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CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Rice's free-kick masterclass helps Arsenal stun Madrid

Rice scores two majestic free-kicks in the second half, while Merino added Arsenal's third goal

AFP
London

Arsenal stormed to a stunning 3-0 win over Champions League holders Real Madrid as Declan Rice's free-kick masterclass left the Gunners within touching distance of a place in the semi-finals.

Rice scored two majestic free-kicks in the second half of the quarter-final first leg at the Emirates Stadium. Mikel Merino added Arsenal's third goal before Real's Eduardo Camavinga was sent off for kicking the ball away in the closing minutes to leave the Spanish giants in disarray.

The brilliance of Rice's brace cannot be understated, with even Real keeper Thibaut Courtois - usually so inspired on Champions League nights - unable to get anywhere near the England midfielder's thunderbolts. Incredibly, Rice had never scored a free-kick in his career before the first of his missiles hit the back of the Real net.

It was no more than Arsenal deserved for a mature performance that exposed injury-hit Real in ruthless style. Mikel Arteta's men will travel to the Bernabeu for the second leg on April 16 as firm favourites to advance to a semi-final tie against Paris Saint-Germain or Aston Villa, who meet in their quarter-final first leg today.

The Gunners have not reached the Champions League semi-finals since 2009, but that target is now within their grasp after an evening that will go down as one of the most memorable in the club's storied history. Arteta had labelled the clash with Real as the "biggest night" of his career as he urged his players to write their own history by winning Arsenal's first Champions League crown.

They rose to the challenge so successfully that even Arteta might have been surprised. Arsenal trail Premier League leaders Liverpool by 11 points and look destined to finish as runners-up for a third successive season. But the Champions League now offers Arteta genuine hope of a first major trophy since the 2020 FA Cup, providing they can finish the job in Madrid next week.

Beaten by Bayern Munich in the quarter-finals last season, Arsenal's only Champions League final appearance ended in defeat against Barcelona in 2006 - a run



Arsenal's Declan Rice (right) celebrates after scoring against Real Madrid during the Champions League quarter-final first leg at the Emirates Stadium in London yesterday. (Reuters)

that included a last 16 victory over Real. For Real, it was a chastening defeat as the 15-time European champions were punished for the flaws that had already seen them beaten 10 times in all competitions this term as they lag four points behind La Liga leaders Barcelona.

Jude Bellingham was largely anonymous and Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Junior posed only sporadic threats after a promising start. Vinicius Junior threatened in the opening stages, curling wide after Mbappe picked him out inside the Arsenal area. Mbappe's electric pace took him clear of the Arsenal defence in another lightning

raid, but the France star shot straight at David Raya.

Arsenal showed no signs of being cowed by Real's star-studded attack and Rice's towering header from Jurrien Timber's cross forced a fine save from Thibaut Courtois, who scrambled across to keep out Gabriel Martinelli's effort from the rebound. Mbappe lashed into the side-netting from an acute angle, but Real were unable to match Arsenal's intensity in the second half and the Gunners deservedly took the lead in the 58th minute.

Rice stepped up 25 yards from goal and whipped a sublime free-kick around the

Real wall and into the far corner. It was a stunning strike that even former Real defender and set-piece maestro Roberto Carlos, watching from the Emirates stands, would have been proud of.

Arsenal almost struck again in a remarkable sequence that saw Courtois save Martinelli's blast before Merino's shot from the rebound was hacked off the line by David Alaba and Courtois again denied Merino. Real were on the ropes and Rice landed another devastating blow in the 70th minute, lashing an unstoppable free-kick into the top corner from 20 yards as Courtois grasped at thin air.

As the ecstatic Arsenal fans roared "Declan Rice, we got him half praise", that reference to his £105 million fee didn't seem like hyperbole for once. Arsenal weren't finished yet and Merino put Arsenal in dreamland five minutes later with a clinical finish from 12 yards as the Emirates turned into a roiling red sea of celebration.

LATE FRATTESI STRIKE GIVES INTER EDGE OVER BAYERN

In Munich, An 88th-minute Davide Frattesi goal took Inter Milan to a 2-1 win against Bayern Munich, giving the Italians the edge after the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final. Undermanned Bayern, nursing a bulging casualty ward, set the tone in the first half-hour, with Michael Olise and Harry Kane narrowly failing to break through.

Inter opened the scoring on the 38-minute mark when Marcus Thuram's clever back-heel found Lautaro Martinez who blasted home. The Italians maintained control until Bayern veteran Thomas Muller, days after announcing a summer departure after 25 years at the club, scored the equaliser with a typical poacher's finish with five minutes remaining.

Not content to be spectators to a Bayern fairytale ending, Inter broke on the counter just three minutes later, with Carlos Augusto finding Frattesi, who scored Inter's second. Inter, defeated in the final by Manchester City two seasons ago, have their noses in front in their bid to make the last four of the competition. The late goal consigned Bayern to their first home defeat in the Champions League since 2021, a run of 22 matches.

