday and end the Pole's bid to claim the year-end number one ranking.

Swiatek, the defending champion, was in a direct battle with Aryna Sabalenka for the top spot this week but needed a win over Gauff to keep her chances alive of leapfrogging her Belarusian rival.

Gauff, 20, entered the contest having lost 11 of her 12 previous meetings with Swiatek, with the American's sole victory coming in Cincinnati last year. But she turned the tables on Swiatek yesterday, defeating the second seed 6-3, 6-4 to make it two straight-sets wins from two round-robin matches in Riyadh this week.

"It feels great. I knew going into the match that despite our head-to-head I had a lot of confidence going in," said Gauff, who hit 11 double faults during the one-hour 48-minute showdown.

With the exception of the opening game of the match, Gauff had break point opportunities in every Swiatek service game in the first set. The American third seed made her move in game seven, breaking for 4-3, and she closed out the set with a second break of serve, taking the lead in 49 minutes.

Swiatek needed six break points in a marathon third game of the second set to finally take down the Gauff serve but she couldn't consolidate her advantage.

They traded breaks again, as Gauff's double-fault tally went up to double digits and Swiatek racked up the errors. It was Gauff who eventually steadied the ship, and sealed the victory on Swiatek's 47th unforced error of the match.

Earlier in the day Barbora Krejcikova ended Jessica Pegula's chances of qualifying for the semi-finals, defeating the sixth-seeded American 6-3, 6-3.



Coco Gauff returns the ball to Iga Swiatek during their WTA Finals Championship match in Riyadh yesterday. *(AFP)*



Barbora Krejcikova serves against Jessica Pegula yesterday. *(AFP)*

A runner-up at the WTA Finals last year, Pegula suffered her second straight-sets defeat of the week and enters her final round-robin match against Swiatek tomorrow anchoring the Orange Group with zero sets won.

Eighth-seeded Krejcikova bounced back from her opening loss to Swiatek to keep her hopes of making the final four alive.

"I was fighting for every ball and I felt that I really have to play my best tennis and I was trying to be really solid and trying to put as many balls to the other side as I could," said Krejcikova, who picked up just her 20th match win of the season.

"I'm definitely proud. I had some very high parts of the season, especially winning Wimbledon, that's something indescribable. And being here in the Finals is a huge privilege. It's nice to get the win and still be part of the event."

Despite being ranked number 13 in the world, Krejcikova qualified for these WTA Finals thanks to a new rule introduced by the WTA that gave priority to a player who has won a Grand Slam this season, while maintaining a ranking between 9 and 20, over a player ranked number eight in the Race.

As the reigning Wimbledon champion, Krejcikova claimed the final qualifying spot in Riyadh over world number eight Emma Navarro.

Krejcikova squandered a 6-4, 3-0 lead against Swiatek in her opener two days ago and made sure there was no repeat scenario against Pegula yesterday.

The crafty Czech fired 11 aces and broke Pegula four times to wrap up the win in 69 minutes.

SPOTLIGHT

Injured Djokovic gives up on ATP Finals title defence

Reuters
Rome

Defending ATP Finals champion **Novak Djokovic** has pulled out of the season-ending event in Turin through injury, the Serbian said yesterday.

The record 24-times Grand Slam champion's absence means that Norway's Casper Ruud, Australian Alex de Minaur and Russian Andrey Rublev are all guaranteed to qualify for the eight-man event regardless of their results in tournaments this week.

"I was really looking forward to being there, but due to ongoing injury I won't be playing next week," the 37-year-old Djokovic posted on Instagram.

"Apologies to those who were planning to see me. Wishing all the players a great tournament. See you soon!"

De Minaur, who had been sweating on making the cut after losing to Holger Rune in the quarter-finals of the Paris Masters last week, will be making his debut in the prestigious event which is regarded as the jewel in the ATP's crown.

