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FOOTBALL

I believe Qatar can qualify for World Cup: Lopetegui

'It's a massive responsibility, and we're all chomping at the bit to get started. We're fully committed'

Julen Lopetegui is the new man in charge of Qatar, right as a crucial stage in Asian qualifying for the FIFA World Cup 2026 is just around the corner.

With the third round drawing to a close, the former Spain and Real Madrid coach has taken the reins of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 hosts with Qatar sitting fourth in Group A and unable to secure a direct berth in the current phase. Should they finish either third or fourth though that would send them through to the next round where half a dozen nations will scrap for a further two direct spots. An additional place at the global finals is then potentially available via the FIFA play-off tournament so there's certainly plenty on the line for the Maroons.

Ahead of Qatar's qualifiers against Iran tomorrow and Uzbekistan next Tuesday, Lopetegui spoke to *fifa.com* to talk about his new coaching challenge. Excerpts.

Q. How do you feel about this new project with Qatar and how did it come about?

Lopetegui: There's a moment when the people offering you the job and your own excitement and enthusiasm to take on the project come together perfectly. We know that we're taking over at a difficult time, and we know we're going to have to pull off something spectacular to qualify for the World Cup. And to compound matters, we're up against the two sides that currently sit first and second in the group.

We'll do everything in our power to give ourselves another shot at qualification in October, which is when the fourth round takes place in Asia. We need to give it our absolute all to give ourselves another chance of qualifying. Let's just hope we've got what it takes. We know it's not going to be easy, but that's one of the reasons why we decided to come here.

We've been aware of Qatar's football project for a long time. Several years ago in my career, I was in talks to come here. It didn't come off back then for various reasons, but now, as I mentioned before, it was the right moment in my career for me to take on the responsibility of leading this national team and heading up the country's football project for at least the next two years to come. It's a massive responsibility, and we're all chomping at the bit to get started. We're fully committed to the task, and have been working tirelessly for the past three weeks.

Q. What will be your approach to the challenges ahead?

We're fully aware of the challenges that lie in wait. In December, we've got the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025, which is another hugely important tournament that's taking place on home soil. We already know who's drawn who, and I think it's going to be an incredibly exciting tournament. But right now, we've got our sights fully set on qualifying for the World Cup.

Qatar has never qualified for a World Cup through the qualifiers before, and it's a dream we're determined to fight for.

It's within touching distance. We've got two games left to play, both of which will be incredibly difficult, and in quick succession. However, despite all the difficulties, we're determined to give it our best shot to earn ourselves another chance of qualifying in October. Fingers crossed we've got what it takes.

Q. What is the feeling going into the Iran match at home knowing that a win would secure a place in the fourth round?

We're fully focused on our match against Iran. We're just taking it one game at a time. After our game against Iran, we'll turn our attention to our next opponent. It's going to be a stern test for us, and we're fully aware of the quality they possess. But every match is a new opportunity, and the past is in the past. We'll do our utmost to take the game to them and put in a performance that gives us a chance of beating them. Knowing how much is riding on this fixture, we'll be giving it everything we've got. We're not thinking about other team's fixtures. We're fully aware that Kyrgyz Republic's two games are very different prospects from ours, but we want to focus on ourselves without worrying about what other teams are doing.



Q. How would it feel to qualify this team for the World Cup?

The prospect of playing at the World Cup is what really spurs us on. And also the wider vision for the national team's future development.

We're hoping for the best, but we know it'll be a tough ask. But at the same time, it's the project itself that's really got the juices flowing amongst everyone – in terms of how the game in Qatar has developed over the past few years.

There's no doubt in anyone's mind that this generation has achieved some very impressive things in the Asian Cup.

However, generations come to an end, and now we need to turn our attention to starting the process again, which will be no mean feat. And while we do that, we'll be doing our best to compete, which is the most important thing in the short term. Right now, our short-term focus is on Iran. We need to make sure all the players stay focused and motivated.

TENNIS

'Amazing' Alcaraz cruises into French Open last four

AFP
Paris

Reigning champion Carlos Alcaraz glided into the semi-finals of Roland Garros yesterday, blowing away American 12th seed Tommy Paul for the loss of just five games in the night session on Court Philippe Chatrier.

