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Australia win thriller to lead series after late India collapse



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Defending champ Dimitrov eases into Brisbane round 2

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SPOTLIGHT

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ARABIAN GULF CUP

Fine margins to decide Saudi semi-final, says Oman coach

Second semi-final will see hosts Kuwait take on Bahrain at the Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium

By Sports Reporter
Kuwait City

Oman head coach Rasheed Jaber believes their Saudi semi-final showdown with Saudi Arabia will be decided by the smallest of details at the Jaber Al Mubarak International Stadium in Kuwait today.

The match will kick off at 5.30pm. The 2023 finalists have impressed by topping Group A, with a win over Qatar and draws against Kuwait and UAE, and are focussed on facing a star-studded Saudi side that has improved with every match since their opening defeat to Bahrain.

"The match will be a very tough semi-final," said Rasheed at the eve-of-match press conference. "We respect Saudi Arabia. They have distinguished players and a big history. But we need effort from our players who must concentrate for the full 90 minutes because this match will be decided on the small details and mental strength of the players."

Several injuries are hampering the Omani preparations, but, again, the coach is not making excuses and believes his side can go all the way in Kuwait and win their third Gulf crown this week. The last coming in 2018. "Irrespective of our line-up, I trust all of my players. Our target is to qualify for the final though after all the work and effort that we have done in the past days. We are ready for the potential to play 90 minutes, 120 mins or even the penalties. Mental concentration will be the main factor for the players."

Meanwhile, winger Marwan al-Sahafi has arrived in Kuwait to bolster Saudi Arabia ahead of the semi-final.

Al-Sahafi has arrived from his Belgian club Beerschot who have started their winter break, but his head coach, Herve Renard, has not revealed whether the 20-year-old will start.

"I don't know what will be my next 11," Renard told media at the eve-of-match press conference. "I want to find the best 11 to start, but also to finish because we can make five substitutions."

After losing their opening match to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia edged past Yemen and then returned to form with their impressive 3-1 win over Iraq to qualify for the last four, and keep their hopes of a fourth Gulf title alive.

Playmaker Salem al-Dawsari played a leading role in that win, and the coach paid tribute to his Al Hilal skipper who a doubt was coming into the tournament.

"Salem broke his nose and wasn't supposed to play here until the semi-final, if we qualified," said Renard. "But he decided to come in against Bahrain and this was a fantastic message to the youth players because when this kind of player shows this level of determination, all the squad will follow."

Bahrain coach hopes to out-fox his predecessor in Kuwait clash Bahrain head coach Dragan Talajic believes he can outfox his predecessor Juan Pizzi who is now in charge of the Kuwait side that he faces in the second semi-final tonight (kick off 8.45pm). Talajic praised Pizzi as an "excellent coach who I have huge respect for" and admitted that the Argentinean knows his players just as well as he does.

"My full respect for Mr Pizzi for all his work with Bahrain," said Talajic at the eve-of-match press conference. "He is a very good coach. He was working with my boys before me and knows everything about us. But tomorrow is not a game between Pizzi and Dragan.

On his part, Kuwait head coach Jian Pizzi is giving nothing away ahead of the showdown. A capacity 57,000 crowd is expected at the Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium to watch the host nation come up against a Bahrain team that has impressed in Kuwait, but lost their last Group B encounter to Yemen.

"Every team has positive and negatives, and we have analysed their team but I will not share my style of play here today or give anything away," he said. "What I can say is that we will fight in order to achieve the best result for Kuwait."





Oman head coach Rasheed Jaber (left) and his Saudi counterpart Herve Renard address a press conference in Kuwait City yesterday.



Saudi Arabia's Abdullah Radif trains yesterday, on the eve of the Arabian Gulf Cup semi-final against Oman.

YEAR-END REVIEW

Qatar savour continental success, Saudis named World Cup hosts in big year for Asian football

Reuters
Doha

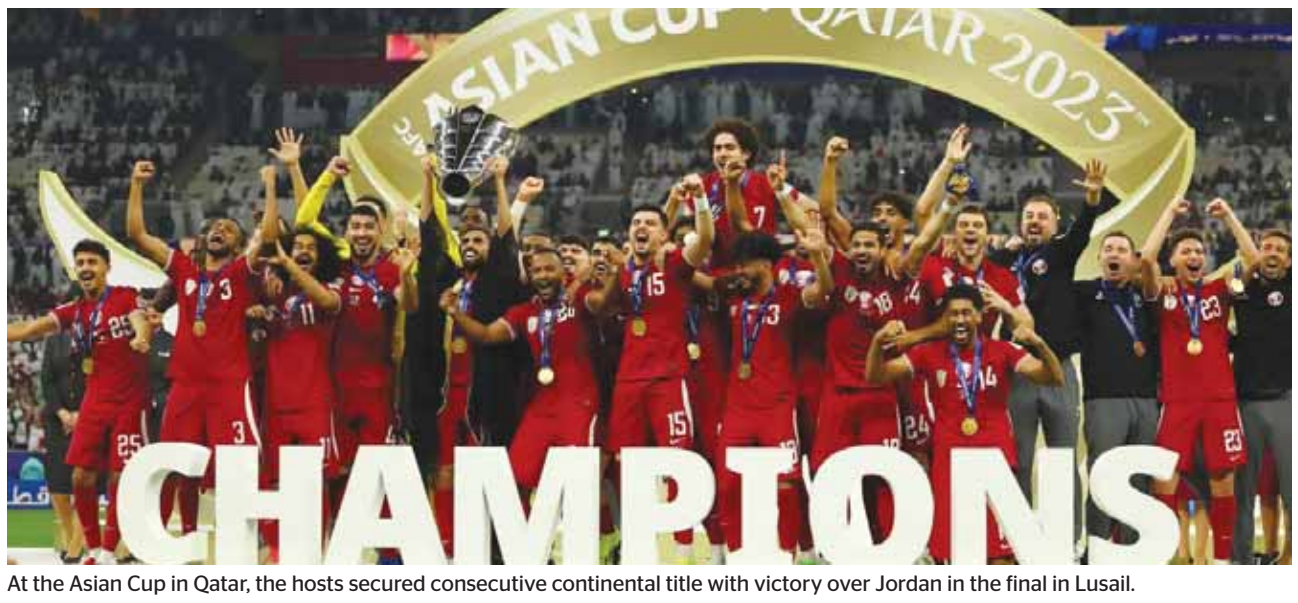
Qatar were in full celebration mode to kick off 2024 with the successful defence of their Asian Cup title while Saudi Arabia ended the year on a high after being named hosts of the 2034 World Cup.