He will join world number one Jannik Sinner, twice former winner Alexander Zverev, four-times Grand Slam winner Carlos Alcaraz, former US Open champion Daniil Medvedev and American Taylor Fritz.

The ATP Finals are being staged at the Inalpi Arena in Turin and boast a total prize pool of $15.25mn including $4.88mn for an undefeated singles champion.

The eight best doubles pairings of the season will also be battling it out in Turin.

Djokovic, the world number five, won a record seventh title at the season-ending tournament last year, dashing the hopes of home favourite Sinner in the final.

He has not added to his Grand Slam collection this year and failed to win an ATP title, although he did claim his first Olympic gold medal by beating Spain's Alcaraz in Paris.



Barcelona to replace flood-hit Valencia for MotoGP finale

Barcelona: Barcelona will host the final race of the MotoGP season next week in place of flood-hit Valencia, organisers Dorna announced yesterday.

"MotoGP can now confirm the 2024 curtain closer will be held in Barcelona," Dorna said of the November 15-17 race.

"We will return to the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya, where the world championship will be decided, on the original dates of the season finale, in solidarity with the Community of Valencia."

The title will go down to the wire with Spanish championship leader Jorge Martin 24 points ahead of Italian two-time defending champion Francesco Bagnaia.

Riders requested to race at a venue other than Valencia out of respect for the victims of the worst natural disaster in Spain's recent history.

Barcelona also hosted the Catalunya MotoGP in May where Bagnaia powered to victory ahead of Martin.

FOCUS

Davis Cup aiming for 'special' Nadal retirement celebration

AFP
Barcelona

The Davis Cup will provide a special farewell to retiring tennis great **Rafael Nadal** at the November final eight, said tournament director Feliciano Lopez yesterday.

The 22-time Grand Slam winner is part of David Ferrer's Spain squad for the finals in Malaga which begin on November 19. Lopez said the Davis Cup was "lucky" to host Nadal's final tournament and wants to offer the departing superstar a farewell that lives up to his glittering career.

"It's confidential of course, but we're planning to do something very special for him, we have to celebrate his career and his legacy," Lopez told reporters.

"There's a lot of things that we're planning but for now I cannot share any more details with you, but we're planning something very special.

"We are going to try and live up to his legacy and his enormous career and I hope we're going to do something very special for him."

Lopez said many stars of tennis and other sports wanted to come to Malaga to witness the denouement of Nadal's career.

"I know that almost everyone in the world wants to be present for his farewell... Novak Djokovic posted on Instagram that he wants to be there, also Andy Murray wants to be there," continued Lopez.

"I don't know if we're gonna have seats for everyone, but as you can imagine all the tennis players that played in his time, they want to be there.

"Other athletes from different sports, of course from Spain and everywhere in the world, they want to be there as well, so it's going to be very special for Rafa."

Lopez did not think the "World Cup of Tennis" will be overshadowed by Nadal's retirement. The tournament director said Nadal himself was keen to make sure that was not the case in Malaga.

"The Davis Cup itself is so important and I don't think this celebration is going to overshadow the competition, especially as Rafa doesn't want any of that," he explained.

Lopez said there was "no doubt" Nadal is the best Spanish athlete of all-time and considered it a "nice coincidence" he will finish his career at the Davis Cup, after a vital win in the competition back in 2004 helped launch his career. Nadal, 18 at the time, defeated Andy Roddick in a thrilling singles battle to help Spain claim the competition at the final against the United States in Seville.



Tickets for Spain's last eight match against Netherlands were snapped up quickly and Lopez joked they could do with "two stadiums, not one", with some being resold for thousands of Euros online as the tennis world tries to catch a last glimpse of Nadal. Nadal could be paired with French Open and Wimbledon champion Carlos Alcaraz, who is also part of the Spain team called up.

World number one Jannik Sinner is part of defending champions Italy's team and Lopez hailed his budding rivalry with Alcaraz.