Semi-finalists last season, Bayern's preparation for the game was hampered by an injury crisis. The German giants were particularly hard hit in defence, with England veteran Eric Dier and Kim Min-jae the only two fit centre-backs.

Inter had their own injury woes in the rematch of the 2010 Champions League final but welcomed the news that Alessandro Bastoni, subbed off at halftime in Serie A on Saturday, was fit to start. Bayern coach Vincent Kompany replaced the injured Jamal Musiala by moving left-back Raphael Guerreiro to the number 10 position behind Kane, leaving veteran Mueller on the bench.

ATHLETICS

Doha crowd 'brings out the best in us', says Chopra ahead of Diamond League meet

Olympic javelin silver medalist Neeraj Chopra of India, the reigning world and Asian Games champion, will compete at the Doha Diamond League meeting for the third successive year on Friday, May 16.

Chopra is India's national record holder with a best of 89.94m. He was the first Indian track and field athlete to set a world record (under-20) when he threw 86.48m to win the 2016 World U20 Championships, which was also the first time an Indian athlete had won a global track and field title.

He made history in Tokyo when he became the country's first Olympic gold medalist in track and field and that trend continued at the 2023 World Athletics Championships in Budapest when he became the first athlete from India to strike gold.

Although finishing runner-up to Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem in 2024 Paris Olympics, Chopra delivered the second-best throw of his career (at the time) with 89.45m. Hindered by a niggling hamstring problem he fouled his remaining



"I'm always overwhelmed by the support I get from the Indian people in Qatar - there aren't enough words to thank them"

attempts, but he impressively improved that mark to 89.49m at the Diamond League meeting in Lausanne two weeks later.

The Doha javelin competition has built a reputation for its high quality in recent years and much has been made of Chopra's potential to throw 90m. The 2024 event was won by Jakub Vadlejch of Czech Republic with 88.38m to Chopra's 88.36m in second. In 2023, Chopra set the tone

for his gold medal-winning summer with an 88.67m victory.

"I'm always overwhelmed by the support I get from the Indian people in Qatar - there aren't enough words to thank them," said the 27-year-old who is now coached by Jan Zelezny of Czech Republic, the world javelin record holder (98.48m) and a multiple Olympic and world champion.

"Last year taught me a lot, but I was proud to be on the podium for India once again at the Olympic Games. I'm now fully fit and really enjoying the hard work that Jan Zelezny and I are putting in. I'm looking forward to opening my season in Doha. The crowd at the Qatar Sports Club is always loud, and I think that brings out the best in all of us. I know the fans expect big things from me when I compete here - and with good conditions and a great atmosphere that's definitely possible - but I pride myself on my consistency, which I believe is one of my greatest strengths. For me, that's more important than just chasing a number."

The Doha Meeting is the third meeting of the 2025 Wanda Diamond League. The series - which will pay out a record total of \$9.24m in prize money - comprises 15 of the most prestigious events in global track and field across four different continents, starting with Xiamen on April 26 and concluding with a single final across two days in Zurich in August 27-28.

MOTOGP

World champ Martin to make injury return at Qatar GP

AFP
Paris

Reigning MotoGP world champion Jorge Martin will return from injury this weekend at the Qatar Grand Prix after missing the first three races of the season, his Aprilia team said yesterday.

The Spaniard broke his right hand and foot in a crash during the first day of pre-season testing in Malaysia in February. "I have a great desire to be back on the track and I'm happy to at least be able to try and race in Qatar," Martin said in an Aprilia statement.

"The goal will be to build up a bit of confidence with the RS-GP25 and to begin to turn some laps. I don't know how my physical fitness will be - undoubtedly not 100 percent... Physically, I'm not even sure I'll be able to finish the race, but if we can manage, it will be a victory because that will mean that I'm beginning to recover."

The Qatar Grand Prix week-



end gets under way at the Lusail circuit with practice sessions on Friday. Martin signed for Aprilia after edging out Francesco Bagnaia to win last season's world title while racing for Ducati satellite team Pramac.

He will belatedly start his title defence 87 points behind early championship leader Alex Marquez. Gresini rider Marquez holds a one-point lead in the standings over his older brother and six-time world champion Marc Marquez, who has been revitalised this season, posting two race victories and three sprint wins.

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Arya ton powers Punjab to 18-run win over Chennai

The left-hander smashed 103 off 42 balls to steer Punjab to 219-6



Punjab Kings' Priyansh Arya (right) plays a shot as Chennai Super Kings' Mahendra Singh Dhoni looks on during the IPL match at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh International Cricket Stadium on the outskirts of Chandigarh yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Chandigarh, India

Up and coming Indian batter Priyansh Arya struck his first century in the IPL to lead Punjab Kings to an 18-run win over Chennai Super Kings yesterday.

