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SPOTLIGHT

World's top high jumpers return for 'What Gravity Challenge'

Olympic medalists Kerr and McEwan will feature alongside the event's founder Barshim

By Sports Reporter
Doha

World's best high jumpers will defy expectations as they take part in the second edition of the 'What Gravity Challenge' today at the iconic Katara Amphitheatre.

The highly competitive high jump-only event is the brainchild of reigning three-time world champion and Tokyo Olympic gold medalist Mutaz Barshim, who created a platform where top athletes can push their limits in front of a global audience.

Barshim speaking to reporters yesterday said he is focused on inspiring future generations. "This event started to honour and empower athletes, it's about creating a movement, challenging limits, celebrating talents, and doing it in the heart of Qatar and beyond," he said.

This year's edition will feature top male stars including Olympic medalists Shelby McEwan and Hamish Kerr, alongside the event's founder Barshim. And for the first time, world's top women athletes such as

Paris 2024 Olympic gold medalist Yaroslava Mahuchikh, Eleanor Patterson and Christina Honsel, will also compete marking a major milestone in the event's evolution toward greater inclusivity and global representation.

Ukraine's Mahuchikh, who holds the women's high jump world record, expressed her excitement about competing in Doha. She praised the unique concept of "defying gravity" and described Qatar as a welcoming and inspiring host country.

"I'm in a strong physical and mental state, and I'm excited to begin my season here," Mahuchikh said. "This competition offers a unique atmosphere and a platform to push the limits of what we can achieve."

The elite jumpers will battle it out for a \$155,000 prize pool, with the winner taking home the unique trophy crafted by renowned Qatari artist Ahmed al-Bahrani, symbolising both athletic excellence and cultural heritage. Qatar Athletics Federation President Mohammed Issa al-Fadala said the inaugural edition of the What



Qatar's high jump legend Mutaz Barshim (third left) poses with fellow athletes yesterday, on the eve of the 'What Gravity Challenge'. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

Gravity Challenge was a resounding success and expressed confidence in an even more remarkable outcome this season.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Men: Mutaz Barshim (Qatar), Juwon Harrison, Shelby McEwan (USA), Hamish Kerr (New Zealand), Brandon Stark (Australia), Jan Steffela (Czech Republic), Ryochi Akamatsu (Japan), Raymond Richards (Jamaica), Donald Thomas (Bahamas), Edgar Rivera (Mexico), Marco Fassinotti (Italy)
Women: Yaroslava Mahuchikh, Yuliia Levchenko (Ukraine), Kristina Gonsal, Imke Onnen (Germany), Eleanor Patterson (Australia), Charity Gavinagel (USA), Maria Zhodzick (Poland), Morgan Lake (Great Britain), Mikela Gruba (Czech Republic), Nadezhda Dubovitskaya (Kazakhstan)



Barshim and Tamberi to be reunited in Silesia

Doha: High jump legends Gianmarco Tamberi and Mutaz Essa Barshim will face each other once again at the Diamond League meeting in Silesia on August 16.

Tamberi and Barshim made high jump history in 2021 when they decided to share the gold medal rather than competing in a jump-off at the Olympic Games in Tokyo.

That episode one of track and field's great friendship-rivalries, one which has continued to develop on the Diamond League circuit ever since the two met at the Kamila Skolimowska Memorial in Silesia in 2023, with Barshim coming out on top thanks to a winning jump of 2.36m.

Tamberi won the following year, jumping 2.31m to claim a crucial victory on the road to his third Diamond League title. The two join fellow superstars Grant Holloway, Mondo Duplantis and Jakob Ingebrigtsen in an increasingly star-studded line-up for this year's meeting.

The Diamond League is the elite one-day meeting series in global athletics. It comprises 15 of the most prestigious events in global track and field. Athletes compete for points at the 14 series meetings in a bid to qualify for the two-day Wanda Diamond League Final, which will be held in Zurich in August on 27 and 28.

FOOTBALL

Sadd, Duhail set for heavyweight Qatar Cup showdown



Al Sadd coach Felix Sanchez (right) and defender Youcef Atal pose with the Qatar Cup trophy, ahead of the final against Al Duhail.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The stage is set for a blockbuster Qatar Cup final as reigning Qatar Stars League champions Al Sadd face off against arch-rivals Al Duhail tomorrow at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium at 7pm. This high-stakes encounter pits two of Qatar's most decorated clubs against each other in a fierce battle for supremacy. With both sides aiming to lift the Qatar Cup trophy for a fourth time since the competition's relaunch in 2014, the match promises drama, intensity, and enthralling football.

Sadd cruised into the final with an impressive 3-0 win over Ahli, while Duhail endured a far more dramatic route, overcoming Al Gharafa 4-3 on penalties.

For Sadd, prolific forwards Akram Aff and Rafa Mujica have each netted 18 goals this season and will be key to their side's attack. Brazilian playmaker Claudinho adds flair and vision in midfield, while goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham remains a solid last line of defence. Defenders such as Youcef Atal will also play vital roles in containing Al Duhail's fast-paced frontline.