In between, Japan and Iran reasserted their status as regional heavyweights in 2026 World Cup qualifying but it has not been smooth sailing for some of the other top sides with South Korea and Australia failing to impress.

At the continental championships in Qatar, the hosts secured consecutive trophies with victory over surprise package Jordan in the final in Doha. Akram Afif's eight goals saw him end the tournament as top scorer and the captain would go on to be named Asian Player of the Year for a second time.

Qatar's success boosted belief they could make a second straight appearance at the World Cup having hosted the 2022 tournament but by November those hopes were hanging by a thread as defeats by the United Arab Emirates and Iran cost coach Marquez Lopez his job.

Japan were knocked out of the Asian Cup by Iran in the quarter-finals but they quickly shrugged off that disappointment to go nine points clear in their World Cup qualifying group while Australia and Saudi Arabia stumbled below them. The Socceroos and Green Falcons both made coaching changes after faltering starts to their 2026 campaigns but the race for Group C's second automatic qualifying spot remains tight with Bahrain, Indonesia and China also in contention.



At the Asian Cup in Qatar, the hosts secured consecutive continental title with victory over Jordan in the final in Lusail.

Iran quickly took command of Group A but South Korea's struggles on and off the pitch continued. With the controversy over Hong Myung-bo's appointment as manager dominating the headlines, South Korea opened their Group B campaign with a 0-0 draw with Palestine in Seoul, a result which sparked heavy criticism from fans and pundits. Hong's side continued to blow hot and cold but they have held onto top spot in the group, with Iraq and Jordan breathing down their neck.

There was disappointment for South Korea when they failed to qualify for the Olympic Games for the first time since 1984, while Asia under-23 champions Japan fell at the quarter-final stage in France. The Japanese women's team, the Nadeshiko, were eliminated at the same stage by the United States.

Japan's Kiko Seike succeeded Sam Kerr as women's Asian Player of the Year having scored the goals that steered Urawa Red Diamonds to the Women's Asian Club Championship. A long-term knee injury sidelined Kerr for much of the year and while Australia's Matildas continued to draw big crowds in her absence their streak of 16 successive home sellouts ended amid a disappointing run of form.

The Asian Football Confederation launched the inaugural edition of the Women's Asian Champions League in a major boost to the game, with 21 clubs vying for a $1.3mn top prize. In the revamped men's edition, the Asian Champions League Elite, the likes of Neymar and Cristiano Ronaldo guided star-studded Saudi clubs into the knockout rounds with ease in the West region.

Japan's Yokohama F Marinos, runners-up to Al Ain last season, lead the East on goal difference ahead of Gwangju and Vissel Kobe but only six points separate 10 teams in the race for one of eight berths in the next round.

In December, FIFA President Gianni Infantino announced that Saudi Arabia would become the second nation from the Middle East to host the quadrennial tournament in 2034 – 12 years after neighbours Qatar staged the 2022 edition.

The kingdom has invested heavily in sport over the last few years, although critics allege it is using its Public Investment Fund to sportswash its human rights record. Saudi Arabia, which denies accusations of human rights abuses and says it protects its national security through its laws, has never hosted a tournament of this magnitude and will have to construct eight stadiums to be used for the event.

SPOTLIGHT

Australia win Test thriller after late India collapse

INDIA LOSE SEVEN IN THE FINAL SESSION ON DAY FIVE AS AUSTRALIA SNATCH 2-1 SERIES LEAD

AFP
Melbourne

Australia ripped out seven Indian wickets in the final session of a dramatic fourth Test in Melbourne yesterday to win a thriller by 184 runs and go 2-1 up in the five-match series.

India crumbled to 155 all out with just 12.5 overs left in the match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and will need to win the final Test starting in Sydney on Friday to level the series and retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

Set an unlikely 340 to win, India looked well placed to salvage a draw when opener Yashasvi Jaiswal and Rishabh Pant batted through the second session in unflustered fashion to take their side to 112-3 at tea.

But Pant perished trying to slog part-time spinner Travis Head for six to spark a collapse as India's last seven wickets fell for 34 runs from 20.3 overs.

Top-scorer Jaiswal was out for 84 to Australia captain and man-of-the match Pat Cummins, who took 3-28, and Nathan Lyon ended the contest when he trapped Mohammed Siraj lbw to spark wild scenes of jubilation among the home team.

Pace bowler Mitchell Starc said the home side never lost faith they could force victory in the last session. "There were a few patches through the day with the wicket not doing a whole lot, but we managed to find a way," Starc said.

"I think that's just a feature of the group at the moment, is that calmness, to have that belief that we can get the job done."

The departure of Pant for 30, caught on the boundary from a wild shot, ended an 88-run partnership and rejuvenated the Australia bowlers. Ravindra Jadeja and first-innings centurion Nitish Kumar Reddy came and went quickly before Cummins ended Jaiswal's gritty 208-ball knock in controversial fashion.

The 23-year-old was given not out to a caught-behind appeal from an attempted hook. But the decision was overturned by the TV umpire on visual evidence that the ball had changed direction, even though no noise was picked up by technology.

Akash Deep was caught at short leg off Scott Boland, who took 3-39, before Jasprit Bumrah scored his second duck of the match. A tenacious Washington Sundar was left not out five after facing 45 balls. Cummins completed an inspirational Test, taking six wickets in total and scoring 90 runs, the best batting match tally of his career.

He terrorised India's top order, removing opposing captain Rohit Sharma and KL Rahul before Starc dismissed Kohli from the last ball before lunch. Rohit, who has not scored more than 10 in the three Tests he has played in the series, said the early demise of the three veteran Indian batsmen removed any prospect of chasing their target.

"We wanted to set the platform where the last two sessions, if we had wickets in hand, we can go for those runs. But they bowled perfectly as well," Rohit said.

"Then we wanted to fight till the end but unfortunately couldn't do it. It is pretty disappointing. If you look at the overall Test match, we had our opportunities, we had our chances."