"They are a true blessing for tennis," he added.

"Roger (Federer) and Rafa are gone, and Novak we don't know how much he has left in the tank... we're very lucky in the tennis industry and world that we have Sinner and Alcaraz leading this new generation of players."

Lopez said preparations for the Davis Cup had not been affected by the recent devastating flooding in the east of the country, and along with the Billie Jean King Cup and the International Tennis Federation, they have made a donation to the Spanish Red Cross.

"It's terrible and horrible to see this happening," said Lopez. "Luckily this is not affecting the preparations in Malaga. "Of course we will try to use our platform to raise awareness and we will try to raise money for everyone affected in Valencia."

BOTTOMLINE

French boxing quits international body to keep its fighters at Olympics

AFP
Paris

France became the latest country to quit the International Boxing Association (IBA), to "guarantee French boxing its place at the Olympic Games", governing body FFBoxe said in a statement on Monday.

The IBA, the long-standing ruling body of traditionally amateur competitions, such as the Olympics, is involved in a brawl with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) over financial, governance and ethical concerns.

The IOC took over running the boxing competition at this year's Paris Olympics.

IOC president Thomas Bach warned that boxing's national federations needed to find a new and "reliable" international partner for the IOC to be sure the sport features on the programme at the Los Angeles Games in 2028.

A decision is due early in 2025 on whether or not to keep the sport in the Games.

FFBoxe said it planned to join World Boxing.

World Boxing, which was founded in 2023 and boasts around 50 members, led by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and Brazil, is in discussions with the IOC to take over running the sport at the Games.

FFBoxe said the decision to "disaffiliate" from the IBA, was "motivated by the desire to guarantee French boxing its place at the Olympic Games and to reinforce the stability of its clubs".

It said it had been prompted to act by a letter from David Lappartient, President of the French Olympic Committee, and a candidate to replace the departing Bach as IOC president, pointing out that boxing was not, for now, on the 2028 Olympic programme.

The IBA is chaired by the Kremlin-linked Russian Umar Kremlev who sparked a damaging gender controversy during the Paris Olympics when he claimed that two women fighters had "genetic testing that shows that these are men".

The IOC, which leaves gender rules to the sporting bodies, cleared them to compete and expressed doubts about the IBA's testing and motivations.

The IBA responded with a chaotic press conference in Paris intended to clarify why it disqualified Algeria's Imane Khelif and Taiwan's Lin Yu-ting from its world championships in 2023 but then cited "medical confidentiality" as it failed to produce definitive evidence.

Both boxers won gold in Paris.

Top-ranked Korda wins LPGA Player of Year award

World number one **Nelly Korda** has clinched her first LPGA Player of the Year honours, the LPGA confirmed on Monday after it became mathematically impossible for anyone to catch her for the points-based award.

In an already historic 2024 campaign America's Korda has six victories and three additional top-10 finishes.

Her wins included a record-equalling run of five straight capped by her second major title at the Chevron Championship, and she represented the United States at the Paris Olympics and in the Solheim Cup. Korda skipped two tournaments on the recent Asian swing after a neck injury limited her ability to practice.



Ayaka Furue of Japan, winner of the Evian Championship in July, would have had to win the rest of the LPGA events this year to catch up, but tied for 10th in the Japan Classic on Sunday.

"Winning the Rolex Player of the Year means so much to me," Korda said in a statement. "This season has had its highs and challenges, and I'm just really grateful for the people around me who have helped me get here."

Korda is expected to tee it up in two more tournaments this year, including the season-ending Tour Championship in Naples, Florida, November 21-24.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Enrique lauds Simeone ahead of Atletico clash

Reuters
Paris


PSG's coach Luis Enrique gestures during a training session yesterday, on the eve of the Champions League match against Atletico Madrid at the Campus Paris Saint-Germain in Paris yesterday. *(AFP)*


Atletico Madrid's Argentine coach Diego Simeone addresses a press conference yesterday. (AFP)

Paris St Germain coach Luis Enrique was full of praise for his former La Liga rival Atletico Madrid manager Diego Simeone ahead of today's Champions League clash against the Spanish side.