Duhail brings its own formidable arsenal, led by Michael Olunga, the Kenyan striker known for his clinical finishing. Supporting him are Moroccan international Hakim Ziyech, the creative force in midfield, and dynamic players like Edmilson Junior, Basam al-Rawi, Karim Boudiaf, Ismail Mohammed and captain Almoez Ali.

Speaking ahead of the match, Felix Sanchez acknowledged the challenge



Al Duhail coach Christophe Galtier (right) and midfielder Hakim Ziyech speak to the media.

ahead but expressed confidence in his players: "Al Duhail are a great team with high-level players. We are continuing to prepare with all our strength for this difficult match. There is no room for mistakes in a final. We have great experience in such games and I trust the players to perform at their best to win the title," the Spaniard said yesterday.

Duhail coach Christophe Galtier praised Al Sadd but maintained belief in his squad: "We'll be facing the league's best team. It will be a very difficult match, but we are ready. We've prepared for all scenarios. Our team has the strength and mentality to rise to the occasion," the Frenchman said.

Ziyech, looking to lead Duhail to victory, said: "We must focus on this final. It's a new opportunity to lift a title. We're motivated to make up for losing the league and are determined to give our best on the pitch."

In the Qatar Stars League this season,

the two sides split their head-to-head encounters. Duhail recorded a resounding 5-1 victory in the first meeting, but Sadd responded in style with a 2-0 win in the reverse fixture, which proved crucial for the Wolves to defend their title.

A key subplot in today's final will be the strategic clash between two esteemed coaches. Sanchez is known for his methodical approach and ability to get the best out of young and experienced players alike. His experience in high-pressure finals, including on the international stage, gives Al Sadd a distinct advantage.

Galtier, meanwhile, brings with him the pedigree of managing top-tier European clubs and has instilled a fighting spirit within Duhail. Despite narrowly missing out on the league title, Galtier's men remain hungry for silverware and will be looking to bounce back with a statement win in the final.

CRICKET

Gill and Bumrah in race to succeed Rohit



Shubman Gill

Reuters
New Delhi

Top order batter Shubman Gill and pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah are locked in a two-horse race to be India's next Test captain following Rohit Sharma's exit. Rohit, 38, was dropped from the fifth Test in Sydney earlier this year after a prolonged run drought, and announced his retirement from Test cricket on Wednesday. Bumrah, who captained India in Perth where they registered their only victory of the Australia series, is a popular choice but doubts linger given the injury risk for fast bowlers. Former India captain Anil Kumble would like to see Bumrah cap-

tain India in their tour of England in June-July - with Gill as his deputy. The five-Test series kicks off India's new World Test Championship cycle. "Maybe just for this series (against England) with Bumrah and then see how his fitness is," Kumble told *ESPNCricinfo*. "I know it's not easy being a fast bowler. "He's had injuries, he was on a break for a while after the Australia series and is only coming into action this IPL (Indian Premier League) but I'd still go with Bumrah. "Every Indian would like to see Bumrah play all the Test matches but his body may not allow it. Whenever that happens, the vice captain comes in and takes over." The 31-year-old Bumrah's workload, however, is likely to tilt

the balance in favour of Gill, who has proved his leadership quality in the ongoing IPL where he has led Gujarat Titans to the top of the points table. The 25-year-old Gill is seen as a long-term prospect having already been appointed as India's vice captain in both white-ball formats. Gujarat assistant coach Parthiv Patel is among those impressed by Gill's captaincy. "One can feel his presence in the dressing room. That's what you look at in a leader," Patel told reporters earlier this week. "On the ground, he's very proactive. His game sense is very good." That Gill was being groomed for the top job has been mentioned in various circles over the past few months, and his performance as a batter and captain of Gujarat Ti-

tans (GT) in the ongoing IPL season has been impressive. Gill took over the leadership of the team in 2024 after Hardik Pandya, who had led them to the title in their maiden season (2022) and the final the following year, left to rejoin Mumbai Indians (MI). IPL 2024 didn't go well for GT, but they have been one of the best performing teams this season. Gill has been a regular in the India Test team since making his debut in Melbourne in December 2020, when he scored 45 and 35 not out against a full-strength Australia bowling attack in a Test India won by eight wickets under Ajinkya Rahane's captaincy. He has played 32 Tests overall, scoring 1893 runs at an average of 35.05 with five centuries and seven half-centuries.