Rohit said Australia's final-wicket stand of 61 between Lyon and Boland in the second innings was a major dent in their push for victory. It came after exceptional Indian fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah, who took 5-57 in the second innings and nine wickets in the match, had reduced the hosts to 91-6 midway through day four - a lead of less than 200.

The final Australia second-innings wicket was finally taken early on Monday when Lyon was bowled for 41 by Bumrah, leaving Boland 15 not out.

The match set the record attendance for any game of cricket in Australia, with 373,591 going through the gates over five days.

Head said the players had found the crowds and atmosphere inspiring. "I don't think we've ever witnessed something like that so, yeah, what a week to be involved in," he said.

"It's two bloody good teams going at it, and I felt like it ebbed and flowed throughout and it's probably one of the best Test matches that I've been involved in.

"It's just nice to come out with a win. It's been a long five days."



Australian players celebrate the final wicket on day five of the fourth Test against India at the MCG in Melbourne yesterday. *(AFP)*

BRIEF SCORES
Australia 474 (Smith 140, Labuschagne 72, Bumrah 4-99) **and 234** (Labuschagne 70, Bumrah 5-57) **beat India 369** (Reddy 114, Jaiswal 82, Boland 3-57) **and 155** (Jaiswal 84, Cummins 3-28, Boland 3-39) **by 184 runs.**

CUMMINS RATES AUSTRALIA'S WIN OVER INDIA AS HIS GREATEST

Pat Cummins said yesterday he rates the fourth Test victory over India by 184 runs as "right at the top" of the greatest games he has played in for Australia.

A rollicking match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground was won late on day five when the home side blasted out seven Indian wickets in the final session.

Cummins was named player of the match for his all-round deeds, including taking three key wickets on the final day as the tourists were skittled for 155.

He did it in front of a final-day crowd of nearly 75,000, pushing the combined attendance across five days to 373,691, easily the highest for any match played in Australia. The 66-Test veteran said he agreed with several teammates that the Test was among the best they'd played in.

"I just felt everyone was talking, trying to work out where it sits. I



reckon that it's right at the top," Cummins said.

"When you take it all into account, it's probably the best Test match I've been involved in. I don't know what the crowd was today, but it was huge," he said.

"It felt like the match swung a lot as well. It never felt like we were so far ahead of the game that a win looked certain. So overall, just one of those great wins."

While Australia's attack was devastating late on day five, Cummins believed victory was set up in the morning when key trio Rohit Sharma, KL Rahul and Virat Kohli were dismissed cheaply.

"I reckon that first session today was close to perfection from a bowling point of view," he said.

Australia can reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy if they win or draw the fifth and final Test starting in Sydney on Friday.

Cummins expected Mitchell Starc to be fit to play, even though the pace bowler was wincing throughout the second innings, favouring what is believed to be a rib complaint.

"We'll reassess in a couple of days but he's a warrior, he gets through," Cummins said.

"He never even contemplates not being an option to bowl.

"So yeah, other than being in pain, he's fully fit and available."

ROHIT CONCEDES HIS FORM IS 'DISTURBING' FOR BEATEN INDIA

India captain Rohit Sharma admitted yesterday his batting form is "disturbing" after a double failure in the 184-run fourth Test loss to Australia in Melbourne.

Rohit also highlighted the need for team-mate Rishabh Pant to bat more sensibly after throwing his wicket away twice in the defeat, which leaves the tourists trailing 2-1 in the series.

Their batting will need to improve for the fifth and final Test starting in Sydney on Friday, which India must win to retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

India's highest run-scorers at the Melbourne Cricket Ground were their two youngest players, continuing a bountiful series for both.

Opener Yashasvi Jaiswal's 84 made up more than half of India's second innings of 155, complementing his first innings knock of 82.

All-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy scored a fighting maiden century in the first innings.

Questions have arisen about the form and ongoing selection of Rohit, 37, and to a lesser degree, fellow-veteran Virat Kohli, 36.

Rohit struggled throughout the 3-0 home series loss to New Zealand in October-November and has failed to get past 10 runs in any of his five innings in Australia.

"A lot of the things I am trying to do are not falling in the place that I would want to," Rohit said.

"Mentally, look, it is disturbing without a doubt if you've come here and you want to try to do successfully what you are supposed to.

"But as of now that is where it is and there are things that we as a team need to look at, and I personally need to look at as well.

"We will see what happens. There is still a game to go."

Pant reached 28 and 30 in his two innings but was guilty of gifting his wicket with loose swipes which were caught in the outfield.

Rohit expected middle-order specialist Pant, renowned for an attack-first batting mentality, to fine-tune his approach in Sydney.

"It's about him understanding and figuring out what is the right way to go about it," Rohit said.

"In the past, he's given us a lot of success doing what he does.

"But it's about the certain situation of the game where if there is a risk percentage, do you want to take those risks? Do you want to let the opposition back into the game?"

FOCUS

Shahidi, Bennett star as Afghanistan draw Test

AFP
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Afghanistan veteran Hashmatullah Shahidi and Zimbabwe rookie Brian Bennett starred as the first Test was drawn after a rain-shortened final day in Bulawayo yesterday.

Shahidi claimed an Afghan record 246 runs at the end of a marathon innings while spinner Bennett took five wickets. Zimbabwe made 586 and 142-4 to lead Afghanistan by 29 runs at stumps after the tourists posted 699. Both first innings scores were national records. With Zimbabwe 88-4 in their second innings and 25 runs behind, batting stability was required and the unbeaten partnership of veterans Sean Williams (35) and Craig Ervine (22) provided it.

Shahidi departed after being trapped leg before by Bennett, whose 5-95 were the best figures among the six-man Zimbabwe attack. The 30-year-old left-hand batter faced 474 balls in 694 minutes, and struck 21 fours at Queens Sports Club in the southwestern city. His partnerships with Rahmat Shah (364 runs) and Afsar Zazai (211) ensured Afghanistan took a 113-run first innings lead.

Before the exit of Shahidi, wicketkeeper Zazai claimed a maiden Test century, hitting 113 before being caught at backward point by substitute Johnathan Campbell.

Bennett, a 21-year-old appearing in only his second Test, twice took wickets from successive balls only to be deprived of hat-tricks on both occasions. He also shone with the bat, making 110 not out in the first innings after Zimbabwe captain Ervine won the toss. Batting a second time, Zimbabwe put on 73 runs before an outside edge from Gumbie allowed Shahidi to make a simple catch in the slips.