The Spaniard needed just one hour 34 minutes to dismantle former world number nine Paul 6-0, 6-1, 6-4 and set up a last-four meeting with Italy's Lorenzo Musetti. Musetti, seeded eighth, earlier beat Paul's compatriot and 15th seed Frances Tiafoe in four sets. It will be the third time Alcaraz and Musetti meet this clay-court season.

Alcaraz has dominated that series, beating the Italian in the final in Monte Carlo before also stopping him in the last four on his way to the Rome title.

And the 22-year-old's blistering performance under the lights on centre court in Paris will have many backing him to make it three from three against Musetti as he seeks to defend his title.

"It was, I could close my eyes and everything went in, my feeling today was amazing. Today was one of those matches where everything went in, I'm just pleased with everything," said Alcaraz.

Alcaraz fired 40 winners on his way to victory over Paul for just 22 unforced errors as he emphatically put inconsistent displays in the previous rounds behind him. "This kind of match is never easy," he said. "I've played Tommy many times and he's beat me twice."

Despite previous success against Alcaraz, it took the 28-year-old American eight games to get on the scoreboard as his opponent raced out of the blocks, mixing powerful groundstrokes with perfectly-weighted drop-shots and lobs.



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz plays a forehand return to Tommy Paul of US during their French Open quarter-final match at Roland-Garros in Paris. *(AFP)*

Paul put up determined resistance in the third set but couldn't deny Alcaraz, who broke in the ninth game before holding to love for victory. "I know you wanted to watch more tennis," an apologetic Alcaraz told the crowd on centre court. "I have to say sorry for that. But I had to do my work."

Paul has now lost his last four meetings with Alcaraz, including at the same venue last year in the last eight of the Olympic Games.

Earlier, Eighth-seed Musetti beat 15th seed Tiafoe in four sets 6-2, 4-6, 7-5, 6-2 after over two hours and 45 minutes of battle on Court Philippe Chatrier. Musetti's serve proved to be a major weapon on the day as he fired down eight aces with an 81 percent success rate on his first serve in gusty conditions in Paris.

He also saved two of the three break points engineered by Tiafoe, who had 51 unforced errors to the Italian's 32.

Musetti has been one of the form players on clay this season, reaching at least the last four in all three of the principal warm-up events ahead of the French Open. For both Musetti and world number 16 Tiafoe – twice a US Open semi-finalist – it was a first last-eight appearance at Roland Garros.



Lorenzo Musetti celebrates after winning his quarter-final match against Frances Tiafoe.

TIAFOE SAYS LACK OF SERIOUS SANCTION FOR MUSETTI BALL ABUSE 'COMICAL'

Later, Tiafoe said it was comical that there was no serious punishment for Musetti and tennis rules lacked consistency after the Italian kicked a ball that struck a line official in his quarter-final victory. The incident occurred in the second set when Musetti was given balls to serve. He kicked one with his left leg and inadvertently hit a line judge, who barely flinched even though she was hit on her upper body.

Musetti apologised and was immediately given a warning for unsportsmanlike conduct by the chair umpire, but not defaulted, and the incident drew comparisons to another involving Novak Djokovic at the 2020 US Open. A petulant swipe at the ball after having his serve broken brought an end to Djokovic's campaign in New York five years ago after he struck a line judge in the throat.

"Yeah, I mean, obviously he (Musetti) did that and nothing happened," Tiafoe, who earlier looked surprised and pointed out the incident to the chair umpire, told reporters after his defeat. "I think that's comical, but it is what it is. Nothing happened, so there's nothing really to talk about. Obviously it's not consistent, so it is what it is."

The rules of the sport state that if a player abuses a ball, they can be sanctioned at first instance with a warning. If the abuse is violent or dangerous, it can lead to further sanctions including default.

Musetti said it was an "unlucky coincidence" and he was afraid as he did not want to harm anyone.