Last year's semi-finalists PSG and quarter-finalists Atletico have had a lacklustre start in the new Champions League format, both having only one win after three games. A home victory would boost PSG, currently 19th with four points, while Atletico, languishing in 27th place on three, are aiming to rebound after back-to-back losses.

PSG have never faced Atletico in the European Cup before but Luis Enrique's Barcelona, who he managed from 2014 to 2017, defeated Diego Simeone's Atletico side nine times in their 14 meetings, drawing twice and losing three times.

Luis Enrique led Barca to a Champions League-La Liga double in 2014-15 followed by another league title the next year.

"We've played against each other as players and then as managers. I admire Simeone, when a coach can stay for so many years at a top club it means he is great because that is such a difficult thing to do," Luis Enrique told reporters yesterday. Argentine Simeone has managed Atletico for 13 years, guiding them to two LaLiga and two Europa League titles but the Madrid side had considered hiring Luis Enrique prior to Simeone.

"I had given my word to another club. If I had gone to Atleti, I would not have stayed half as long as Simeone because I don't have the energy as him," added Luis Enrique.

"They are lucky to have found Simeone as a coach. You need a lot of energy, to be able to convince all your players over the long-term."

The Spaniard said he was satisfied with PSG's previous performances and added that their results were undeserved. "I would settle for repeating the statistics obtained in our draw with PSV Eindhoven (1-1) and win against Girona (1-0), with different results," he said. They also lost 2-0 at Arsenal.

PSG, without former talisman Kylian Mbappe who joined Real Madrid in the close season, have just two goals in their three Champions League games.

"I have no doubt we can improve in defence and attack, whether it is with the defender duos of Marquinhos and Willian Pacho, or Milan Skriniar and Lucas Beraldo, or in the midfield," Luis Enrique said.

"I understand you want to discuss individual players, but we analyse things from a broader perspective.

"What interests me is to always generate goalscoring opportunities and to arrive in the penalty area because you have managed to be stronger than your opponent. That is my objective as a coach: to always generate opportunities"

Close-season signing Matvey Safonov, who kept a clean sheet in their opening win against Girona, might replace number one goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma, whose mistakes proved costly at Arsenal and against PSV.

"You will find out tomorrow. After a good cup of cappuccino, I will decide who the goalkeeper is," Enrique added.

PREVIEW

Inter will fight to keep possession against Arsenal, says Inzaghi

'We are facing one of the best teams in Europe, very recognisable with a great coach'

Reuters
Milan



Inter Milan will try to hog the ball against an Arsenal side hungry for victory after a three-game Premier League run without a win, the Serie A club's manager **Simone Inzaghi** said ahead of their Champions League meeting today.

Arsenal have not won in the league since their 3-1 home victory over Southampton on Oct 5, which was followed by away defeats by Bournemouth and Newcastle United either side of a 2-2 draw at home against Liverpool.

"We all know how the big teams react after a defeat, look at us after the derby... You find teams out for redress," Inzaghi told a press conference yesterday.

"I saw the match between Arsenal and Newcastle. Playing at Newcastle's home is not easy but it was an open and fascinating match. We will find a team that lost two-and-a-half days ago, they will want to play a great game at San Siro."

Inter lost 2-1 to visiting AC Milan late in September then went on to win seven games and draw one across all competitions after what was their only defeat so far in the campaign. Despite their recent domestic hiccup, Mikel Arteta's side are unbeaten in Europe's elite club competition as both teams sit on seven points in the standings.

"We are facing one of the best teams in Europe, very recognisable with a great coach," Inzaghi said. "If you see Arsenal among 100 teams, without knowing the name, you recognise them. They played for the last two English titles point for point with Manchester City.