BRIEF SCORES: Zimbabwe 586 in 135.2 overs and 142-4 in 34 overs (B. Curran 41, S, Williams 35 not out, C. Ervine 22 not out; Z. Khan 2-43) **v Afghanistan 699 in 197 overs** (H. Shahidi 246, Rahmat Shah 234, A Zazai 113; B Bennett 5-95).

TWENTY20

Duffy, Hay heroics secure series for NZ

AFP
Mount Maunganui, New Zealand

Crucial wickets to Jacob Duffy and a rollicking cameo with the bat by Mitchell Hay saw New Zealand beat Sri Lanka to wrap up their Twenty20 series with a game to spare at Mount Maunganui yesterday.

New Zealand made 186-5 in their 20 overs, with player-of-the-match Hay cracking an unbeaten 41 from 19 deliveries.

Sri Lanka in reply were all out for 141 with Duffy taking four wickets for a miserly 15 runs, including the tourists' top scorers Kusal Perera for 48 and Pathum Nissanka for 37.

"I said at the start whoever could use the wind the best would do pretty well, and we were able to do that with the bat," New Zealand captain Mitchell Santer said, while also praising Duffy's bowling.

"Every time I bring him back he gets a pole. The best way to slow a run rate down is to take wickets and that's what we were able to do in the middle."

The 45-run victory, following their eight-run win on Saturday put New Zealand 2-0 up in the three-match series.

"I'm really disappointed with the results," Sri Lankan captain Charith Asalanka said, adding his side needed to adapt more quickly to New Zealand pitches.


New Zealand's Jacob Duffy (right) and Mitchell Hay celebrate the wicket of Sri Lanka's Maheesh Theekshana during the second T20 match at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui yesterday. *(AFP)*

"They're more bouncy than at home, that's the main thing, and we have to adjust to that. At the same time they (New Zealand) were brilliant."

Sri Lanka started their run race cautiously with eight off the first two overs before Nissanka launched into New Zealand's strike bowler Matt Henry, taking 16 off his next over.

But, no sooner had Sri Lanka started to fire, Santner came into the attack into the fifth over and removed Kusal Mendis for 10 with his first delivery. Nissanka and Perera had lifted the score to 71 by the 10th over when Duffy, who turned the first game in New Zealand's favour, again made a crucial breakthrough. A slower delivery to Nissanka was scooped to Henry at fine leg and the Sri Lankan talisman was gone for 37.

When Perera was bowled at the start of the 16th over it was the beginning of the end for Sri Lanka as their last seven wickets fell for just 14 runs. New Zealand, who again lost the toss and were told to bat first, produced a steady performance until Hay opened up with three overs remaining.

In the final 18 deliveries New Zealand scored 43 runs, 35 of them coming from Hay as he atoned for his first-ball duck in game one. After New Zealand lost Rachin Ravindra for just one early, Tim Robinson and Mark Chapman put on 69 for the second wicket.

But in the 10th over, after belting the first ball from Wanindu Hasaranga over the midwicket fence, Robinson misread the next delivery and was bowled for 41. Another "wrong 'un" from Hasaranga undid Chapman, who was stumped for 42 off 29 deliveries. Hasaranga returned the best figures for Sri Lanka with 2-28.

BRIEF SCORES
New Zealand 186 for 5 (Chapman 42, Hay 41, Robinson 41) **beat Sri Lanka 141** (Perera 48, Duffy 4-15) **by 45 runs.**

TENNIS

Defending champ Dimitrov enters Brisbane 2nd round

DJOKOVIC AND KYRGIOS DELIGHTED OVER VICTORIOUS DOUBLES DEBUT AGAINST ERLER AND MIES

AFP
Brisbane

Defending champion Grigor Dimitrov eased into round two of the Brisbane International with a hard-fought win over qualifier Yannick Hanfmann yesterday, but Holger Rune crashed to defeat.

Bulgaria's second seed Dimitrov has a great track record in the city, winning the title twice, as well as making the final in 2013.

His 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 victory over Germany's Hanfmann was his 24th in Brisbane, more than any other player.

Yet he has flown under the radar this year due to the presence of former world number one Novak Djokovic and the comeback of mercurial Australian Nick Kyrgios after an 18-month injury lay-off.

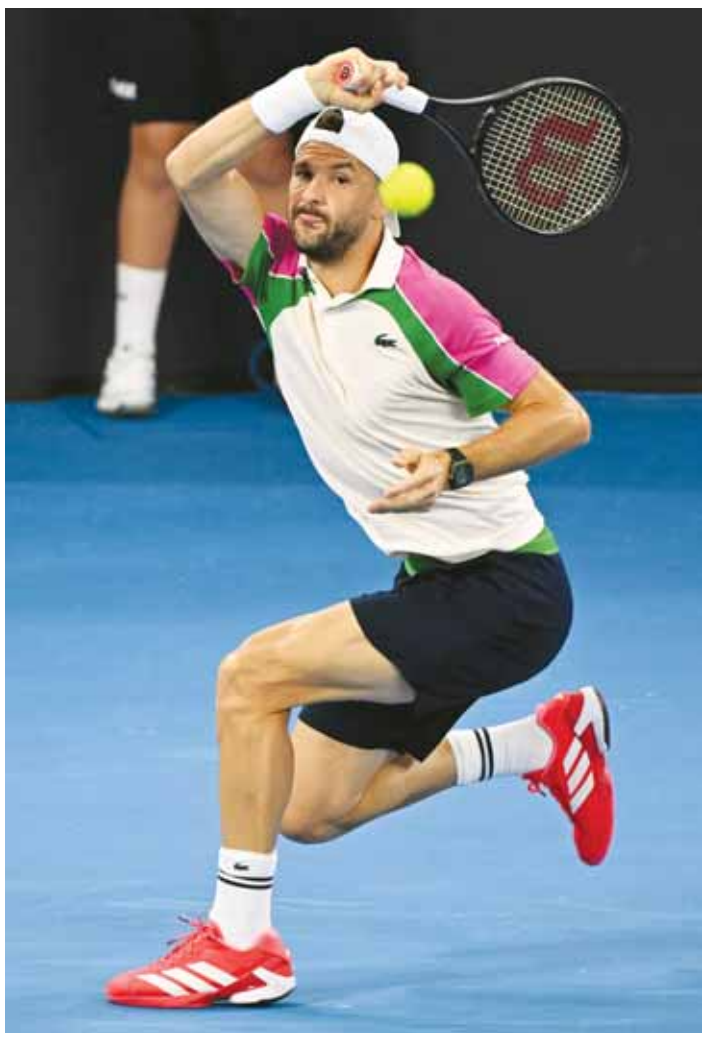
Djokovic and Kyrgios teamed up for an unlikely doubles appearance and won their first round clash 6-4, 6-7 (4/7), 10/8 over Austria's Alexander Erler and German Andreas Mies.