Arya, a left-hand batter known for his six-hitting in domestic cricket, smashed 103 off 42 balls to steer Punjab to 219-6 at Mullanpur, near Chandigarh, where Chennai managed 201-5.

Spotted by Punjab after hitting six sixes in an over in a Delhi Premier League T20 match last year,

the 24-year-old Arya was brought by the franchise for \$440,000 in the November auction.

The big-hitter did not disappoint as he smashed the second ton of this season in his fourth match in the T20 tournament. He raced to his hundred in 39 balls as he pummeled the opposition at attack with seven fours and nine sixes. The ton was the fastest against five-time champions Chennai and the joint fourth-fastest ever in the IPL. Chris Gayle holds the record with a century in 30 balls.

Opener Arya found little support at the start as Punjab slipped to 83-5. After Shashank Singh joined the rising star and

the two put together 71 runs in 34 balls. Arya finally fell to Afghanistan spinner Noor Ahmad, but Shashank, with his 52, and South African Marco Jansen, who smashed 34, finished with a flourish in an unbeaten stand of 65.

Chennai attempted to make a fist of the chase as New Zealand left-handers Rachin Ravindra and Devon Conway put on 61 runs for the opening wicket.

Australia spinner Glenn Maxwell got Ravindra stumped on 36. Skipper Rituraj Gaikwad fell for one off fast bowler Lockie Ferguson.

Conway powered on with impact substitute Shivam Dube as

the two put on 89 runs but Ferguson broke through to get the left-handed Dube bowled for 42.

Veteran MS Dhoni walked out to loud cheers but even though Conway retired out, Chennai's batters failed to keep up to the ever-increasing run-rate.

Dhoni, 43, raised faint hopes of getting the target in his 12-ball 27 but departed at the start of the last over.

BRIEF SCORES
Punjab Kings 219 for 6 (Arya 103, Shashank 52*, Khaleel 2-45)
beat Chennai Super Kings 201 for 5 (Conway 69, Dube 42, Ferguson 2-40) **by 18 runs**

FOCUS

MI happy with Bumrah's bowling form after return

Reuters
Bengaluru

Mumbai Indians pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah looks in solid shape after a three-month layoff due to a back injury sustained during India's tour of Australia this year and the 31-year-old will get better with more game time, coach Mahela Jayawardene said.

Bumrah had back spasms during India's final Test in Sydney in early January as they lost the series 3-1 and was also ruled out of a five-match Twenty20 international series with England and the triumphant 50-overs Champions Trophy campaign.

The talismanic seamer returned to action in Mumbai's 12-run loss to Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the Indian Premier League on Monday, going wicketless and conceding 29 runs in his four overs, but Jayawardene said there were plenty of positives.

"I just spoke to him after the game and he looks in good nick," Jayawardene told reporters.

"He's disappointed as well. He wanted a win when he came back. But other than that, he looks fine. I think the pace was up and the execution was good."

Jayawardene said Mumbai wanted to ease Bumrah back and Trent Boult and Deepak Chahar were the first choices to handle the new ball against Bengaluru.

"I think we've got two swing bowlers, we need to give them that opportunity first up," Jayawardene said.

"Boom's coming back from a



Mumbai Indians' fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah reacts during an IPL match against Royal Challengers Bengaluru at Wankhede Stadium, Mumbai, India, on Monday. (Reuters)

three-month layoff as well. So we just wanted to ease him into the competition. He bowled well and he controlled things really well.

"The more he starts playing ... he'll get into it. The last time he was playing a Test match, all of a sudden he's playing a T20. So we need to understand that. The skills were brilliant but there are areas for us to improve."

Skipper Patidar lauds brave Krunal for late burst in RCB win
Royal Challengers Bengaluru captain Rajat Patidar heaped praise on Krunal Pandya for his bravery during the final over of their tense victory over five-times Indian Premier League champions Mumbai Indians after the all-rounder claimed three wickets.

Monday's 12-run win at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium marked the first time Bengaluru prevailed

at the venue in a decade but the match was in the balance until the end with 19 runs needed by the hosts in the last six balls.

But Krunal removed Mitchell Santner and Deepak Chahar in the first two deliveries of the 20th over and then Naman Dhir in the penultimate ball to finish with figures of 4-45 and hand his brother Hardik's side their fourth loss in five matches.

"It wasn't easy and the way that he bowled was amazing," Patidar said.

"The way he showed courage was fantastic. It was pretty clear that we had to take the game as deep as we can, and then we could use one over of KP at the end."

Krunal said the confidence his skipper gave him made a big difference as they successfully defended their total of 221. "Rajat has been fantastic," Pandya added



Mumbai Indians' captain Hardik Pandya (right) speaks with his brother and Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Krunal Pandya during the IPL match at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Monday. (AFP)

of Patidar, who scored 64 after Virat Kohli's 67. "He's a captain who gives you the comfort when he gives you the ball, he gives you the confidence, backs your game plan and as a bowler you want that. He has a calm demeanour, doesn't make things complicated. You can see that also in how he bats."