Jasprit Bumrah

CYCLING

Roglic is the man to beat at tricky Giro d'Italia

Roglic and Ayuso head a long list of contenders at 21-stage race

AFP
Paris

Primoz Roglic and Juan Ayuso head a long list of contenders at a 21-stage Giro d'Italia laced with hills that culminates in the high Alps and starts today with three stages in Albania. Defending champion Tadej Pogacar is missing, but several riders could take the honours in an event notorious for surprises and wild weather, which sometimes favours an outsider. Veteran Roglic: Red Bull-Bora rider Roglic is a five-time Grand Tour winner backed by climbers - the 2022 Giro champion Jai Hindley and 2024 runner-up Dani Martinez. Roglic, 35, can also count on the gutsy Italian Gianni Moscon in the engine room. The Slovenian is capable of shining in the time-trial, in the hills and in the high mountains. But he is also capable of losing his nerve when isolated or racing downhill. Roglic is also on record as saying his main target this year is the Tour de France, and should he claim the Giro again he will become the oldest rider ever to do so. "Inside I still feel 20," he said this week. Rookie Ayuso in Pogacar's shadow: The 22-year-old Spanish all-rounder Ayuso won the Tirreno-Adriatico this year but makes his Giro debut here backed up in their Team UAE by another potential champion, Adam Yates, who has proven talent in the mountains but is only an average time-trialist. It will be fascinating to see the team's tactics in the two individual time-trials, a hilly one in Tirana on day two and a 30-kilometre (18.6 mile) flat run from



FROM LEFT: Q36.5 Pro Cycling Team's British rider Tom Pidcock, Lidl - Trek team's Italian rider Giulio Ciccone, UAE Team Emirates XRG's Spanish rider Juan Ayuso, Red Bull-Bora-Hansgrohe's Slovenian rider Primoz Roglic, EF Education - EasyPost's Ecuadorian rider Richard Carapaz, Ineos Grenadiers' Colombian rider Egan Bernal and Team Visma-Lease a Bike's Belgian rider Wout Van Aert pose with the Trofeo Senza Fine during the Top Riders press conference on the eve of the departure of the Giro d'Italia 2025 cycling race, in Tirana, yesterday. (AFP)

Luca to Pisa on stage 10. Team UAE won the race in 2024 with Pogacar, who took six stage wins and won by ten minutes, setting the bar very high for young pretender Ayuso. Home hope Tiberi: A distant fifth in 2024, Antonio Tiberi represents Italy's best hope of a first home win since 2016 when the great tactician Vincenzo Nibali won, and tactics could prove key on such an extraordinarily challenging route. "Over 21 days anything can happen and the hierarchy can shift at any moment. I think there's room to try something," he said confidently this week. The Bahrain Merida rider will be flanked by experienced pair Pello Bilbao and veteran Ital-

ian Damiano Caruso. Tiberi, a 23-year-old climber, has promised to keep is powder dry until the final Alpine stages, hoping to ride into Rome in his home region on June 1 donning the leader's pink jersey. Scores to settle: Twin brother of Adam, Simon Yates was on his way to victory in 2018 before a crushing meltdown as Chris Froome turned the tables with an 80km attack. Yates has a chance at new team Visma, where he is backed by Wout van Aert. If Yates can survive the time trial on stage 10 he looks a contender to do well at altitude in Sestriere on stage 20. Yates and Van Aert could conversely both win multiple stages.

South American trio: Richard Carapaz leads the EF team, Egan Bernal fronts the Ineos challenge and Nairo Quintana heads the roster at Movistar. All three are former Giro champions with 2021 Olympic champion Carapaz seen as a serious contender with the American team who are sometimes found tactically wanting yet remain enthusiastically ambitious. Bernal appears to be in his best form since his Giro win in 2021. "I hope to win. Every morning when I wake up that's what motivates me and I can't wait to get started," Bernal said at a press conference yesterday. Meanwhile Quintana, the 2014 champion, would likely be satisfied with a stage win.

SPOTLIGHT

BCCI moves IPL match from Dharamsala but says foreign players are 'comfortable'



Spectators leave after the IPL match between Punjab Kings and Delhi Capitals was abandoned due to a technical failure at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium in Dharamsala yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
New Delhi

An Indian Premier League match in Dharamsala has been shifted to Ahmedabad but the IPL's foreign players are happy to play on despite the ongoing India-Pakistan conflict, the secretary of the Indian cricket board (BCCI) told Reuters yesterday. Sunday's match between Punjab Kings and Mumbai Indians has been moved to Ahmedabad amid fears of an escalation in the conflict. India struck multiple locations in Pakistan this week after a deadly April 22 attack targeting Hindu tourists in Indian Kashmir that New Delhi blames on its Muslim neighbour. Pakistan, which denies any link to the Kashmir violence, said yesterday it shot down 25 drones from India overnight. Flight operations have been suspended in several Indian airports including Dharamsala. "With the airport in Dharamsala closed, it would have been a huge logistical challenge for everyone involved," BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia told Reuters by phone. "Purely due to logistical reasons, we've decided to move the match to Ahmedabad." **IPL match in Dharamsala called off as stadium lights fail** The IPL match between Pun-

jab Kings and Delhi Capitals was abandoned midway yesterday due to floodlights at Dharamsala's HPCA stadium malfunctioning, India's cricket board (BCCI) said. Punjab were batting at 122-1 against Delhi when the match was called off with only one floodlight functioning. Only 10.1 overs of the first innings were bowled after Punjab chose to bat first. "Due to a power outage in the area, one of the light towers at the HPCA stadium malfunctioned. BCCI regrets the inconvenience caused to the in-stadium attendees," BCCI said in a statement reported by *ESPNCricinfo*. Despite the prevailing volatility, Saikia said the foreign players in the 10-team league had no apprehensions about continuing their participation. "They are quite comfortable. Everyone in the league is comfortable," Saikia said. "The safety and security of every player - be it a local player or a foreigner - every match official and every fan is important for us. "We have the clearance of every single authority." Across the border, a Pakistan Super League match in Rawalpindi was postponed hours before its scheduled start yesterday. More PSL matches were likely to be rescheduled, the Pakistan Cricket Board said in a statement. "The PCB is reviewing the situation and will be rescheduling some of the PSL matches."