"We will have to try to keep the ball as much as possible, we know that we are facing a team that put on a lot of offensive pressure. We know that it will be a problem for us when they have the ball but the opposite is also true."

Asked if he enjoyed the competition's new format, with the group stage replaced by a 36-team league phase from this season, the Italian coach said it posed a bigger challenge.

"It's much more difficult for us coaches, even for the players," Inzaghi said. "Before, we prepared for six games against three opponents, so until February you concentrated on three teams, it was easier. Now you have to think about eight different games.

"Before, after the first three games, you had the standings in your head, while now you know the positions and how many points could be needed, but then maybe the placings get decided on a goal scored or conceded.

"It's probably a more fascinating group, more entertaining, but also more difficult. The spectacle increases but it's more demanding."

Lautaro Martinez, the match winner at the weekend, is set to make his first start in this season's Champions League alongside Marcus Thuram.

France striker Thuram has only missed one match in Inter's packed fixture list and was one of those guilty of missed chances in a tired-looking display against Venezia.

Inter are in the Champions League top eight thanks to his late winner at Young Boys last month, when both Thuram and Martinez had to come off the bench to save the day after disappointing efforts from their backups Marko Arnautovic and Mehdi Taremi.

Good news for Inter comes in the shape of the return of key midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu and Italy defender Francesco Acerbi who Inzaghi said will be available after a fortnight out with a thigh strain.

Arsenal skipper Odegaard back in training after two months

Arsenal captain **Martin Odegaard** has returned to full training after two months on the sidelines due to an ankle injury, the Premier League club said yesterday.

The 25-year-old midfielder, who injured his ankle during the second half of Norway's 2-1 win over Austria in the Nations League in September, has returned to training as Arsenal prepare for today's Champions League game at Inter Milan.

"Our skipper has been out of action for two months...and missed our subsequent 12 matches, but he joined in with the rest of our squad ahead of our Champions League trip to Inter Milan," the club said in a statement.

The club said Odegaard, who had missed only a handful of games over the last three seasons, was taking the latest step towards a first-team return.

Arsenal sit ninth in the Champions League standings after three games, while Inter are seventh also on seven points.



Arsenal's Martin Odegaard takes part in a training session yesterday. *(AFP)*

BOTTOMLINE

Bayern desperate for win over Benfica after two defeats

Reuters
Munich

Bayern Munich will look to get their Champions League season back on track with victory over visitors Benfica today, and the new competition format plays no role in the team's planning, coach Vincent Kompany said yesterday.

The Bavarians lead the Bundesliga title race but have lost two of their three Champions League matches so far and are currently ranked 23rd in the competition.

They kicked off their European season with a 9-2 demolition of Dinamo Zagreb before losing to Aston Villa and Barcelona.

"I don't want to think too far ahead because we have enough games," Kompany, in his first season in charge, told a press conference. "We have to win against Benfica. I don't want to spend too much time thinking what could happen in January.

"No one knows how it will work. We only know we want to win tomorrow. We play at home. That is my only goal," he said.

The European top-flight has switched from a group stage to a league phase this season where 36 teams play eight matches each, with the top eight in the table progressing directly to the next round, while the next 16 teams enter a two-legged playoff. This means even if Bayern do not finish in the top eight they can still qualify for the knockout stage via the playoffs.

"We have a lot of confidence going into this game. We will always adapt and take the steps that are right for the team. But to say we will change everything is not serious. We just want to win again at home," Kompany said.

For their part, Benfica have won two of their three Champions League matches.

"What we know is you have to win around six (of eight) games to reach the top eight. You have to win three games and that should be enough for the playoffs. My goal is to reach the top eight", Kompany said.


Bayern Munich's Michael Olise (left), Harry Kane (fourth from left) and Kim Min-Jae (right) listen to coach Vincent Kompany during a training session yesterday. *(AFP)*