Krunal said he felt for his brother, who was left to digest another defeat in a shaky start to Mumbai's season.

"The bond that we have, at the end of the day, we knew only one Pandya would win," Krunal said after the match.

"But the love and affection we have for each other is natural," he added.

CHESS

QCA president meets FIDE officials in China



QNA
Shanghai, China

Muhammad al-Mudhahka, President of the Qatar Chess Association (QCA), has met with officials of the International Chess Federation (FIDE) focused on advance preparations for the World Chess Championship to be hosted by Qatar from December 25-31, 2025.

Al-Mudhahka pointed out that during his stay in Shanghai, China, several topics related to the development of the World Championship and 'QCAs determination to host a distinguished edition of the championship were discussed'.

In a statement to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), he said that the Doha edition will feature the world's best players. He noted that

the last edition in New York saw the participation of 180 players in the men's category and 110 players in the women's category.

Al-Mudhahka explained that the Qatari national team will participate in the international tournament, which will be crucial for improving their ranking and competing against various chess schools worldwide.

He also mentioned that the fourth round of the Women's World Championship, featuring Chinese players Ju Wenjun and Tan Zhongyi, will consist of 12 matches.

FIDE announced last January that Qatar has been awarded the honour of hosting the FIDE World Championship for the second time, following its initial hosting in 2016 at the Ali Bin Hamad Al Attiyah Arena in Doha.

SPOTLIGHT

Pooran and Marsh help Lucknow edge Kolkata

AFP
Kolkata

Explosive knocks from Nicholas Pooran and Mitchell Marsh set up a tense four-run win for Lucknow Super Giants in a high-scoring IPL clash against Kolkata Knight Riders yesterday.

Marsh smashed 81 for his fourth half-century of the tournament and Pooran an unbeaten 36-ball 87 to fire Lucknow to 238-3 at Kolkata's Eden Gardens.

Kolkata mounted a strong reply as skipper Ajinkya Rahane struck 61 off 35 balls and Rinku Singh blasted an unbeaten 38 in a late blitz, but the home team finished on 234-7.

Lucknow have three wins from five matches. Kolkata, who won their third IPL title last year, have three defeats from their five outings.

LSG fast bowler Akash Deep and Shardul Thakur took two wickets each and struck at key moments to trigger a middle-order collapse

during which KKR lost four wickets in 16 balls.

Thakur dismissed Rahane and Andre Russell, for seven, while Deep cut short Venkatesh Iyer's knock on 45.

Sunil Narine got the chase off to a brisk start with his 13-ball 30 and after his departure Rahane and Iyer kept up the charge until Kolkata lost their way.

Earlier, the in-form Marsh laid the foundations for Lucknow's mammoth total in his 99-run opening stand with Aiden Markram, who hit 47.

Pooran is the leading run-scorer in the 2025 IPL so far with 288 runs including three half-centuries in five matches, scoring at a strike-rate of 225.

Marsh has accumulated 265 runs and is second on the list.

BRIEF SCORES
Lucknow Super Giants 238 for 3 (Pooran 87*, Marsh 81, Markram 47, Harshit 2-51) **beat Kolkata Knight Riders 234 for 7** (Rahane 61, Venkatesh 45, Rinku 38, Thakur 2-52) **by 4 runs**

Former Test player Pucovski retires after concussion struggle

Melbourne: Former Test batsman Will Pucovski has confirmed his retirement from cricket at the age of 27 as the Australian continues to battle concussion symptoms more than a year after being struck by a ball in a domestic match. The Melbourne native was once seen as the future of Australian cricket as he made a half-century on his Test debut against India at the Sydney Cricket Ground in 2021.

It was to prove his only international match, though, as he suffered a shoulder injury in the field and was never able to break back into the squad due to repeated instances of concussion. Pucovski confirmed to radio station SEN yesterday that he was still suffering symptoms more than a year after being hit in the helmet by a delivery from Tasmania fast bowler Riley Meredith in a Sheffield Shield match in Hobart.

"It's been a tough year" "From there it's been a tough year, a lot of the symptoms didn't go away, which has led me to this decision," said the former Victoria number three, who has battled headaches, dizziness and lethargy.

"It's unfortunately gotten to a stage now where a year or so down the track (I am) still suffering, still don't really have the answers I have been looking for in terms of why I am still getting



these symptoms, and it's come time to make this decision." The setback he suffered against Tasmania was the 13th known instance of concussion over his career which began with huge promise as the right-hander racked up runs in Victoria's top order.

While on the cusp of playing Test cricket, Pucovski withdrew himself from selection several times to manage mental health problems linked to concussion. He told SEN he was still suffering from fatigue and with "things on his left side."

He said his next move would be in coaching with his local team, the Melbourne Cricket Club, which would help soften the blow of never playing the sport again. "I am 27 and hopefully I have a good life ahead of me ... I don't want to do any more damage to my brain," he said.