Qatar National Peninsula Arabian Horse Show: Talal Al Waab, Shaikha Al Danat win Senior Stallion and Mare gold



Talal Al Waab, owned by Abdulla Mohammed JA al-Kuwari, won gold in the Senior Stallions Championship Class while Shaikha Al Danat of Al Nawasi Stud was adjudged as best in the Senior Mares Championship Class of the 10th Qatar National Peninsula Arabian Horse Show For Individual Owners which concluded at the Qatar Equestrian Federation's indoor arena on Wednesday. The Junior Colts Class gold was won by LD Al Faisal of QN Stud while Shaghirah Al Doha topped the Junior Fillies Championship Class. The Yearling Colts Class gold went to Ragheed Al Sraiya of Al Sraiya Stud, and GJ Majestica of QN Stud claimed gold in the Yearling Fillies Class. Nabeel Al Rayyan of Al Marroona Stud was awarded gold in the Stallions 11+ Years Class while Dhari Alzobair of Fuwairit Stud topped the Stallions 7-10 Years Old Class. Talal Al Waab, owned by Abdulla Mohammed Jassim al-Kuwari, won gold in the Stallions 4-6 Years Old category. **PICTURES: Juhaim**



Talal Al Waab, owned by Abdulla Mohammed Jassim al-Kuwari, won gold in the Stallions 4-6 Years Old category. **PICTURES: Juhaim**

SPOTLIGHT

Alcaraz feels '100 percent ready' for return

AFP
Rome

Spanish world number three **Carlos Alcaraz** said yesterday he has overcome the injury that has impacted the build-up to his French Open title defence as he prepares to return to action in Rome.

The four-time Grand Slam winner was forced to miss the Madrid Open after he picked up a thigh issue during his Barcelona Open final defeat in April.

"I'm in a good shape. I'm 100 percent ready to start the tournament. So I just can't wait for tomorrow," Alcaraz said ahead of his opening match in the Italian capital against Serbia's Dusan Lajovic.

"I'm really happy to be here in Rome. (It) is the second time that

I'm going to play here, so I'm excited."

Alcaraz, 22, missed out on the Italian Open last year due to injury and has only once taken to the courts of the Foro Italico, with his 2023 appearance being cut short at the round of 32 stage by Hungarian Fabian Marozsan.

"Last year was even more difficult," said Alcaraz of his injury-hit clay-court season in 2024, which nonetheless culminated in the Spaniard lifting the trophy at Roland Garros.

"Here (2025), I couldn't play Madrid. But I could play really good tournaments, Monte Carlo, Barcelona, good matches. Right now, yeah, I stop a little bit (Madrid). I just try to recover from the injury, which I wasn't worried (about) at all.

"Right now I have confidence.



The practices have been well... Obviously I would say the first round in every tournament is never easy, you have to get used to the conditions, the tournament, the court, everything."

"I think my level is in a good spot," he added.

The headlines at the Rome event have been dominated by the return from a three-month doping suspension of Italy's Jannik Sinner.

Alcaraz shared that he was happy to see his rival back in action again and would relish taking on the world number one for the crown in Rome.

"It is great. I'm really happy to have him around again," said Alcaraz, who leads Sinner 6-4 in the pair's ATP Head2Head series.

"It's been three months. Obviously for him (it) was tough and I'm pretty sure [it] was super long. I think (there isn't) a better place to come back than here in his home, in Rome. We are in different sides of the draw. Hopefully I'm going to meet him at the final... I'm really happy to see him, his team around. I think I'm going to enjoy watching him play again, his matches. For the people, I think (it) is great."

Away from the court, Alcaraz has been in the spotlight due to the success of his new docuseries,

'Carlos Alcaraz: My Way'. The three-part series released last month followed Alcaraz on his journey on the Tour and gained positive reviews.

"I was nervous honestly because I didn't know how it's going to be for the people when they watch it, how their reactions are going to be," Alcaraz said. "I liked it. I just really wanted people (to) enjoy watching it. So far the reactions have been super positive, which for me it was great. Some players told me that they loved it. It was really honest, as well.

"(I am) just super happy that there was a great impact for the people, for the fans. I just (tried) to show my (personality), how I am, and how I was struggling, my thoughts in my head. I'm just really happy about how the people watch it."