The two men rarely play doubles and got together for this tournament, although Djokovic hinted earlier Sunday they may pair up for next year's Grand Slams.

They won the first set against the doubles specialists Erler and Mies with one break of Mies' serve, but lost a close second set before clinching the win with a match tiebreak.

"Nick said the other day that it should be a pleasure to play with him and it is," a smiling Djokovic said. "I'm glad to share the court with him on his comeback.

"I haven't played that many doubles matches in my life so whatever Nick was saying, I was following."



Grigor Dimitrov of Bulgaria hits a return during his match against Yannick Hanfmann of Germany at the Brisbane International yesterday. *(AFP)*

Kyrgios said he was just pleased to be playing again.

"This injury's been brutal for me so I was just glad to get back on court," he said.

Dimitrov first played Brisbane in 2012, when he finished runner-up to Andy Murray.

"I came here 15 years ago and since day one I've had that love affair (with Brisbane), so I want to keep on going, keep on testing myself and delivering as long as I can," Dimitrov said. "Hopefully I can continue and go all the way again. I enjoy the weather - it's hot and humid and I like that," added the world number 10.



Australia's Nick Kyrgios (left) and Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrate a point during their doubles match against Austraia's Alexander Erler and Germany's Andreas Mies in Brisbane yesterday. *(AFP)*

Czech Jiri Lehecka caused a major upset with a 7-5, 6-3 win over third-seeded Norwegian Rune.

"To win and begin the season like that is always a good start," the 23-year-old Lehecka said. "The conditions suit me well here."

Earlier, eighth-seeded Australian Jordan Thompson came from a set down to overcome former world number six Italian Matteo Berrettini 3-6, 6-3, 6-4.

Berrettini is now 34th in the world, only eight places behind Thompson and that closeness showed in a match that last two hours, 15 minutes on Pat Rafter Arena.

"I mean today I think I was eighth seed and playing Berrettini," Thompson said. "I don't know how he's not seeded. But I feel like everybody could be a seed. This is one of the strongest tournaments of the year."

In other matches, French qualifier Benjamin Bonzi upset sixth seeded Chilean Alejandro Tabilo 6-7 (8/10), 7-6 (7/5), 6-4, while American Alex Michelsen beat Australia's Christopher O'Connell 6-4, 4-6, 7-6 (12/10). Chile's Nicolas Jarry downed Mariano Navone of Argentina and Japanese qualifier Yoshihito Nishioka beat Frenchman Arthur Rinderknech, both in straight sets.

In the women's draw, Russia's Polina Kudermetova defeated China's Wang Yafan 6-1, 6-3.

However, the Russian's older sister Veronika was knocked out by American Payton Stearns 6-2, 6-3. Ukraine's Anhelina Kalinina progressed when her Chinese opponent Wang Xinyu retired hurt with Kalinina leading 6-4, 2-0.

In an all-Australian battle, wildcard Kimberly Birrell outlasted training partner Priscilla Hon 3-6, 7-5, 6-2.

UNITED CUP

Swiatek romps as Tsitsipas crashes at United Cup

AFP
Perth, Australia

Iga Swiatek romped to an emphatic victory in her season-opening match at the United Cup yesterday, but Stefanos Tsitsipas crashed as Kazakhstan upset Greece to make the knockout round of the mixed-team tournament.

Five-time Grand Slam winner Swiatek was on court for the first time since news broke in late November that she served a one-month ban for a doping violation.

But the Pole quickly shook off any nerves in Sydney with a 6-1, 6-0 thrashing of Norway's Malene Helgo.

"Pleased with everything, honestly. I'm happy for sure with the performance," said the world number two.

"It's not always easy to play for your country, sometimes the pressure is a bit bigger.

"I feel good, I feel happy, happy I can play tennis overall," she added. "I'm just going step by step and we'll see what's next."

The 23-year-old tested positive for the heart medication trimetazidine (TMZ) in an out-of-competition sample in August when she was ranked number one.

However, the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) accepted that the violation was not intentional and she escaped with a one-month sanction.

While she was in electric form, Greek star Tsitsipas had a day to forget. He is coming off a mediocre 2024 in which his ranking dropped to its current 11 from a career-high three and was hoping for a confidence-boosting fresh start in Perth. But he was stunned 6-4, 7-6 (7/0) by 78th-ranked Alexander Shevchenko.

Kazakh world number six and 2022 Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina then survived a late wobble before burying Greek hopes with a 6-4, 6-3 defeat of Maria Sakkari.

"I'm really happy for the team," said Rybakina, now working with Novak Djokovic's former coach Goran Ivanisevic. "We all tried hard. "It was a tough match for me today and I'm so happy to be in the quarter-finals."



Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return against Norway's Malene Helgo during their singles match at the United Cup on Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney yesterday. *(AFP)*

Rybakina took the first set and led 5-0 in the second, but the former world number three Sakkari won three games in a row to threaten a comeback.

Rybakina came through on her third match point as Sakkari mishit an overhead.

"At 5-0 you have nothing to lose, she played more aggressively and hit some good shots," said Rybakina. Shevchenko called his defeat of a sluggish Tsitsipas "one of the best" of his career.

"He was not at his best today. But I played really well and found the moment to win that match," he said. "It will definitely go in my record as one of my best wins."

Defending champions Germany, led by Alexander Zverev, defeated China 2-1 in the Perth evening session as both nations reached the quarter-finals.

The Germans finished top in their group and will line up on Wednesday against Kazakhstan. China advanced as the best of the three runners-up in Perth.

Second-ranked Zverev recovered from a bad start to beat Zhang Zhizhen 2-6, 6-0, 6-2 but unfancied Gao Xinyu stunned German Laura Siegemund 6-1, 3-6, 6-3 to even the tie. The German pair combined in mixed doubles to defeat Zhang Shuai and Zhang Zhizhen 6-2, 7-6 (7/3).