TENNIS

Zverev crashes as Tsitsipas and Draper advance

'I thought my level was terrible, but that's just my opinion'

AFP
Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco

Top seed Alexander Zverev crashed out in his opening match of the Monte Carlo Masters yesterday falling to Italy's Matteo Berrettini as defending champion Stefanos Tsitsipas and Britain's Jack Draper both advanced.

World number two Zverev has struggled for any kind of form since his defeat by Jannik Sinner in the Australian Open final at the end of January, winning just six of 12 matches.

But with a first-round bye in the absence of world number one Sinner, who is suspended for a doping violation until May 4, Zverev was among the favourites.

After a controlled start to the game, the German slumped to a 2-6, 6-3, 7-5 defeat to 34th-ranked Berrettini, at the end of a high-flying match, which had included an impressive 48-stroke rally won by the Italian.

"It's been the worst period since my injury (the) last few months," said Zverev who has suffered a string of early exits of late, including at Indian Wells.

"I played a great first set, and once I got broken in the second set I play ten levels down. My ball is much slower. I stop hitting the ball.

"The same story the last few months. Nothing changes. So it's me who lost the match, once again.

"I thought my level was terrible, but that's just my opinion."

Defending champion and three-time Monte Carlo winner Tsitsipas advanced past 38th-ranked Australian Jordan Thompson. After a lacklustre US tour, the Dubai winner won through 4-6, 6-4, 6-2 in his second round tie.

Indian Wells champion Draper, seeded fifth, eased past 45th-



Italy's Matteo Berrettini plays a forehand return to Germany's Alexander Zverev during the Monte Carlo ATP Masters Series match on the Rainier III court at the Monte Carlo Country Club in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin yesterday. Berrettini won 2-6, 6-3, 7-5. (AFP)

ranked American Marcos Giron 6-1, 6-1.

Novak Djokovic - the winner in 2013 and 2015 - and Carlos Alcaraz start their campaigns today.

'Comfortable on clay'

Zverev won the first set against former Wimbledon runner-up Berrettini but a break of serve in the sixth game of the second set allowed the Italian to level the match. Berrettini broke at 3-all in the final set before blowing a chance to close out victory on his own serve, but he broke again for a 6-5 lead after an astonishing 48-shot rally.

The 34th-ranked Berrettini made no mistake with his second opportunity though, advancing to a last-16 meeting with Lorenzo Musetti or Jiri Lehecka.

"The game plan was the same but I changed my attitude and the way I was believing in my strokes," Berrettini said. "I told

myself to be more aggressive and if I am going to lose this match, I am going to do the right things and luckily it worked."

Berrettini has won 17 of his past 18 matches on clay. Last season, he captured clay-court titles in Marrakesh, Gstaad and Kitzbuehel. However, he hasn't played at the French Open since 2021 due to injuries.

"I have missed the biggest tournament on clay for the past three years and that was tough and now I want to enjoy it. I feel really comfortable on clay," said the former world number six.

For Zverev, last year's Roland Garros runner-up, it was another disappointing outcome on clay after quarter-final exits in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. His next tournament will be on home soil in Munich.

Meanwhile Tsitsipas let a 5-2 lead slip in the second set, before getting past Thompson to set up

a third round meeting with either Portugal's Nuno Borges or Spaniard Pedro Martinez.

"I really didn't know what to expect, you don't know what your opponent is capable of," said Tsitsipas.

"He showed a good first set, he seemed to be playing quite reserved and wasn't giving me much to work with. I was just trying to find something to reignite that consistency within my game."

Dane Holger Rune, the 10th seed, retired due to illness against Portugal's Nuno Borges.

Rune, the Monte Carlo runner-up in 2023, called for the doctor after losing the opening set before shaking hands with his opponent while trailing 6-2, 3-0.

Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov, a two-time Monte Carlo semi-finalist, defeated Chilean Nicolas Jarry 6-3, 6-4, on his seventh match point.

BASKETBALL

Qatar drawn along with Australia, South Korea and Lebanon for FIBA Asia Cup 2025



By Sports Reporter
Jeddah

Qatar have been drawn along with reigning two-time champions Australia, South Korea and Lebanon in Group A for the 31st FIBA Asia Cup 2025 to be held at Jeddah in Saudi Arabia from August 5-17, marking the first time the Gulf state is hosting FIBA's flagship event in Asia after 1997.

The draw ceremony in Jeddah with 16 teams divided into four groups of four teams each.

The other groups are:

Group B: Guam, Japan, Syria, Iran

Group C: China, Jordan, India, Saudi Arabia

Group D: Chinese Taipei, New Zealand, Iraq, Philippines

Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari, Secretary-General of the Qatar Basketball Association (QBA), who was also present at the draw ceremony, expressed confidence in Qatar's ability to perform well, despite being placed in a challenging group.

"We have full trust in our play-

ers and coaching staff to deliver a strong performance," he said.