CRICKET

2025 FINAL

Kohli fulfils IPL dream as RCB beat Punjab for maiden title



Royal Challengers Bengaluru players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Indian Premier League title following their win over Punjab Kings at Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad yesterday. *(Reuters)*

AFP
Ahmedabad, India

Batting great Virat Kohli fulfilled an 18-year dream of winning an IPL title with Royal Challengers Bengaluru after they beat Punjab Kings by six runs in yesterday's final in Ahmedabad.

Kohli's 43 from 35 balls at the top of the order set up Bengaluru for an imposing total of 190-9 which was one big blow too many for a Punjab side that battled until the end, finishing on 184-7.

More than 91,000 fans packed into the 132,000-capacity stadium, a sea of Bengaluru's red and Kohli's jersey number 18 dominating the stands as chants of "Kohli, Kohli" rang out.

They celebrated noisily when Kohli and RCB clinched victory for the first time in the 18 years of the IPL, their three previous finals having all ended in defeat.

The 36-year-old Kohli, one of India's all-time greats in all formats of the game, collapsed on the ground after the win and then got up to be hugged by his teammates as the crowd celebrated their hero.

"This win is as much for the fans as it is for the team, it's been 18 long years," said Kohli.

"I've given this team my youth, my prime, my experience. I gave it everything I have.

"I never thought this day would come. I was overcome with emotion as soon as the last ball was bowled.

"I have stayed loyal to this team, no matter what. My heart is with Bangalore, my soul is with Bangalore and this is the team I'll play for till the last day I play the IPL."

Punjab put up a feisty response to the Bengaluru total but faltered in their chase after left-arm spinner Krunal Pandya took 2-17 from his four overs.

Shashank Singh hit a valiant 61 not out and finished with three sixes and a four off Australian fast bowler Josh Hazlewood who defended 29 runs in the final over.

Hazlewood, who took 3-21 against Punjab in last week's qualifier win after recovering from a shoulder injury, struck first to send back left-handed Priyansh Arya for 24 with Phil Salt taking a stunning catch at the ropes.

Impact substitute Prabhsimran Singh was the next to go off Pandya but the Bengaluru crowd went wild when Romario Shepherd had skipper Shreyas Iyer caught behind for one.

'King Kohli'

Pandya stuck again to cut short Australian wicketkeeper-batter Josh Inglis' stay on 39 and Bengaluru seized momentum and Shashank's late blitz was not enough. "I am very proud of each and every individual who has participated in this team," said Iyer.

"There are a lot of youngsters who are playing their first season, they've shown a lot of fearlessness. We wouldn't be here without them. Kudos to them."

Bengaluru had the perfect start as 'King Kohli' dug in. Far from his fluent best, he only struck three fours during his innings but in the end it turned out to be key.

He lost opening partner Salt for 16 when New Zealand quick Kyle Jamieson struck in his first over to have the England batter caught in the deep off Iyer.

Kohli, who was his team's best batter this season with 657 runs including eight half-centuries, anchored the innings, sharing important partnerships with Mayank Agarwal, who made 24, and then skipper Rajat Patidar, who hit 26.

But Punjab kept chipping away with wickets as leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal got Agarwal and Jamieson trapped the captain lbw.

Kohli's vigil ended when he mistimed a rising delivery from Afghanistan pace bowler Azmatullah Omarzai for a caught and bowled, the disappointment etched across his face mirrored by his fans.

Jamieson took his third wicket to cut short Liam Livingstone's rampant 25 off 15 balls.

Wickets kept tumbling as wicketkeeper-batsman Jitesh Sharma fell for a 10-ball 24 and Romario Shepherd for 17 off nine balls.

Left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh took three wickets including Shepherd in the 20th over and gave away just three runs.