Zverev had his problems in the opening rubber against an inconsistent Zhang, who swept the opening set but disappeared after that.

"I didn't start off well. I was missing more shots from my backhand side, which is normally the most stable," said Zverev.

"He was also playing extremely well, so aggressive. He was not letting me into the match or find my rhythm.

"Then I found my rhythm and I'm happy with my performance in the second and third sets."

In Sydney, Katie Boulter led Britain to victory over Argentina with all three teams in the group, which also includes hosts Australia, still in contention for the knockout rounds.

World number 24 Boulter downed 100th-ranked Nadia Podoroska 6-2, 6-3.

Underdog Billy Harris looked on track to seal the tie for Britain when he went a set up against Tomas Martin Etcheverry.

But the Argentine rallied for a gutsy 3-6, 6-3, 6-2 win to send the tie to a deciding mixed doubles.

Etcheverry fronted up again with Maria Carle to take on Boulter and Charles Broom, with the British pair coming out on top 7-6 (7/4), 7-5.

FOCUS

'King' James on top of his game at 40

AFP
Los Angeles

NBA superstar **LeBron James** celebrates his 40th birthday yesterday, the milestone carrying him to yet another first in a league in which he has starred for more than two decades - with the clock still running. The Los Angeles Lakers great will become the first NBA player ever to play in his teens, 20s, 30s and 40s.

A four-time champion, four-time NBA Most Valuable Player and four-time Finals MVP, James continues to excel. In his 22nd season he's averaging 23.5 points, nine assists and 7.5 rebounds per game.

Having surpassed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the league's all-time scoring leader in February of 2023 he has taken his total to 41,131.

Still in his sights is the record for baskets made - James's 15,088 trailing Abdul-Jabbar's 15,837 - and the record for most games played. With 1,520 he's fifth on that list topped by the 1,611 of Robert Parish.

"It's just commitment to the craft and to the passion and love I have for the game," James said when he set the minutes-played mark on December 19.

"It's kind of mind-boggling just to be in this position coaching him, playing against him for 15 years, taking three years of calling his games and then he's still playing at this level," said JJ Redick, the 40-year-old who played 15 seasons in the NBA then served as a TV commentator before being named head coach of the Los Angeles Lakes in June.

"Feels like he's just been doing this forever, and not a small stretch in human history - but forever. And that just speaks to his competitive stamina and love of the game."

James's longevity allowed him to achieve a cherished dream this season, playing alongside son Bronny James as they became the first father-son duo to play together in a regular-season game.



The Lakers' decision to draft the largely untried Bronny James -whose collegiate career was disrupted by a frightening heart attack that revealed a congenital heart defect - sparked backlash.

But James said in September that the chance to play alongside his son, and his role in helping the United States defend their Olympic title in Paris, had reinvigorated him.

"Gives you a lot of life," James said, and that's surely just what the Lakers wanted to hear from the player who signed a new two-year contract worth a reported $100mn in July.

Whether he'll go on that long remains to be seen. James's interests off the court are constantly expanding. As a partner in the Fenway Sports Group that owns Liverpool FC, James has shares in the English Premiership club as well as Major League Baseball's Boston Red Sox and the National Hockey League's Pittsburgh Penguins.

His entertainment firm the SpringHill Company has made him a player in Hollywood and Forbes estimates that James is the first basketball player to become a billionaire ($1.2bn) during his career.

When his playing days are over, James has said, he wants to become an NBA owner, preferably in Las Vegas. But first there's the pursuit of a fifth title.

James won back-to-back titles with the Miami Heat in 2012 and 2013, then returned to his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers and led them to the crown in 2016.

But he hasn't won a ring since 2020, when the Lakers triumphed in the league's "Covid bubble" in Orlando.

The Lakers have since been disappointing, reaching the Western Conference Finals in 2023, but being eliminated in the first round of the play-offs last spring.

They have struggled to build momentum this season and James looked his age as he battled through a shooting slump that saw him miss all 19 of his three-point attempts in one four-game stretch. He has also missed games with a foot injury and illness and seen his points in the paint and efficiency in transition diminish. But James delivered a classic on Christmas Day, scoring 31 points and handing out 10 assists as the Lakers edged the Golden State Warriors.

Redick sounds in awe of James's ability to keep rising to the demands of the game.

"For guys like him ... the Tom Bradys of the world, the Roger Federers of the world, it's hard to comprehend having that level of sustained excellence for so long because of the toll that it takes on all of you, not just on your body."

SPOTLIGHT

Fares dominates Qatar Cup and Arab Weightlifting Championship



Qatar's Fares Ibrahim lifts the barell during the Qatar International Cup and Arab Weightlifting Championship, organised by the Qatar Weightlifting Federation in Doha.

QNA
Doha

Qatar's Fares Ibrahim secured six gold medals in the Qatar International Cup and the Arab Weightlifting Championship, organised simultaneously by the Qatar Weightlifting Federation. The events featured 163 participants — 98 men and 65 women — from 29 countries.

Tokyo Olympic champion Fares displayed outstanding skills on the final day of both competitions, excelling in the men's 102kg weight category. He outperformed several top-tier Arab and international weightlifters.

In the Qatar International Cup, Fares clinched three gold medals in the men's 102kg weight category, securing victory in the clean and jerk (200kg), the snatch (166kg) and the combined total (366kg). Albania's Artan Kovas earned two silver medals for his total of 358kg and a 165kg snatch, along with a bronze medal for a 193 kg clean and jerk. Saudi's Ali Yousef al-Othman took silver in the clean and jerk (197kg) and two bronze medals for a 338kg total and a 141kg snatch.

In the men's 89kg weight category, Oman's Amer al-Khanjari dominated, winning three gold medals with a total lift of 340kg, comprising a 190kg clean and jerk and a 150kg snatch. Algeria's Mansour Mohamed El Amin took two silver medals for his 317kg total and a 140kg snatch,



Fares Ibrahim poses with his medals on the podium yesterday.

along with bronze for a 177kg clean and jerk. Saudi lifter Hussein Ali secured silver in the clean and jerk (177kg) and two bronze medals for a 315kg total and a 138kg snatch.