TENNIS

Just 52 minutes - Swiatek makes impressive start

'I FELT LIKE THE BALL WAS KIND OF LISTENING TO ME TODAY'

Agencies
Rome

Iga Swiatek dismissed Elisabetta Cocciaretto in just 52 minutes as she opened her account at the Italian Open yesterday.

World number two Swiatek came to Italy on the back of a demoralising straight-sets defeat to Coco Gauff in the semi-finals of the Madrid Open.

But the 23-year-old Pole dropped just a single game in winning 6-1, 6-0 against Italian Cocciaretto to move onto a third-round meeting with either American Danielle Collins or Elena-Gabriela Ruse of Romania.

"I felt like the ball was kind of listening to me today and I had full control over the match, so it's always pretty comfortable to play a match like that," Swiatek said.

"You just need to continue the work you've been doing and not expect that it's going to happen more often."

Swiatek is a three-time winner of the Italian Open and is using the claycourt tournament as a key step towards her defence of her French Open title, but she is yet to win a tournament this season.

Sixth seed Jasmine Paolini, cheered on by her home crowd, was a comfortable 6-4, 6-3 winner against Lulu Sun of New Zealand and will face Ons Jabeur in round three after the Tunisian benefited from a walkover against Petra Kvitova.

Men's world number one Jannik Sinner will make his return to competition after a three-month doping ban by facing Mariano



Poland's Iga Swiatek in action during her round of 64 match against Italy's Elisabetta Cocciaretto at the Italian Open yesterday. (Reuters)

Navone tomorrow after the Argentinian beat Federico Cina 6-3, 6-3 yesterday.

Osaka advances

In another second-round match, former world number one Naomi Osaka came from behind to overcome lucky loser Viktorija Golubic 2-6, 7-5, 6-1.

Naomi Osaka came back from the brink to extend her clay-court winning streak to seven matches following last week's Saint-Malo WTA 125 title.

Osaka had originally been set to play a marquee match against No. 9 seed Paula Badosa, but shortly before the pair were due to take

the court, the Spaniard withdrew due to the back injury that has plagued her throughout 2025. Osaka was informed half an hour ahead of the match - and then, as she put it with a wry smile, "things got a little hectic" from there. Osaka had been aware of Badosa's injury issues, but had still been focused on preparing for her - and had overlooked a key tennis rule.

"Unless she plays another lead-up, this is the only clay-court tournament left (before Roland Garros)," Osaka explained.

"I was 90% expecting to play her. And I didn't know lucky losers could replace seeds, so I

thought if she pulled out, I'd get a walkover.

"I learned a lot of rules about tournaments today."

Instead, she got Golubic, whose throwback web of stylish finesse could not be more contrasting to Badosa's power and physicality. Osaka had defeated Golubic 6-3, 6-2 in their only previous meeting, in the second round of the Tokyo Olympic Games in the year 2021.

But for nearly two sets this time, the 32-year-old was able to deploy her full repertoire of slices, drop shots and one-handed backhands to disrupt Osaka's game.

LA28 REVEALS VENUES FOR OLYMPIC OPENING AND CLOSING CEREMONIES



A drone view of Los Angeles Coliseum, as it was announced it will host the opening ceremonies of the 2028 Olympics along with SoFi Stadium in a dual event, closing ceremony, and host the opening of the Paralympic Games in 2028, making it the first facility to host events for 3 Olympic Games in Los Angeles yesterday. (Reuters)

Los Angeles: Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum and SoFi Stadium in Inglewood will serve as the venues for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games, LA28 announced yesterday.

The July 14 2028 opening ceremony will be shared between the historic Coliseum, which will become the first venue to host events for three Olympic Games, and the state-of-the-art SoFi Stadium, in an unprecedented dual-venue celebration.

"The venues selected for the 2028 opening and closing ceremonies will highlight Los Angeles's rich sporting history and cutting-edge future, showcasing the very best that LA has to offer on the world stage," LA28 Chairperson and President Casey Wasserman said in a statement.

"These two extraordinary venues will create an unforgettable experience, welcoming fans from across the globe to an Olympic and Paralympic Games like never before and concluding what will go down as one of the most incredible Games in history."

The closing ceremony on July 30 will take place at the Coliseum in what organisers said would be an unforgettable celebration.

The Paralympic opening ceremony on August 15 2028 will be held at SoFi, home to the NFL's Rams and Chargers, while the August 27 closing ceremony will

take place at the Coliseum, which is the home of the University of Southern California's Trojans football team.

Los Angeles previously hosted the Olympics in 1932 and 1984 but 2028 will mark the city's first time hosting the Paralympics.

"The Paralympic closing ceremony marks the final moments of the LA28 Games, creating an unforgettable legacy that will forever connect the Olympic and Paralympic movement to Los Angeles," LA28 said in a statement issued yesterday.

Yesterday's announcement comes as little surprise as LA28 had floated the venues in their 2017 Olympic bid plan.

The Paris Olympics opening ceremony last year saw national teams parade in boats down the River Seine in a spectacle that attracted rave reviews despite wet weather.

