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Alcaraz and Sabalenka cruise to wins at the Italian Open

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QOC PRESIDENT SHEIKH JOAAN ATTENDS WHAT GRAVITY CHALLENGE

HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, poses with athletics legends Mutaz Barshim of Qatar and Mo Farah of Britain, during the second edition of 'What Gravity Challenge' at the Katara Amphitheater yesterday. The event founded by Barshim featured a stellar lineup of high jump athletes, including several Olympic medallists. The event was also attended by Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, Secretary-General of the QOC; Dahlan al-Hamad, Asian Athletics Association President; Mohammed Issa al-Fadala, Qatar Athletics Federation; and Prof Dr Khalid al-Sulaiti, General Manager of Katara Cultural Village.

SPOTLIGHT

Woo, Mahuchikh soar to What Gravity Challenge triumph

Event's founder Barshim — who won the inaugural edition — had to withdraw this time due to injury

By Sports Reporter
Doha

South Korea's Woo Sang-hyeok and Ukraine's Yaroslava Mahuchikh were crowned champions at the second edition of the 'What Gravity Challenge', held at Katara's Roman Amphitheater yesterday. The event brought together some of the world's top high jumpers in a spectacular contest.

Woo clinched the men's title with a jump of 2.29m, narrowly edging out Japan's Ryoichi Akamatsu, who claimed silver with a 2.26m effort. Jamaica's Raymond Richards also cleared 2.26m but had to settle for bronze due to a higher number of failed attempts.

The founder of the event, Mutaz Barshim — who won the inaugural edition — had to withdraw this time after sustaining a last-minute injury. The reigning world champion and four-time Olympic medallist has been advised six weeks of rest.

The star-studded men's field featured 11 of the world's top active jumpers, including 2024 Paris Olympic gold medallist Hamish Kerr of New Zealand and World Championship silver medallist JuVaughn Harrison of the USA. Kerr finished 10th, while Harrison was ninth.

Woo delivered a confident performance, clearing 2.15m, 2.20m, 2.23m, and 2.26m on his first attempts. Several of his main rivals stumbled at 2.23m and 2.26m, narrowing the field.

The defining moment came at 2.29m. After missing his first two attempts, Woo successfully cleared the bar on his third

try, drawing loud cheers from the crowd. None of the remaining athletes managed to surpass that mark, sealing Woo's victory. "I'm very happy to win a competition that brought together the world's best jumpers," Woo said after the event. "I'll carry this momentum forward to my next event in Paris."

This victory marks Woo's fourth consecutive international title this season. He previously won the Hustopec Indoor Meet (2.31m), Banska Bystrica in Slovakia (2.28m), and the World Indoor Championships in Nanjing, China (2.31m). Woo will return home to compete in the 2025 Asian Athletics Championships, set to begin May 27 in Gumi, South Korea.

In the women's competition, Olympic champion Mahuchikh soared to victory with a season-leading jump of 2.02m. Australia's Eleanor Patterson took silver with 1.96m, while Poland's Maria Zdzik claimed bronze with the same height, losing silver on countback. Mahuchikh is also the current world record holder with a 2.10m jump, set at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Mahuchikh called the event a great boost ahead of the World Championships. "It was an unforgettable experience, and I'm proud to be the first female champion of the Gravity Challenge," the Ukrainian said.

Following the competition, the winners were crowned by Saad bin Ali al-Kharji, Chairman of Qatar Tourism, and Bader Mohammed al-Meer, CEO of Qatar Airways, in the presence of Qatar Athletics Federation President Mohammed Issa al-Fadala.

Barshim expressed his deep pride in the



South Korea's Woo Sang-hyeok (left) and Ukraine's Yaroslava Mahuchikh celebrate with the trophies after winning the second edition of the 'What Gravity Challenge', held at Katara's Roman Amphitheater yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

success of the second edition of his brain-child event. "This success fills me with indescribable happiness," Barshim said. "The idea, the public turnout, and the high level of competition exceeded expectations. The second edition truly reached a distinguished level."

Barshim emphasised that moving the high jump from the traditional stadium

setting to the theatrical stage marks an important step in evolving the sport. "This transition strengthens our vision for the future. It will inspire new champions and embed high jump culture into broader public consciousness," he noted.

He thanked the Qatar Athletics Federation and all who contributed to what he described as a pioneering initiative. "This

championship aspires to global status, and the response we've seen proves it's on the right path," he said.

QAF President al-Fadala lauded the event's organisation and competition level. "The performances were exceptional, and the championship demonstrated our ability to host world-class events to the highest standards," he said.



In the women's competition, Olympic champion Yaroslava Mahuchikh of Ukraine soared to victory with a season-leading jump of 2.02m.