In the men's over 102kg category, Iraq's Ali al-Ammar won three gold medals, lifting a total of 400kg, with a 220kg clean and jerk and a 180kg snatch. South Korea's Lee Seung-hoon claimed silver with a 387kg total, a 213kg clean and jerk, and a 174kg snatch. The UAE's Mohammed Muayyad al-Najjar earned three bronze medals with a 385kg total, a 212kg clean and jerk, and a 173kg snatch.

In the Arab Championship, Fares maintained his dominance in the men's 102kg category, replicating his three gold-medal performance with identical lifts (200kg clean and jerk, 166kg snatch, 366kg total).

Amer al-Khanjari continued his winning streak in the men's 89 kg competition, taking home three golds. Algeria's Mansour Mohamed El Amin also impressed in the youth division, earning two golds (317kg total, 140kg snatch) and a silver for a 177kg clean and jerk.

In the men's 96kg category, Saudi weightlifter Ali Yousef al-Othman triumphed with three gold medals for a 338kg total, a 197kg clean and jerk, and a 141kg snatch. Saudi Arabia's Bader al-Eid claimed gold across the youth and junior divisions in the men's 89kg category, with identical totals of 260kg (150kg clean and jerk, 110kg snatch).

In the over 102kg youth division, Saudi's Abdullah Ali dominated with three gold medals, lifting a total of 250kg (130kg clean and jerk, 120kg snatch). Meanwhile, Saudi's Dali Mutab al-Rayhan shone in the men's 109kg youth category, securing three golds with a total of 291kg (155kg clean and jerk, 136kg snatch).

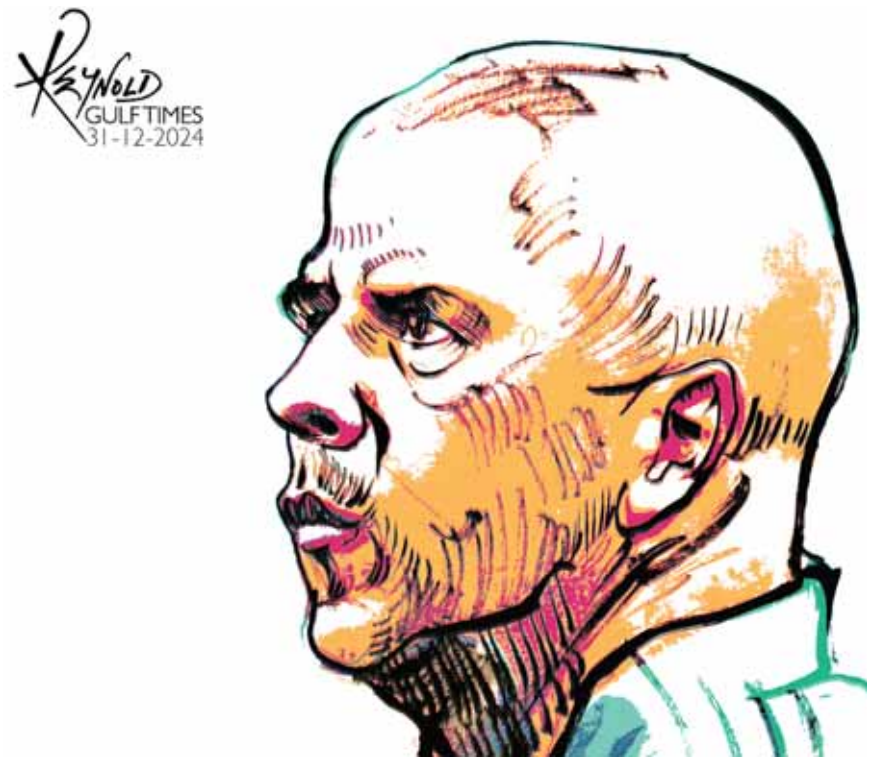
Iraq's Ali al-Ammar continued his gold streak in the over 109kg men's division, lifting an identical total of 400kg, with a 220kg clean and jerk and a 180kg snatch, matching his performance in the youth category.

FOOTBALL

Liverpool's Slot rounds off almost perfect year

Under new coach Slot, Liverpool have lost only once in all competitions this season

Reuters
London



Replacing Kop idol Juergen Klopp at Anfield looked to many like mission impossible for Dutchman **Arne Slot** when he was named as the German's successor in May. Now the appointment looks like a masterstroke halfway through his maiden Premier League campaign. Liverpool's 5-0 thrashing of West Ham United on Sunday put Slot's side eight points clear of surprise second-placed side Nottingham Forest and 14 ahead of champions Manchester City.

They have lost only once in all competitions this season and Slot can look back on an almost perfect 2024.

His Feyenoord side were unbeaten from the turn of the year to when he left as they finished runners-up to PSV Eindhoven. The only side to get the better of Liverpool this season are Nottingham Forest and the way Slot's side have ended the year, a 20th title for the club now looks in their grasp.

"Compliments to Nottingham Forest. They were the one," Slot said after his side's rout of West Ham at the London Stadium. While Slot inherited a high-quality squad and has not had to instigate a major rebuild, the tweaks he has made to Liverpool's style have put them in total control of the table.

They are a little more pragmatic than they were under Klopp's high-octane pressing game, but Slot has still retained Liverpool's attacking verve, evidenced by the fact they have scored 45 goals in 18 games including 14 in the last three.

The 46-year-old has benefited hugely from Mohamed Salah having what promises to be his best-ever season at Liverpool despite the ongoing saga of the Egyptian's contract talks. Salah's goal on Sunday took his tally for the season to 20 and his two assists mean he has been involved in 30 goals in 18 Premier League games for Liverpool this season.

The 32-year-old Salah has been involved in 52 goals in all competitions in 2024 (29 goals, 23 assists), which is more than any other player in Europe's big five leagues. "Mo and the word extraordinary is something I've heard a lot in the last six months," Slot told reporters. "He truly deserves this and probably for the eight years, but I am involved in the last half-year. I don't think he keeps surprising us because we know what a player he is and we know he is able to do so. We can only hope he can keep bringing these performances in, but I would like to add that if he scores there's also a lead-up to him scoring. So there are also other players that bring him into these positions, but if you bring Mo in these positions, he is extraordinary. Definitely."

While Slot was delighted to see five different players on the scoresheet on Sunday, a first clean sheet in five games was equally satisfying after his side conceded nine goals in their previous four.