The closing ceremony featured movie star Tom Cruise rappelling from the roof of the Stade de France to take the Olympic flag back to Los Angeles, where it ended up at a beach party in Long Beach.

LA28 last month unveiled additional venue plans for the Games, with beach volleyball enjoying surf-side digs at Alamitos Beach in Long Beach and squash getting a little Hollywood razzle-dazzle for its Olympic debut on the Universal Studios Lot.

MOTORSPORT

Alpine shock as F1 team principal Oakes resigns after 9 months in job

AFP
Paris

Alpine's team principal Oliver Oakes has resigned after less than a year in the job, the French Formula One team announced yesterday.

"The team has accepted his resignation with immediate effect," Alpine said in a statement.

The 37-year-old Briton's surprise exit comes only nine months since his appointment as successor to Frenchman Bruno Famin.

"As of today, Flavio Briatore will continue as executive adviser and will also be covering the duties previously performed by Oliver Oakes," the team statement added.

Oakes leaves his role with Alpine ninth of the 10 teams in the constructors' world championship after six races.

"The team would like to thank Oliver for his efforts since he joined last summer and for his contribution in helping the team secure sixth place in the 2024 constructors' championship.

"The team will not be making any further comment," Alpine said. French driver Pierre Gasly has picked up all the Enstone-based team's seven points, with Australian Jack Doohan yet to score in his rookie season.

Doohan's seat has been at risk from Franco Colapinto ever since Alpine signed the Argentine from Williams over the winter.

Doohan replaced Esteban Ocon, who claimed Alpine's sole win, in Hungary in 2021. Reports suggest Colapinto will be in place instead of Doohan for the upcoming race in Emilia-Romagna next week.

Oakes' unexpected departure is the latest chapter in a rocky time for the former Renault team.

He told AFP last November he wanted Alpine to shrug off their problems and be at "the front" of the midfield this season. He said there were "no silver bullet".

"I think we ultimately have to produce a better car," the former racing driver conceded.

Next season Renault are to stop producing F1 engines, with Alpine becoming a customer outfit for the first time since 2015, using engines supplied by Mercedes.

Oakes, the 2005 world karting champion, succeeded Famin in 2024 a month after the appointment of one of F1's most controversial figures, 74-year-old Briatore. Among the team's many investors are golf superstar Rory McIlroy, former heavyweight champion boxer Anthony Joshua and actor Ryan Reynolds, part owner of Welsh football club Wrexham, promoted to the English Championship last month.

GOLF

PGA of America to give away 3,000 Ryder Cup tickets in New York area

Reuters
New York

The PGA of America will distribute 3,000 tickets to this year's Ryder Cup at Bethpage Black in New York as part of a fan engagement initiative dubbed "The People's Perk," the biennial competition's co-organisers said on Wednesday.

The programme will surprise New York golf fans with free tickets over the next five months at Bethpage Black and other select public courses in Long Island and New York City metro.

The 3,000 free tickets will cover the three days of tournament play between Team Europe and Team USA and the three days of practice rounds, with 500 tickets allocated per day.

"The People's Perk is a special way for us to celebrate the unparalleled dedication and enthusiasm of the New York golf community by providing them with a memorable experience at the 2025 Ryder Cup," PGA of America president Don Rea Jr said in a statement.

Each recipient will get two tickets, but will not be able to choose a specific date.



A view of the first hole at the Bethpage Black in New York getting spruced up for this year's Ryder Cup. (@RyderCupUSA)

There will be no advance notice for the giveaways, which will feature PGA leaders and special Ryder Cup guests.

In coordination with the Metropolitan PGA Section, tickets will be distributed to local residents as well as first responders and community groups.

Europe captain Luke Donald will aim to defend the title at the famed Long Island course from Sept 26-28, with Keegan Bradley leading the US team.

EUROPA LEAGUE

Man United to face Spurs in final

Agencies
Manchester

Manchester United beat Athletic Bilbao 4-1 in the Europa League yesterday to complete an emphatic 7-1 aggregate victory, setting up a mouthwatering final against Tottenham. Ruben Amorim's men, 3-0 up after the first leg semi-final, conceded first but hit back with two goals from Mason Mount and strikes from Casemiro and Rasmus Hojlund.

In Norway, Tottenham avoided any mishaps in the Arctic Circle by easing into the final with a composed 2-0 win at Bodo/Glimt for a 5-1 aggregate victory. Ange Postecoglou's side never looked like relinquishing the lead they established last week in north London and goals by Dominic Solanke and Pedro Porro midway through the second half snuffed out any hope of a Bodo/Glimt comeback.

Despite a woeful Premier League campaign, Tottenham will now have the opportunity to win their first trophy since 2008 when they face their United in Bilbao on May 21. Solanke, who also scored in the first leg, scrambled in a Cristian Romero header in the 63rd minute and Porro then deceived home keeper Nikita Haikin with a cross that looped in to spark celebrations from the few hundred away fans.