This edition, which marks the first time Saudi Arabia will host the FIBA Asia Cup, holds particular significance for Arab teams, including Qatar, as they aim to showcase the region's growing basketball talent and compete for the continental title.

During the group phase, the teams will play against each other in a single-round robin format. The first-placed teams of each group will qualify directly to the quarter-finals. The second- and third-placed teams in each group will play in a qualification to the quarter-finals round. The final phase of the competition will proceed from the quarter-finals onwards with a single-elimination format in place.

Australia, have yet to lose a game in the Asia Cup and will be looking to maintain their perfect record.

2022 Finalists Lebanon came close to winning it all and will be aiming for their first-ever Asia Cup title. China will try to extend their lead as all-time leader in Asia Cup titles, having already won 16 in the past.

GOLF / AUGUSTA MASTERS

McIlroy tunes out 'narrative and noise'

Reuters
Augusta, Georgia

Sunday finally could be reckoning day for the red-hot Rory McIlroy as he chases an elusive green jacket.

The World No 2 arrived in peak condition this week at Augusta National Golf Club, where he finished second at the Masters in 2022 but also missed the cut in 2023 and 2021.

McIlroy already has two wins under his belt this season at the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am in January and The Players Championship last month.

"It's been a nice way to start the year with the two victories at Pebble Beach and Sawgrass," he told reporters yesterday in Augusta, Ga.

"Had a decent showing last

time out when I played in Houston a couple weeks ago, had a good weekend... so yeah, it's been a really good sort of lead-in to it."

The Masters is McIlroy's white whale.

The 35-year-old Northern Irishman has fallen short of completing his career grand slam for more than a decade now, having won two PGA Championships (2012, 2014), the US Open in 2011 and The Open Championship in 2014.

After his T5 at the Texas Children's Houston Open, McIlroy took last week off to rest a sore elbow.

"It's all good," he said yesterday and practised with his coach, Michael Bannon.

When he wasn't out playing "quite a bit of golf," he said he has spent time binge-watching episodes of "Bridgerton" and read-

ing the John Grisham novel "The Reckoning".

"Yeah, I've gotten into 'Bridgerton' the last - I didn't think I would," McIlroy said. "I was very against watching it, but Erica convinced me. So, we're on a bit of a 'Bridgerton' kick this week, yeah."

McIlroy, who also cracked the top 10 at the Masters in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2020, finished T22 last year with four rounds in the 70s.

He's grown accustomed to the annual April talk that "this could be his year" at Augusta.

"I understand the narrative and the noise, and there's a lot of anticipation and buildup coming into this tournament each and every year, but I just have to keep my head down and focus on my job," he said.

McIlroy has fallen painfully

short of ending his major drought several times over the years, including runner-up finishes at the past two US Opens and his second-place finish to Scottie Scheffler at the 2022 Masters.

"I think once you go through that, once you go through those heartbreaks, as I call them, or disappointments, you get to a place where you remember how it feels and you wake up the next day and you're like, yeah, life goes on, it's not as bad as I thought it was going to be," he said.

"And I think that's the - it's going through those times, especially in recent memory, where the last few years I've had chances to win some of the biggest golf tournaments in the world and it hasn't quite happened. But life moves on. You dust yourself off and you go again."



Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy hits his tee shot on the 12th hole during a practice round at the Augusta National Golf Club, Augusta, Georgia, US, yesterday. (Reuters)

Seve still inspires as Rahm chases second Masters title



Spain's Jon Rahm talks to a club member on the 12th hole during a practice round at the Augusta National Golf Club, Augusta, Georgia, US. (Reuters)

Augusta, Georgia: Former Masters champion Jon Rahm says the mystique of Augusta National has an extra dimension for Spanish golfers still inspired by Seve Ballesteros, the first European to win the coveted green jacket.

In 2023, Rahm became the fourth Spaniard to win the Masters, after Ballesteros in 1980 and '83, Jose Maria Olazabal in 1994 and '99, and Sergio Garcia in 2017.

"I think it all started with Seve," Rahm said yesterday as he prepared for a practice round ahead of tomorrow's start to the 89th edition of the Masters. "I think he set that essence, and it can't be a coincidence that the last two Spanish players to win it both won it on what would have been Seve's birthday."

"There's definitely something here going on with him and with all of us, and I think it's something we can all feel."

Rahm will be hoping some of that Seve spirit can help him get off to a solid start in the first major championship of 2025, after a disappointing showing in last year's majors amid his move to the Saudi-

backed LIV Golf circuit in December of 2023. Rahm finished tied for 45th in his Masters defence last year. He missed the cut at the PGA Championship and withdrew from the US Open with a foot injury before finishing with a share of seventh at the Open Championship.

"Not my favourite major season last year, that's true," Rahm said. "Didn't play great here, didn't play great at the PGA, and wasn't even able to tee it up at the US Open."