Following the competition, the winners were crowned by Saad bin Ali al-Kharji, Chairman of Qatar Tourism; and Bader Mohammed al-Meer, CEO of Qatar Airways; in the presence of Qatar Athletics Federation President Mohammed Issa al-Fadala.

CRICKET

IPL suspended for one week over India-Pakistan conflict

AFP
New Delhi

The Indian Premier League, the richest tournament in cricket, was suspended for one week yesterday because of the conflict between New Delhi and Pakistan.

“Further updates regarding the new schedule and venues of the tournament will be announced in due course,” Devajit Saikia, honorary secretary of the Indian cricket board (BCCI), said in a statement.

“While cricket remains a national passion, there is nothing greater than the nation and its sovereignty, integrity and security of our country,” the statement added.

Officials paused the T20 competition after a match Thursday was abandoned in Dharamsala, less than 200 kilometres (125

miles) from the northern city of Jammu, where explosions were reported hours earlier.

On a third day of exchanges between the nuclear-armed neighbours yesterday, India said it repulsed a wave of Pakistani drone and artillery attacks overnight.

Officials in Pakistan reported more civilian deaths. Pakistan cricket has moved the remaining matches in its own T20 league to the United Arab Emirates because of player safety.

Thursday’s match in the IPL between Punjab Kings and Delhi Capitals was abruptly called off after 10.1 overs due to an apparent floodlight failure in the Himalayan hill town of Dharamsala.

The stadium was swiftly evacuated and players whisked out of the ground in the team bus, according to media reports.

IPL chairman Arun Dhimal was seen signalling to fans to leave the stadium. The 10-team IPL, which

features cricket stars from around the world, started on March 22.

Lucknow Super Giants had been scheduled to host Royal Challengers Bengaluru yesterday.

There are 12 games left in the group stage, which should have been followed by the playoffs, scheduled to be played in Hyderabad and Kolkata.

Gujarat Titans lead the table followed by Bengaluru with both teams on 16 points after 11 matches. The final was set for May 25 at Kolkata’s Eden Gardens and typically attracts a vast global television audience.

Among the overseas stars are Australians Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head and Mitch Marsh, while former skipper Ricky Ponting coaches Punjab.

Some Australian players based in India could fly home as soon as Saturday, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation said.

Cricket Australia said in a statement yesterday before the suspension news: “We continue to closely monitor the situation in Pakistan and India... and maintaining communication with our players and support staff currently in the region.”

India and Pakistan have fought two of their three full-scale wars over Kashmir, a disputed territory that both claim in full but administer separate portions of since gaining independence from British rule in 1947.

New Delhi launched missile strikes on Wednesday morning in retaliation for a deadly attack on tourists in Indian-run Kashmir two weeks ago that India blames on Pakistan. Islamabad has denied any involvement.

More than 50 people have been killed on both sides of the border since Wednesday, in the worst violence in decades between the South Asian neighbours.



Cricket fans stand outside the Ekana Cricket Stadium in Lucknow yesterday, after the Indian Premier League was suspended for a week. (AFP)

CYCLING

Pedersen claims opening stage of Giro in Albania

‘The team set it up. We rode hard and then got ahead for the finale’



Lidl-Trek’s Danish rider Mads Pedersen, next to Team Visma-Lease a Bike’s Belgian rider Wout Van Aert (right), celebrates as he crosses the finish to win the first stage of the 108th Giro d’Italia cycling race, 160km from Durres to Tirana in Albania, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Tirana

Denmark’s Mads Pedersen of Lidl-Trek won the opening stage of the Giro d’Italia yesterday, a 160km dash over rugged hills ending with two loops of downtown Tirana, as Albania hosts the first three days of this edition.

Pedersen was beautifully led out before resisting a late surge from Belgian Visma rider Wout van Aert. Primož Roglič, the overall favourite to win the 21-day race, finished on the same time in a small bunch just behind. “I knew he (Van Aert) was behind me so you never know if you can win until the line,” said Pedersen.

“The team set it up. We rode

hard and then got ahead for the finale.”

Pedersen then took to the podium to slip on the iconic race leader’s pink jersey and spray the crowds with a magnum of sparkling wine.

“It’s the first leader’s jersey I have in a Grand Tour, so that’s something nice,” said Pedersen, the 2019 world champion.

This was a 51st career win for Pedersen and his second on the Giro after one in 2023. He has also won stages at the Tour de France and the Vuelta a Espana.

Spanish climber Mikel Landa was one of five victims of a nasty crash on a tight corner 5km from the finish line as the 184 riders began their epic three-week 3,400km slog to the Vatican in Rome. Landa, who was third on

the Giro in 2015 and 2022, hit a curb and flew into a drop of one metre to the pavement and rolled in agony before being taken away in an ambulance, making him the first casualty of the Giro. Decathlon AG2R La Mondiale rider Geofrey Bouchard also pulled out after the fall.