With Bodo/Glimt boasting a formidable record on the artificial surface at their Asp-



Manchester United's Mason Mount scores against Athletic Bilbao in Manchester. (Reuters)

myra Stadium, home fans arrived believing their team could turn around the tie and become the first Norwegian side to reach a European final. Bodo dominated possession in the first half but Ole Blomberg's volley into the side netting was about the closest the hosts came to scoring on a disappointing night.

CHELSEA IN CONFERENCE LEAGUE FINAL
Chelsea advanced to the final of the UEFA Conference League after a 1-0 win over Swedish side Djurgarden sealed a 5-1 aggregate victory in their last-four tie. Kiernan Dewsbury-Hall struck the only goal at Stamford Bridge late in the first half.

Alebb Katara wins Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate



Alebb Katara, ridden by Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri, clinched victory in the Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, bringing the curtain down on the horse racing season at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. The event marked the conclusion of the 48th Race Meeting, which featured six additional races. Among the winners was War Effort, guided by jockey Rashid Ali al-Marri, who triumphed in the Thoroughbred Handicap (0-60) over 1200m. Gold Medallist, with Alberto Sanna in the saddle, secured first place in the 1900m Thoroughbred Handicap (0-60). In the 1200m Thoroughbred Handicap (0-70), Main Reef emerged victorious under jockey Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik. Dhi Qar Zakhir, ridden by Saleh Faraj al-Otaibi, won the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-65) over 1900m. **PICTURE: Juhaim**

FOOTBALL

PSG close in on elusive Champions League title

Spanish coach Enrique, appointed in 2023, has completely transformed the side

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain's achievement in reaching the Champions League final is vindication for the club's decision to abandon its policy of amassing superstars and instead put faith in a hungry young team led by Luis Enrique.

If PSG in past years under their Qatari owners have consistently stumbled on big occasions, the Spaniard's thrilling side has taken Europe by storm this season. The 2-1 win over Arsenal at a rocking Parc des Princes on Wednesday, secured thanks to goals by Fabian Ruiz and Achraf Hakimi, clinched a 3-1 aggregate semi-final triumph and set up a meeting with Inter Milan in the final in Munich on May 31.

PSG, the perennial French champions, have defeated four clubs from the mighty Premier League on this run, their victory against the Gunners following wins over Manchester City, Liverpool and Aston Villa since January.

They have done it with a youthful side in which six starters against Arsenal were 24 or under, and the oldest player is captain Marquinhos, at 30 – compare that to Inter who had two 36-year-olds and one 37-year-old playing against Barcelona a day earlier.

Wednesday's win sparked wild celebrations around the French capital, with fans partying on the Champs-Elysees in scenes unimaginable late last year, although the party descended into sporadic violence as the night wore on.

PSG lost three of their first five Champions League games this season and appeared in real danger of early elimination. That was off the back of the departure of Kylian Mbappe, their all-time top scorer, following last season's semi-final exit to Borussia Dortmund. Mbappe must have thought he had a better chance of winning the Champions League with Real Madrid and at that point PSG seemed further away than ever from getting their hands on the prize.

But Luis Enrique, appointed in 2023 just as Lionel Messi and Neymar left the club, has completely transformed the side, and PSG have hit new heights in the second



Paris St Germain's players celebrate after their win over Arsenal at the Parc des Princes in Paris. (Reuters)

half. "The coach has gone step by step. He arrived and he saw a lot of things needed to be improved," defender Marquinhos said. "The DNA needed changing, a mentality needed to be put in place, and it wasn't going to be done overnight."

Where once they had three superstar forwards who did not defend, now PSG play a voracious pressing game, defending from the front to suffocate opponents. "The coach says it is very difficult to be an attacking player in his team because you need to put in a lot of effort," Marquinhos added. "When you play in a collective manner like that you get so much confidence, so it comes down to hard work as well as the quality of the players."

PSG have gone from being almost a laughing stock, to now being the envy of the continent. "It makes us think about all we

have experienced, all the scars. Some guys have just arrived, maybe they don't know how difficult it is to get this far," said Marquinhos, at PSG since 2013.

This transformation has not been done on the cheap, with PSG still spending upwards of 600mn euros in the last two years. But the money has been spent impressively, including on the January signing of Khvicha Kvaratskhelia from Napoli, making PSG serious contenders. "Everyone wants to win the Champions League, all 36 teams, but only a very small number can do so," said Luis Enrique, who won the competition with Barcelona a decade ago. "Our objective is to make history and we still have one more step to go."

This season's final will be the first to feature no club from Spain, England or Germany since 2004, when Porto defeated Mo-

naco in Gelsenkirchen – a club representing France losing a Champions League final in Germany, which is exactly what PSG are hoping to avoid. This is PSG's second final, after their loss to Bayern Munich behind closed doors during the Covid pandemic in Lisbon in 2020.

Now they go to Munich, where Marseille won France's only Champions League so far, against Inter's rivals AC Milan in 1993. Could that be a sign? "Let's not forget it is their second final in three years which shows they are an established team," Enrique said of Inter, three-times European Cup winners.