"I was very happy to finish up there at The Open on a very challenging week. At least set the tone hopefully for this year, and feel like I'm playing much better golf coming into this week."

Rahm won the individual championship in his debut LIV Golf season - bagging the \$18mn bonus prize.

FULL SPANISH FOUR-BALL

He has yet to win in 2025, but started the year with a runner-up finish in Riyadh and has since added four more top-10 finishes and says he's "feeling really, really good about this year in general."

Rahm was heading out yesterday afternoon for a practice round alongside Olazabal, Garcia and Spanish amateur Jose Luis "Josele" Ballester - who is making his Masters debut after following his 2023 European Amateur championship victory with a win in the US Amateur last year.

"Full Spanish four-ball with Ollie, Sergio, Josele," Rahm said. "Quite special to be able to share the stage with two past champions, with Ollie, which I spent basically two and a half hours asking Ollie to tell us stories because he has a story for every tree that has been on property and shots that he's seen and things like that - same with Sergio."

While Ballester is getting his first taste of Augusta National, another Spaniard has actually joined the ranks of Spanish champions at the fabled Georgia club this year as Carla Bernat Escuder won the Augusta National Women's Amateur last week. "Spanish players being known for being rather creative with good short games, I think that's usually a recipe that works really well at Augusta National," Rahm said. "There's no surprise that there's now five champions here."

FOOTBALL

PSG coach Enrique 'delighted' to be facing Asensio in Champions League

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique has no fears about Marco Asensio coming back to haunt the French side, as the on-loan Spaniard prepares to line up for Aston Villa against his parent club in the quarter-finals of the Champions League.

"I am delighted he can play," the PSG boss told reporters on the eve of today's first leg between the sides at the Parc des Princes in the French capital. "He wasn't getting the game time he wanted here and he had the opportunity to go to Birmingham. It is good that he is playing."

The 29-year-old Spanish international made 16 appearances for PSG in the first half of the season but had fallen out of favour so was allowed to join Villa on loan at the start of February, just before the winter transfer window closed. He has since scored eight goals in 11 appearances for Villa, including three over the two legs of their Champions League last-16 win against Club Brugge.

"I have shared a lot with him with the national team," added Luis Enrique, under whom the former Real Madrid player featured for Spain at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. "He came to the World Cup with me and was very important, and he was important for us last season and at the start of this season. He is a top-class player."

PSG, who were confirmed as Ligue 1 champions at the weekend, are hoping to carry on their run in Europe's elite club competition after eliminating Liverpool on penalties in the last 16.



Paris Saint-Germain's Spanish head coach Luis Enrique (second right) gestures next to defender Lucas Beraldo during a training session in Poissy, west of Paris yesterday, on the eve of the UEFA Champions League quarter-final first leg match against Aston Villa. (AFP)

They will be without captain Marquinhos due to suspension in the first leg, as Luis Enrique also prepares to come up against his compatriot Unai Emery, now in charge of Villa.

"It is going to be great to see him again," said Luis Enrique, who will be taking charge of his

100th game as PSG coach. "He is a great coach and Aston Villa are a great team. He always improves his teams, has tireless energy and has won lots of trophies."

The second leg between the sides will take place in England next Tuesday, April 15.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Barca's Flick stays grounded ahead of Dortmund test

'We can dream, but we must keep our feet on the ground'

Reuters
Barcelona

Barcelona have not lost a game this year but their manager Hansi Flick is not getting carried away ahead of today's Champions League quarter-final first leg against Borussia Dortmund. Barca top the La Liga standings ahead of Real Madrid with eight matches left and will play their arch-rivals in this month's Copa del Rey final.

"We can dream, but players and coaches must keep our feet on the ground," Flick told reporters. "We have to look at what we have achieved, based on hard work, and it must not be the end. We have to pull out all the stops to keep going. We want to continue without losing this year, but we have to perform at our best against a very strong rival."

Dortmund finished runners-up to record 15-times European champions Real in the Champions League last season, but have struggled domestically in this campaign and are only eighth in the Bundesliga. They suffered another blow this week when German centre back Nico Schlotterbeck was ruled out for the rest of the season due to a serious knee injury.

"I prefer to play against the better team. I'm sorry about Nico's loss and I wish him well. Dortmund have a lot of classy players and they are in the quarters for a reason. The absentees will have little influence on them," Flick said.

The former Bayern Munich coach was asked about Brazilian forward Raphinha, who was only a substitute in Barca's 1-1 La Liga home draw with Real Betis on Saturday. Raphinha, 28, has scored 27 goals and provided 20 assists in 44 appearances in all competitions for Barca this season.

"We have tried, after the international break, to get him back on his feet. What I see in the session is the same as I saw before: he's very active, awake, dynamic... it shows that he's ready for tomorrow's game," the German said.