Another fancied rider for the overall top 10 Derek Gee of Israel Premier Tech was held up by the fall and now stands 1min 07sec adrift of Pedersen.

Team UAE’s key rider Juan Ayuso and his teammate Adam Yates, Tom Pidcock, Simon Yates, Richard Carapaz, Jai Hindley, Egan Bernal and Nairo Quintana also all ended the stage in the top 36 riders on the same time as winner Pedersen, who picked up 10 bonus seconds for his triumph.

An enthusiastic early break surged ahead of the main peloton aiming for the first King of the Mountains blue jersey, taken by Cofidis rider Sylvain Moniquet.

Saturday’s stage 2 is a 13.7km individual time-trial on the streets of the Albanian capital, with van Aert again a major contender for the stage and the pink jersey.

The time-trial features a short 1.3km climb, with the peculiarity of a U-turn at the top.

Tomorrow’s stage 3 will suit the sprinters who were dropped in the hills yesterday as it is a flat run around the coastal city of Valona.

The final week of the Giro will be decisive with stage 20, which ends with a gruelling climb up the Colle delle Finestre to the Sesetriere ski resort, the moment when the winner is likely to emerge.

FOCUS

Pakistan postpones T20 League amid clashes with India

AFP
Karachi

Pakistan yesterday postponed its Twenty20 League indefinitely as tension with India escalated, barely a day after relocating it to the United Arab Emirates.

On the other side of the border, the more high-profile Indian Premier League was yesterday suspended for one week due to the India-Pakistan situation.

Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) said the worsening situation with nuclear rivals India had escalated with the incursion of 78 drones from across the border.

“The decision to postpone the Pakistan Super League (PSL) has been taken pursuant to advice received from the prime minister Mohammad Shahbaz Sharif,” said a PCB release.

The tenth edition of the PSL Involved 37 foreign players including from England, Australia, New Zealand, the West Indies and South Africa.

Most of the foreign players wanted to leave Pakistan after a drone fell adjacent to Rawalpindi cricket stadium where a match

on Wednesday was cancelled.

The top-notch players included former Australian opener David Warner, former West Indian skipper Jason Holder and New Zealand’s current white-ball captain Michael Bracewell.

There were eight matches remaining in the six-team PSL, including the play-offs and the final scheduled for May 18.

PCB said safety of the players was paramount.

“We have sincere regard for the mental well-being of participating players and the sentiments of our foreign players, and we respect the concerns of their families who want to see them back home.”

India launched air strikes into Pakistan on Wednesday, two weeks after New Delhi blamed Islamabad for backing an attack on the Indian-run side of disputed Kashmir, which Pakistan denied. Pakistan responded with heavy artillery fire and both sides accused each other on Thursday of carrying out waves of drone attacks.

The exchange of drones and firing continued yesterday, with Pakistan vowing not to escalate tension.



A worker removes a hoarding outside the Gaddafi Cricket Stadium, one of the venues for the Pakistan Super League in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

SA appoint Conrad as white-ball coach

Reuters
CAPE TOWN

South Africa have named Shukri Conrad as their limited overs coach after he led the country to the World Test Championship final where they face Australia at Lord’s from June 11-15.

The 58-year-old Conrad, who took over the Test team in January 2023, replaces Rob Walter, after he resigned last month for personal reasons, and will be in charge across all formats.

“Coaching the Test side has been the greatest privilege of my cricket journey, and to now oversee the white-ball teams as well is something unbelievably special,” Conrad said in a statement from Cricket South Africa.

“South African cricket has incredible white-ball talent. There’s a strong foundation to build on, and I believe we have what it takes to achieve something special.”

South Africa will co-host the next 50-over Cricket World Cup in 2027 along with Zimbabwe and Namibia.

A veteran of the domestic coaching circuit, Conrad has enjoyed great success, leading to the WTC final appearance.

South Africa also made the final of last year’s T20 World Cup, but let a commanding position slip as they lost to India, and reached the semi-finals of the 2023 50-over World Cup and the recent ICC Champions Trophy.

Their next limited overs assignment is a tri-series in Zimbabwe that also involves New Zealand in July. Later in the year they tour Australia, England and India.

Pacquiao to un-retire and fight Barrios for welterweight title: report

Los Angeles: Iconic Filipino boxing star **Manny Pacquiao** will end his four-year retirement at age 46 to fight Mario Barrios for his WBC welterweight title, ESPN reported on Thursday. Unidentified sources told the US-based sports network the fight would be contested in Las Vegas on July 19.