"Clean sheets are one of the reasons why you win a lot. If every time you have to score two, three or four goals it is difficult," he said.

"At the moment we do but it is not sustainable for a longer period of time. Sometimes you need a win by keeping a clean sheet and scoring one or two."

GOMEZ FACES SPELL OUT WITH HAMSTRING INJURY

Meanwhile, Liverpool defender Joe Gomez faces a spell on the sidelines after picking up a hamstring injury in their 5-0 thrashing of West Ham United on Sunday, Arne Slot said. The 27-year-old England international was replaced by Jarell Quansah shortly before halftime at the London Stadium. Liverpool are already without first-choice centre back Ibrahima Konate due to injury.

"You saw today an injury of Joe Gomez. If a player says he wants to stop, he has to be changed," Slot said.

"In a sprint, then we all know it's a hamstring and we all know it's going take a while before he is back. I don't know how long but he will be out for quite a bit."

The win stretched Liverpool's lead in the Premier League to eight points.

They next host Manchester United at Anfield on Sunday.

Man United's transition to Amorim will be tough: Maguire

London: Manchester United's transition from Erik ten Hag to Ruben Amorim is not going to be easy as their styles are completely different but the squad have full faith in the new manager, defender Harry Maguire said. The 39-year-old former Sporting boss, who favours a back three, has won four, lost five and drawn one of his 10 games since taking over from Ten Hag in November.

United have struggled to get any momentum in the Premier League and sit 14th having lost four of their last five.

"The thing is with the managers and the styles, it is not like they have come in and they have similar styles," Maguire said.

"They are the total opposite in terms of what they want and what they demand. So the transition period is going to be tough. We all have great belief in the manager and all his coaching staff. I am sure things are going to turn around."

United, who lost 2-0 at Wolverhampton Wanderers on Thursday, were hosting Newcastle United late last night before a trip to face leaders Liverpool on Sunday.

REFEREES TO EXPLAIN VAR DECISIONS TO STADIUM IN LEAGUE CUP SEMIS

Referees will explain VAR decisions to the crowd in a trial measure to be implemented in the League Cup semi-final matches next week, the English Football League (EFL) said. As part of the trial, referees will use the stadium public address system to announce the final decision following a visit to the VAR pitchside monitor, or after decisions made on matters such as accidental handball by a scorer or offside judgments.

In-stadium VAR announcements have already been made in trial runs at FIFA tournaments including the Women's World Cup last year and also at the 2023 Club World Cup.

VAR is only used in the League Cup at the semi-final stage, and the trial will cover both legs of the Arsenal versus Newcastle United and Tottenham Hotspur against Liverpool ties.

The first-leg matches take place at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium on Jan. 7 and at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium the following day.

FORMER BARCA FORWARD SOTIL DIES AGED 75

Former Barcelona forward Hugo Sotil, famously known as 'Cholo', has died aged 75, the La Liga club said. The former Peruvian international, considered one of the finest South American players of his generation, was admitted to hospital earlier this month due to illness.

Sotil, who made his professional debut at Deportivo Municipal, joined Barcelona in 1973 and won the league title in his maiden campaign.

Sotil, who won 62 caps for his country, was part of the national team that won the 1975 Copa America where the Peruvian scored the only goal in the final against Colombia.

SERIE A

Conceicao named Milan manager after Fonseca sacked

Reuters
Milan

AC Milan have appointed Sergio Conceicao to become their new manager, the Serie A side said yesterday, after the Italian club parted ways with Paulo Fonseca. The Portuguese coach has signed a deal until June 30, 2026, the club said in a statement.

Milan sacked Fonseca earlier yesterday after only six months in the job after an inconsistent run of form left the club eighth in the Italian top flight. Milan, who drew 1-1 at home against struggling AS Roma on Sunday, have won only two of their last seven league games.

The 19-time Italian champions sit eight points off the top four with a game in hand, and 14 points behind leaders Atalanta.

"AC Milan announces that Paulo Fonseca has been relieved of his duties as head coach of the men's first team," Milan said in a statement.

Conceicao, 50, had been without a team since leaving Portuguese giants Porto in June despite signing a four-year contract extension only two months before. In his seven-year tenure he became the club's most successful coach, guiding them to three championships, four Portuguese Cups, a League Cup, and three Super Cups.

Conceicao, who was a winger at Porto, Lazio and Inter Milan during his playing days, started his managerial career as an assistant at Belgian top-flight side Standard Liege in 2010.

He then managed Portugal's Olhanense and Academica before taking charge of Braga in 2014, followed by stints at Vitoria Guimaraes and Ligue 1 club Nantes before signing with Porto in 2017.

Fonseca was appointed in June to replace Italian Stefano Pioli, who had helped Milan to a single league title in 2022 during his five-year tenure, finishing second and 19 points off champions Inter Milan in his last season. Expectations were therefore going to be high from the start for former Roma coach Fonseca, who arrived after two seasons at French Ligue 1 side Lille.

But Milan got off to a slow start under the 51-year-old Portuguese, drawing 2-2 against Torino and Lazio either side of a 2-1 loss at promoted Parma. Fonseca led Milan to their first win of the season mid-September, a 4-0 home victory over Venezia, before beating rivals Inter 2-1.

After a similarly poor start to their Champions League campaign, where they suffered back-to-back defeats by Liverpool and Bayer Leverkusen, they embarked on a four-game winning streak, beating champions Real Madrid along the way. However, Milan have won only seven of their 17 league matches this season.



Paulo Fonseca (centre) reacts as he receives a red card during AC Milan's Serie A match against AS Roma at San Siro Stadium in Milan on Sunday. *(AFP)*

Fonseca previously won the Portuguese Super Cup with Porto in 2013, the Portuguese Cup with Braga in 2015-16, as well as three consecutive Ukrainian Premier League titles with Shakhtar Donetsk between 2017 and 2019.

On Sunday, Fonseca had dismissed growing speculation about his future, stressing that he had not discussed his role with anyone and had no fear. Rumours about his possible departure dominated Italian media coverage of Milan's 1-1 draw at home against AS Roma in Serie A.

"Did I have a tough meeting with Zlatan?" Fonseca said of rumours he had spoken to the club's senior adviser and former player Zlatan Ibrahimovic. "No, I haven't spoken to anyone. I haven't seen anyone from the club. I can't say anything more. I can't make up things that haven't happened," he told a press conference.