Beware of Barcelona's attacking power, warns Dortmund's Kovac

Borussia Dortmund must find ways to harness the attacking power of Barcelona, coach Niko Kovac said. Barcelona, led by the in-form frontline of Raphinha, Lamine Yamal and Robert Lewandowski, have not lost a game this year



Barcelona's Raphinha (right), Robert Lewandowski (centre) and Pau Cubarsi train on the eve of the Champions League quarter-final first leg match against Borussia Dortmund. (AFP)

and are top of the La Liga standings ahead of Real Madrid with eight matches left. They will also play their arch-rivals in this month's Copa del Rey final.

"We come here as outsiders as underdogs but it does not make it easier for our opponent," Kovac told a press conference. "We are on the rise so I see us as underdogs but there are two matches and they still need to come to Dortmund. I think we have chances to reach the semi-finals."

Last season's Champions League finalists, Dortmund, are in eighth place in the Bundesliga after their 4-1 win over Freiburg on Saturday as they attempt to finish in the top four with six games left to play or risk missing out on next season's Champions League. Dortmund will be without centre back Nico Schlotterbeck, who will be out for the rest of the season after suffering a meniscus tear in his left knee. Pascal Gross

will also be missing with a suspension.

"We know the attacking power we will come up against tomorrow. We have to be disciplined. They are extremely strong in and around the box," said Kovac. "They have a lot of strengths but every opponent has weaknesses and we want to use them. It would not be wise to say what we have planned but we have an idea."

Kovac said he was not thinking about Barcelona's treble chances this season and would only focus on how his team could reach the last four. "I cannot imagine that (Barcelona coach) Hansi (Flick) is talking about dreaming to win the treble. I know him. He is from (the southwestern German region of) Swabia. He is down-to-earth and focuses on work. We will not talk about if Barcelona can win three titles."

"We came here to win the game and if it is a good result we are happy to leave with it," he said.

Al-Athba grabs gold, Ali silver at Gulf Beach Games



Qatari rider Ali Hamad al-Athba yesterday claimed the gold medal in the individual tent-pegging competition at the third edition of the Gulf Beach Games in Muscat. Al-Athba triumphed over Saudi Arabia's Hussein Asiri, who took silver, and Oman's Hamad al-Riyami, who secured bronze.



Hamdi Ali claimed men's high jump silver medal for Qatar.

HORSE RACING

Account clinches Al Jumayliyah Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

bred Maiden Plate.

40TH AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING - AL JUMAYLIYAH CUP

Account made a triumphant return to form with a dominant victory in the Al Jumayliyah Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. The 6-year-old, owned by Khalifa Hassan al-Jehani, controlled the race from start to finish, to win by four and a half lengths. Jockey Olivier d'Andigne, who also claimed victory in the opening race, partnered with Account for a fitting end to the day's card.

Jockey Soufiane Saadi had a standout day, completing a hat-trick of victories. He first partnered with Jassim Ghazali-trained Thor's Hammer to win the Thoroughbred Handicap 65-85. Saadi then claimed his second win aboard Baker De Saularie in the Purebred Arabian Handicap 70-90, before securing his third win with a thrilling one-length victory on Mohammed Ghazali-trained Billboard Star in the Thoroughbred Conditions.

Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri also enjoyed success, steering Amersun to victory in the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap 0-70 and See All Match to a win in the Thoroughbred Handicap 50-70 (Class 5).

Other notable results included Pierre Charles Boudot riding Bojdoor to victory in the Purebred Arabian Handicap 55-75 (Class 5) and Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik guiding It's A Hot One to a win in the Thorough-



Jockey Olivier d'Andigne rides Account to Al Jumayliyah Cup win at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. PICTURE: Juhaim

Qatar Racing's Heavenly Sunset wins in US

Heavenly Sunset, owned by Qatar Racing, won the Thoroughbred Novice Race held at Keeneland Racecourse in the United States. Heavenly Sunset made her way to the podium in her second start after achieving her first win, under the supervision of trainer Brad Cox and jockey Flavien Prat. Salted, trained by Mark Cassie and ridden by Irad Ortiz Jr, came in second, while Lulu Lou Bloom, trained by Robert Hess and ridden by Julien Leparoux, came in third.



Referees to wear body cameras at Club World Cup

Paris: Referees at this year's Club World Cup will be equipped with body cameras and instructed to implement new rules to cut down on time-wasting by goalkeepers, FIFA announced. The use of the cameras will be on a trial basis after they were approved last month by IFAB, the sport's lawmakers.

"We think that it is a good

chance to offer the viewers a new experience, in terms of images taken from a perspective, from an angle of vision which was never offered before," said Pierluigi Collina, chairman of the FIFA referees committee.

The 32-team competition in the United States will also attempt to crack down on time-wasting by goalkeepers, award-

ing a corner to the opposing team if they hold on to the ball beyond eight seconds. The current rule states that 'keepers are supposed to be sanctioned with an indirect free-kick if they hold on for more than six seconds.

However, the offence is rarely penalised. The Club World Cup begins on June 14 and runs until July 13.