Pacquiao, who won 12 world titles in eight different weight classes, has not fought since dropping a unanimous 12-round decision to Cuban Yordenis Ugas for the WBA welterweight crown on August 21, 2021 in Las Vegas. ESPN reported that WBC president Mauricio Sulaiman said last week at a fight in Saudi Arabia that Pacquiao planned to fight Barrios for the crown in July and the Asian star had

already been cleared to fight by the Nevada State Athletic Commission. WBC rules allow a former champion to request a world title fight when coming out of retirement.

Pacquiao is set to be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame next month and faces a Senate election next week in the Philippines.

Barrios is 29-2 with one drawn and 18 knockouts and kept his title last November with a draw against fellow American Abel Ramos in his most recent bout on the Mike Tyson-Jake Paul undercard.

Pacquiao has a career record of 62-8 with two drawn and 39 knockouts.



TENNIS

Alcaraz, Sabalenka cruise to wins at the Italian Open

GAUFF HOLDS NERVE TO BEAT QUALIFIER MBOKO 3-6, 6-2, 6-1

AFP
Rome

Carlos Alcaraz kicked off his bid for a first Italian Open title by cruising past Serbian qualifier Dusan Lajovic 6-3, 6-3 in Rome yesterday on his return to action from a thigh injury.

World number three Alcaraz got past Lajovic in one hour and 23 minutes in his first match since suffering the injury in his Barcelona Open final defeat to Holger Rune last month.

The Spaniard showed some signs of ring rustiness with 22 unforced errors but still managed to win the first four games of the match to give Lajovic too much to do in the first set.

And Alcaraz closed out the match in professional style with another quick start in the second set which put him three games ahead, allowing him to serve out for the win.

"Today was a really good day in the office, hopefully tomorrow and Sunday is going to be better," said Alcaraz.

"Of course I tried to make the most of my time, when I'm not playing tournaments I always try to find the positive things... I could stay at home more with my friends, with my family, recovering and getting a little bit fresh mentally.

"It was a great performance, a great level, which was surprising for me a little bit but I'm just really happy for that."

Alcaraz will now face one of Alex Michelsen and Laslo Djere in the third round as he eyes a potential final with world number one Jannik Sinner in the Italian capital.

Sinner will make his comeback from a three-month doping ban today when he takes on Mariano Navone in front of what will be a partisan crowd at the Foro Italico.

Alcaraz later told reporters that he would take it easy on his day off, keep an eye on Sinner's match and go to watch his friend Patric play for Serie A football club Lazio against Juventus at the nearby Stadio Olimpico.

One of Alcaraz's potential opponents in the last 16, Grigor Dimitrov, fell at the first hurdle against wild card entrant Francesco Passaro. Bulgarian Dimitrov, the 14th seed, was beaten 7-5, 6-3 by Italian Passaro, who will take on Romanian Burruchaga or Karen Khachanov in the next round.

Last year's winner Alexander Zverev is in action, against Ar-



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz plays a backhand return to Serbia's Dusan Lajovic during the ATP Rome Open at Foro Italico in Rome yesterday. (AFP)



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka in action during her match against Russia's Anastasia Potapova yesterday. (Reuters)

gentina's Camilo Ugo Carabelli, in the last match of the day on centre court. Home hope Lorenzo Musetti opened his week, his first in the top 10 of the men's world rankings, with a 6-3, 6-2 win over qualifier Otto Virtanen.

In the women's draw, Aryna Sabalenka cruised past Anastasia Potapova and into the third round

with a 6-2, 6-2 victory. Last year's beaten finalist and current world number one, Sabalenka swept past Russian Potapova in just over an hour.

"I'd say that the top player is always a favourite," said a confident Sabalenka.

"I know that if I bring my best game and my fight spirit on court,

I know that I can win this tournament."

Sabalenka will play Sofia Kenin in the next round after the American beat another Russian in Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova in straight sets, 6-3, 6-0.

The 27-year-old Sabalenka has reached the final of her last four tournaments, with 1000 series wins in both Miami and Madrid.

Meanwhile, Coco Gauff survived a scare at this year's Italian Open, coming back from a set down to beat qualifier Victoria Mboko 3-6, 6-2, 6-1.

World number three Gauff will play Magda Linette in the third round in Rome after prevailing despite being far from her best in a match which signalled more progress from her up-and-coming opponent.

Canadian Mboko played with a maturity which defied the 153 places separating her from Gauff in the world rankings in a prime-time clash on centre court.

The 18-year-old has risen from 333 to 156 since the start of the year and the Foro Italico crowd quickly took to her confident, and powerful play.