"They obviously have more experience, not only with the players they have but also as a club. But we have dreamt since we came here of having the opportunity to play these finals and win trophies."

Beckham, Neville in new Salford ownership group

London: David Beckham and Gary Neville are members of a new ownership group at English fourth-tier football club Salford, it was announced.

The club announced the former Manchester United stars were part of a consortium which also includes a US-based businessman, Declan Kelly, and Mervyn Davies, who was a banker before becoming a UK minister in the Labour government of Gordon Brown from 2009-10.

Salford, in Greater Manchester, is walking distance from United's Old Trafford ground, with Beckham saying on Instagram: "Salford played such an important role in my life growing up... it's where I bought my first house and where me and Victoria (his pop star wife Victoria Adams) lived."

The 50-year-old added: "I'm so proud to be part of a new ownership group alongside gnevill2 (Gary Neville) as we begin the next chapter of Salford's journey. "Football is at the heart of this community and I can't wait to see what the future holds for the Ammies."

Neville – now a television football pundit, said: "I am passionate about Salford City. This is a unique partnership with a diverse range of minds and expertise, held together by a love of football. Football will come first, however it's critical that we drive the club towards sustainability in the next four to five years. I can't wait for the next part of this journey."

Salford were once owned by a larger group of United stars from the celebrated 'Class of 92' which, as well as including Beckham and Gary Neville, also featured Phil Neville, Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs and Nicky Butt.

Salford rose through the non-League ranks since their investment began in 2014 before entering League Two, the lowest tier of the senior English football pyramid that peaks with the Premier League. But the new ownership structure appears to reflect the need for additional finance at Salford, who finished eighth last season, just outside the play-off places, as they bid for promotion to League One.

FOCUS

Arsenal fall short again as striker woes haunt Arteta

AFP
London

Arsenal fell short on the big stage again as their painful Champions League semi-final exit against Paris Saint-Germain left Mikel Arteta to rue his club's failure to provide him with enough attacking options. Arteta's side were unable to reach the Champions League for the first time in 19 years as PSG clinched a tense 2-1 win at the Parc des Princes on Wednesday.

Trailing 1-0 from last week's first leg in north London, the Gunners made a blistering start to the second leg but couldn't convert their chances as Gianluigi Donnarumma's superb saves inspired PSG's 3-1 aggregate victory. Arsenal were punished for those misses when Fabian Ruiz struck in the 27th minute before Achraf Hakimi's clinical

finish in the 72nd minute put PSG on course for the final against Inter Milan.

Bukayo Saka reduced the deficit with 14 minutes left, but it was too late for Arsenal to avoid the latest agonising flop of Arteta's increasingly tortured reign. Since leaving his role as Pep Guardiola's Manchester City assistant to replace the sacked Unai Emery at the Emirates Stadium in December 2019, Arteta has rebuilt Arsenal after a bleak period prior to his arrival.

The Spaniard has turned Arsenal into serial title contenders and a force to be reckoned with in Europe. But an FA Cup final victory against Chelsea in 2020 remains Arteta's only trophy. Losing the biggest game in their recent history leaves Arsenal facing a long summer of regret over their lack of success in the last two transfer windows.

Arteta's Arsenal legacy is in danger of being tarnished by the club's curious decision not to sign a prolific striker. Injuries to



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta consoles his players after the loss to PSG. (Reuters)

Kai Havertz and Gabriel Jesus forced Arteta to use Spain midfielder Mikel Merino as a makeshift striker with mixed results during the final weeks of the season.

But even before Havertz and Jesus were sidelined, Arsenal missed the ruthless cut-

ting edge possessed by Premier League champions Liverpool and elite European teams like PSG. Arteta had tried to remedy that shortcoming with a move for England striker Ollie Watkins during the January transfer window.

However, Arsenal were unable to convince Aston Villa to accept their £60mn offer, prompting a frustrated Arteta to admit he was "disappointed" when the window closed without reinforcements. Arsenal gifted the Premier League title to Liverpool with 13 draws – six more than Arne Slot's team – as their lack of killer instinct was exposed.

And as Arsenal poured forward in waves at the start of the second leg against PSG, it was clear what a predatory forward would have added to their vibrant team. The sight of Saka blazing over with an open goal at his mercy in the closing stages perfectly encapsulated Arsenal's attacking woes.

Arteta praised Donnarumma as "the

best player on the pitch" rather than blame his forwards. But penalty area profligacy has been a recurring problem for Arteta throughout a reign that has promised more than it has delivered. Without a Premier League title since 2004, Arsenal finished as runners-up to Manchester City for the last two seasons after squandering sizeable leads in the title race.

This season they couldn't keep up with Liverpool's relentless form, so attention switched to the Champions League. When holders Real Madrid were demolished 5-1 on aggregate in the quarter-finals, it seemed Arsenal might win the tournament for the first time to validate the Arteta era.

But that Achilles heel of errant finishing, combined with costly defensive mistakes, proved fatal against PSG.

"We were not strong enough in the boxes. That's where we lost it," Arsenal captain Martin Odegaard said.