Mboko had Gauff on the ropes in the first set, breaking the former US Open winner four times, but eventually gave way to her more experienced opponent who is one of the favourites for overall victory after losing to Sabalenka in the recent Madrid final.

MOTORSPORT

Marquez sets Le Mans lap record in French MotoGP practice

AFP
Le Mans, France

Six-time world champion Marc Marquez broke the lap record at Le Mans to post the quickest time in practice for the French MotoGP yesterday.

The 32-year-old, who is one point behind his brother Alex Marquez at the top of the standings heading into the sixth race of the season, was comfortably fastest in both sessions on his Ducati.

In the second session he clocked 1min 29.855sec to improve on Jorge Martin's old track record, set last year, of 1min 29.919sec.

Frenchman Fabio Quartararo, world champion in 2021, confirmed his Yamaha's renewed form by setting the second fastest time of the session 0.177sec behind Marquez followed by Francesco Bagnaia's Ducati.

Spanish rookie Fermin Aldeguer continued to impress as he took fourth while Alex Marquez (Ducati-Gresini), who won his maiden MotoGP race in the last meet in Madrid, had to settle for fifth fastest 0.401sec behind his brother.

The riders will have qualifying on Saturday followed by the Sprint race.

Reigning MotoGP world champion Jorge Marti is out of action indefinitely after a brutal crash in last month's Qatar Grand Prix.

The 27-year-old was making his first appearance of the season for his new team Aprilia.

He was first injured during pre-season testing in Sepang and had to undergo surgery at the beginning of February.

He then suffered another crash which necessitated another operation on his left hand at the end of February, just before the opening round of the season in Thailand.



Ducati Lenovo Team's Spanish MotoGP rider Marc Marquez rides during a France Moto GP Grand Prix free practice session at the Le Mans Circuit yesterday. (AFP)

ATHLETICS

McLaughlin-Levrone to run first professional 100m flat at Grand Slam

Reuters
New York

American Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone will run her first professional 100m race at the Philadelphia Grand Slam Track meet that begins later this month, the athletics circuit said yesterday.

The 400m hurdles world record holder and twice Olympic champion has kept a stranglehold on her signature event for several years, and swept the long hurdles groups at the first two Grand Slam meets in Kingston and Miami.

She will drop down to the women's short hurdles group for

the Philadelphia meet beginning on May 30, which comprises the 100m hurdles and the 100m flat, the latter of which she has never run in a professional setting.

The Michael Johnson-fronted circuit offers a twist on traditional track meets, as athletes face off in 12 groups - men's and women's short sprints, long sprints, short hurdles, long hurdles, short distance and long distance - and compete in two races per meet. The points totals from those runs determine the champion of each group.

The last time McLaughlin-Levrone took on the 100m flat was at a collegiate event in 2018 when she was a student at the University of Kentucky. She ran the distance in 11.07 seconds.

GOLF

Mitchell leads, Lowry charges and Rory five back at rainy Truist

AFP
Philadelphia

Keith Mitchell clung to a one-stroke lead after yesterday's rainy second round of the PGA Tour Truist Championship with Shane Lowry making a charge and Rory McIlroy five adrift.

Mitchell, seeking his first PGA title since 2019, fired a three-under-par 67 to stand on 12-under 128 after 36 holes at Philadelphia Cricket Club.

The 33-year-old American, who fired a career-low 61 on Thursday, won his lone PGA crown at the 2019 Honda Classic but he was a runner-up last month at Punta-cana.

"A lot more up and downs. The greens were tougher to hit because we had a lot more club, a little bit more wind and the rain," Mitchell said. "It definitely played tougher. Didn't hit as many greens but I thought my short game was pretty good. I've got to keep my head down and keep moving."

Ireland's Lowry, the 2019 British Open champion, fired a 65 to pull within a stroke of Mitchell with Austrian Sepp Straka third on 130 and defending champion McIlroy in a fourth-place pack on 133 after a 67.

"It was pretty good," Lowry said. "Weather has turned a bit nasty but I thought early on it was actually OK, it was like not the worst, wasn't that much wind. I'm very happy but it's pretty miserable out there for the rest of the guys."

Heavy afternoon rain forced course workers to soak up water off several greens between groups to keep the course playable.

The event was moved from its usual home at Quail Hollow in Charlotte, North Carolina, because that course is hosting next week's 107th PGA Championship.

World number 90 Mitchell answered a bogey at the second with birdies on the next three holes and a bogey at 11 with birdies at 12 and 14. Lowry, a runner-up to McIlroy at Pebble Beach in February, contended at the Masters and feels he has made a breakthrough in his game. "There's a consistency to my whole game that has been very good," Lowry said. "I think I'm just maturing as a golfer, taking the rough with the smooth, the good days taking them well and the bad days working through them."

McIlroy made six birdies and three bogeys, twice answering bogeys with birdies on the next hole, to share fourth with South Korean Kim Si-woo and Americans Justin Thomas, Akshay Bhatia, Collin



Keith Mitchell hits out of a greenside bunker on the second hole during the second round of the Truist Championship 2025 at The Wissahickon at Philadelphia Cricket Club in Flourtown, Pennsylvania. (AFP)

Morikawa and Patrick Cantlay. Second-ranked McIlroy, in his first solo event since winning the Masters to complete the career

Grand Slam, is playing his final tuneup for next week's PGA at Quail Hollow, where he has won four times. The five-time ma-

jor champion, a winner at Pebble Beach and the Players in addition to the Masters this season, is pleased at preparations for the

PGA, but has more work to do. "I've putted nicely, which has been good to see," McIlroy said. "I've seen my lines pretty well the first two days.

"My focus is good. I made some uncharacteristic mistakes over the first to days compared to the way I've played the most part of this year. If I can just iron those out - it would be nice to go out there and not have to scramble so much - if I can clean the cards up over the weekend I'll be in a good spot headed into Quail Hollow."

Leading scorers after second round
(par 70, USA unless noted):
128 - Keith Mitchell 61-67
129 - Shane Lowry (IRL) 64-65
130 - Sepp Straka (AUT) 63-67
133 - Justin Thomas 66-67,
Rory McIlroy (NIR) 66-67, Collin Morikawa 63-70, Akshay Bhatia 63-70, Kim Si-woo (KOR) 65-68, Patrick Cantlay 65-68
134 - Max Homa 66-68, Thomas Detry (BEL) 65-69, Stephan Jaeger (GER) 65-69, Rickie Fowler 63-71, Gary Woodland 68-66
135 - Tony Finau 65-70, Harris English 65-70, Sam Stevens 64-71, Denny McCarthy 62-73, Im Sung-jae (KOR) 69-66, Alex Noren (SWE) 67-68, Sam Burns 65-70, JT Poston 65-70, Nick Taylor (CAN) 67-68, Erik van Rooyen (RSA) 65-70

SPOTLIGHT

Alonso confirms exit from Leverkusen

The 43-year-old has reportedly agreed to join Real Madrid, replacing Ancelotti

AFP
Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso confirmed yesterday he will leave the club at the end of the season, amid reports linking him to Spanish giants Real Madrid. Alonso said it was “the right moment” to announce the exit, but did not confirm his next post, saying it was “not the right moment to talk too much about the future”.

Spanish and German media reported the 43-year-old has already agreed to join Real and will link up with the Spanish giants after the Club World Cup, replacing Carlo Ancelotti, with a compensation payment of around 12mn euros (\$13.5mn) to be paid to Leverkusen. Taking over in October 2022, Alonso guided Leverkusen to an unbeaten league and cup double in 2023-24, the first Bundesliga title in the club's history.

In March 2024, Alonso declared he would stay with the club despite reported interest from Liverpool, Real and Bayern Munich, all of whom he represented as a player. Alonso will be in the home dugout for the final time on Sunday against Borussia Dortmund, before his last match as Leverkusen coach away at Mainz.

“We have to enjoy this moment, with mixed emotions. I spoke this morning to the players, the staff, who have been with me during this unbelievable, fantastic three years,” Alonso said. “And now it's the moment to share it on Sunday, especially with the fans, in the stadium on Sunday, where I lived great emotions and where I have become what I am right now. Football is about the moment and I think is a good moment for everyone. Let's enjoy it... We can be happy and proud of what we have achieved always with the good feeling we're taking the club in the right direction.”

Leverkusen's title defence ended with their 2-2 draw at Freiburg on Sunday,



Xabi Alonso guided Leverkusen to an unbeaten league and cup double in 2023-24, the first Bundesliga title in the club's history. (AFP)

which confirmed Bayern as this season's title winners. Alonso's side will finish in second spot regardless of results in their final two matches. Gesturing to sporting director Simon Rolfes and club CEO Fernando Carro at the back of the room, Alonso thanked the duo for “believing in me” when they hired him despite having no first-division experience.

The coach revealed the three sat together in San Sebastian, where he was then managing Real Sociedad's second team, to sketch out their plan for success at Leverkusen. “I remember our first meeting we had some ideas, some expectations. And once you fulfil them, you can say that the

job was done.”

Alonso joined in October 2022 with Leverkusen hovering dangerously close to the relegation spots. The Basque immediately put the club back on track; by the end of the season, Leverkusen had risen to fifth, while making the Europa League semi-finals. After bringing in several key pieces in the off-season including midfielder Granit Xhaka, striker Victor Boniface and full-back Alex Grimaldo, Alonso piloted Leverkusen to an unbeaten league and cup double – the first in German football history.

“It was a historic season, a dream season with great nights and great games,” Alonso said. In bringing Leverkusen their first

league title, Alonso helped shatter the unwanted ‘Neverkusen’ moniker given to the club after five second-place finishes, three German Cup final losses and defeat in the 2002 Champions League final.

In 2024-25, Leverkusen pushed Bayern until the last weekend in the league and remain on track for their second-best points total. Alonso's men were eliminated from the German Cup semi-final by third-tier Arminia Bielefeld and by Bayern in the last 16 of the Champions League.

The coach said this season was “the most challenging one,” but said “I've learned so many things and I have improved as a coach”.

LIGUE 1

Enrique resting key players as PSG chase treble

Reuters
Paris

Several key Paris St Germain players will be rested as the French champions look to ensure they remain fresh for their two finals coming up, including the Champions League showpiece, as they chase a treble, manager Luis Enrique said.

PSG sealed the league title with six games to spare last month and will now target the Coupe de France final on May 24 against Stade de Reims before they chase a first Champions League crown versus Inter Milan a week later. Goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma, Achraf Hakimi, Marquinhos, Nuno Mendes, Willian Pacheco, Fabian Ruiz and Vitinha have been given time off and will not return to training until Wednesday.

“We have a set plan which depends on playing time and travelling throughout the season. You have to balance all that out to arrive in the best possible condition for both finals,” Enrique said ahead of today's trip to Montpellier.

“When the Champions League final is over, the vast majority will go to the nation-

al team. Every player needs a personalised plan. We've managed that, but there are still the final matches to achieve our objectives. The players need to arrive mentally fresh... We're playing against Montpellier and Auxerre (next weekend), which will help us stick to our plan. There are a lot of players and we're managing it individually.”

Enrique said Ousmane Dembele is fully fit after the club's top scorer with 33 goals this season only came on as a second-half substitute in Wednesday's Champions League semi-final victory over Arsenal. “Ousmane Dembele is perfectly fine. He trained with the team today, he wanted to come,” the Spaniard said. “He had permission from the staff not to come, it's what we considered adequate rest time. But if he needs to come, he's completely free to do so.”

PSG will be playing in their second Champions League final after losing to Bayern Munich in 2020 and Enrique said the French club deserve to win the title after such a long wait. “If a team deserves to win, after waiting so long, it's PSG. I know the club was founded the year I was born (in 1970). Let's hope this connection proves true and we can secure the Champions League,” he said.



Luis Enrique's sealed the league title with six games to spare last month and will now target the Coupe de France final on May 24 against Stade de Reims before they chase a first Champions League crown versus Inter Milan a week later. (Reuters)

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arteta wants Arsenal to use guard of honour to Liverpool as title fuel

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta has urged Arsenal to use the frustration of having to give champions Liverpool a guard of honour tomorrow as fuel to win the Premier League title next season after admitting they have gone “backwards” this term.

Arteta's side are destined to finish the season without a major trophy after failing to keep pace with Liverpool and crashing out of the Champions League semi-finals on Wednesday. The Gunners' 2-1 defeat against Paris Saint-Germain ended their bid to win the tournament for the first time.

It was a painful loss for Arsenal, who created a host of chances in the early stages of the second leg but couldn't find a way past inspired PSG keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma. Still licking their wounds from the disappointment in Paris, Arsenal head to Anfield this weekend for the uncomfortable task of watching to Liverpool's ongoing title celebrations.

Arne Slot's men wrapped up the title two weeks ago, leaving second-placed Arsenal trailing in their wake. After finishing as runners-up to Manchester City for the previous two seasons, the north Londoners remain with a title



since 2004. “Something has to drive you, motivate you, and pain for this is a good one to use, when you really want to do something. It's the right thing to do, usually as a motivation for next season,” Arteta said of Arsenal's guard of honour for the champions.

“They've been the best team, they've been the most consistent, and what Arne and the coaching staff have done has been fascinating, it's been really good. They fully deserve it, and that's the sport. If somebody is better, you have to accept it and try to reach that level.”

Arteta attracted criticism in some quarters for claiming Arsenal were the best team in the Champions League this season despite their last four exit. The Spaniard stood by his claim days later, saying: “100 percent. I'm watching the impact, I'm watching all the stats because they

were the best stats and the best goal difference in the semi-final, so it's very clear. When you look at the important stats that normally give you the best platform to win football matches, it's crystal clear who was better.”

Arsenal's failure to sign a striker in the January transfer window was a major blow in a season marred by long injury absences for Kai Havertz, Gabriel Jesus and Bukayo Saka at various stages. “In January it was clear or not? I made a very clear statement, and the statement continues the same. I want the best team, the best players. If we have three goalscorers over 25, bring them in, we're going to be a much better team, yes,” Arteta said.

Arteta conceded Arsenal have been unable to match his expectations this season. But he is adamant they have the quality to end the club's five-year trophy drought. “In the Premier League we've done a step backwards. With the points that we have created, it's clear that we haven't done as good as last season, that's obvious,” he said.

“But with the amount of points that we have generated in the last few seasons, we could have two Premier Leagues. So we know how close. We are there, we are providing the numbers that win you titles. We have to be a little bit luckier, but still do better to make sure that nobody has a season better than you.”

Juventus on track to secure top-four finish, says Tudor

Turin: Juventus coach Igor Tudor is confident his team will qualify for the Champions League as they prepare to visit Lazio in Serie A today amid an incredibly tight top-four race.

Juve missed a chance to strengthen their grip on fourth place after being held to a 1-1 draw at Bologna on Sunday and they sit level on 63 points with fifth-placed AS Roma and Lazio in sixth with three games remaining. Asked whether Juventus would play in Europe's elite club competition next season, the Croatian said he believed that would be the case.

“Yes, I am convinced (of that), but everyone is convinced,” Tudor said. “All the teams think they are strong. Then there is the pitch. Sometimes words are smoke. You have to prepare well.”

Juve, who suffered a first league defeat at the end of January, have lost three and drawn two of their last eight games. “I saw awareness and confidence (this week), and a great desire to do well,” Tudor said. “We know the importance of this match (Lazio) and we

FIFA Women's World Cup to be expanded to 48 teams from 2031

Paris: The Women's World Cup will be expanded from 32 to 48 teams, like the men's competition, starting with the 2031 edition, FIFA announced. The FIFA Council unanimously agreed to enlarge the competition “given the remarkable recent strides made by women's football across the world,” the sport's governing body said in a statement.

The 48-team tournament will adopt a 12-group format, increasing the total number of matches from 64 to 104 and extending the tournament by one week, FIFA said. FIFA have still to ratify the 2031 and 2035 hosts. The 2027 tournament in Brazil will remain at 32 teams.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino said the move followed the success of the 2023 World Cup in Australia won by Spain. The 2023 tournament was “the first in which teams from all confederations won at least one game and teams from five confederations reached the knockout stage, among many other records, set a new standard for global competitiveness”, said Infantino.

“This decision ensures we are maintaining the momentum in terms of growing women's football globally. This is not just about having 16 more teams playing... but taking the next steps in relation to the women's game in general by ensuring that more FIFA Member Associations have the chance to benefit from the tournament to develop their women's football structures.”

The decision, FIFA said, will broaden representation, offering more nations and players access to elite competition and accelerating investment in women's football worldwide.

The men's tournament will be expanded to 48 teams for the World Cup in 2026, to be hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico.

BAYERN CAPTAIN NEUER TO RETURN FOR MUELLER'S MUNICH FAREWELL

Bayern Munich captain Manuel Neuer will return after a two-month absence alongside veteran Thomas Mueller, who will play his last home game with the club. Speaking to the media yesterday, Bayern coach Vincent Kompany confirmed Neuer would return from injury for the home game against Borussia Moenchengladbach.

Bayern, who clinched their 34th German title last weekend, will be presented with the Bundesliga shield after the match, with striker Harry Kane set to lift team silverware for the first time in his career. “If everything goes well, Manuel Neuer will be back tomorrow,” Kompany said.

Neuer, 39, injured his calf muscle while celebrating a goal in Bayern's Champions League last 16 win over Bayer Leverkusen in March and has missed 11 games. Asked if Mueller, who will leave in the summer after 25 years at the club, would start in his final home game, Kompany joked “I'm not stupid... I don't want to spoil the party.”

Bayern hold an eight-point lead over second-placed Bayer Leverkusen with two games remaining.

prepared ourselves as best we could.”

Juventus welcome back striker Dusan Vlahovic, their top scorer this season with nine league goals, who returned to group training on Thursday after being sidelined with a thigh injury since late April. “Dusan is fine. He was all week with us,” Tudor said. “(Federico Gatti and Teun Koopmeiners), meanwhile, will not be there, although Gatti played a little bit with us and will be on the bench.”

Former defender Tudor, who briefly coached Lazio last year after Maurizio Sarri's resignation and left them seventh in the standings, was optimistic about facing his former side. “Last year we did a great job and went to the Europa League,” Tudor recalled.

“Then I made a calm decision (to leave) and I (still) love everyone. Tomorrow will be a different match than Bologna, but they have other qualities. “Lazio is an experienced team with strong players. We have to be careful... but we have to focus on ourselves”.