The 18th edition of the world's richest cricket league ended nine days late due to a pause caused by the military conflict between India and Pakistan

BRIEF SCORES
Royal Challengers Bengaluru 190 for 9 (Kohli 43, Arshdeep 3-40, Jamieson 3-48) **beat Punjab Kings 184 for 7** (Shashank 61*, Inglis 39, Krunal 2-17, Bhuvneshwar 2-38) **by 6 runs**

FREEZE FRAMES FROM THRILLING IPL FINAL



RCB's Krunal Pandya (left) speaks with teammate Virat Kohli (centre) and captain Rajat Patidar (second left) during the IPL final against Punjab Kings yesterday. *(AFP)*



Punjab Kings' Shreyas Iyer holds a check with Honorary treasurer of the BCCI, Prabhtej Singh Bhatia, after the match. *(Reuters)*



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Rajat Patidar with secretary of the BCCI, Devajit Saikia, after winning the IPL title. *(AFP)*

FOCUS

England sweep Windies series

AFP
London

Jamie Smith struck a maiden one-day international fifty to set-up England's victorious run-chase as they completed a 3-0 series sweep of the West Indies at his Oval home ground yesterday.

Player-of-the-match Smith, opening in ODIs for the first time this series, launched England's pursuit of a revised target of 246 in a match reduced by rain to 40 overs per side with a quickfire 64.

Victory meant Harry Brook led England to a clean sweep in his first series as permanent white-ball captain after they had lost their seven previous matches at this level, culminating in a lacklustre exit from this year's Champions Trophy in Pakistan.

Brook was 26 not out at the finish but it was Jos Buttler, his predecessor as captain, who ended the match with an emphatic six out of the ground off fast bowler Jayden Seales that capped his unbeaten 41 off 20 balls. England made a blistering start to their chase, scoring 93 in the first seven overs. Smith's fifty came off 25 balls, including nine fours and two sixes.

Fellow opener Ben Duckett got in on the act with consecutive sixes off Alzarri Joseph before the paceman's next ball saw him dropped at fine leg. An eventful seventh over started with Smith being dropped off left-arm spinner Gudakesh Motie's first ball when Justin Greaves floored a relatively simple chance at short midwicket. Smith punched the next ball through cover for four and off the third of the over went to his fifty with a superb straight six.



England's Jamie Smith in action in the third and final ODI against the West Indies at the Oval in London yesterday. *(Reuters)*

He followed that up with a four and a six off the next two balls before being bowled by Motie, who made a fine 63 in West Indies' total of 251-9. Smith's exit brought in Joe Root, fresh from steering England to a three-wicket win in Cardiff on Sunday with an ODI best of 166 not out that saw the star batsman become his country's leading run-scorer in this format.

Duckett completed a 34-ball fifty including four fours and three sixes, before the left-hander fell for 58 when he flayed off-spinner Roston Chase to cover.

New batsman Brook opened his account with a classic on-driven four off Seales, only to be dropped next ball when Chase put down a two-handed chance at point. Root could only manage 44 before he was caught top-edging a hook off Alzarri Joseph. But that still meant the player-of-the-series had scored 267 runs in three innings at an average of 133.5.

Earlier, Sherfane Rutherford top-scored for the West Indies with 70 in his first match of the series. The tourists slumped to 121-6, with veteran England leg-spinner Adil Rashid (3-40) taking three wickets in quick succession.

But Motie and Alzarri Joseph (41) shared an eighth-wicket stand of 91 in 12 overs before Smith made the West Indies' total look inadequate. The West Indies' day got off to a bad start when traffic problems meant they arrived at the ground late, delaying the start by 30 minutes. England avoided the traffic by riding bikes and made the most of winning the toss to leave their opponents 28-3 inside seven overs.

West Indies will hope for a better showing when they face England in the first of a three-match Twenty20 series in Chester-le-Street on Friday.

BRIEF SCORES: England 246 for 3 (Smith 64, Duckett 58, Root 44, Buttler 41*) **beat West Indies 251 for 9** (Rutherford 70, Motie 63, Rashid 3-40) **by seven wickets (via DLS method)**

SPOTLIGHT

Irshad stars as Black Hawks lift QCA Cup 2025



By Sports Reporter
Doha

A breezy half century from Adnan Irshad and a four-wicket haul by Awais Riaz propelled Black Hawks to a convincing 56-run victory over Arabian Knights in the final to lift the QCA Cup.

The winners were honoured by Abdullah al-Abdullah, Director of Domestic Cricket, Qatar Cricket Association (QCA). Adnan, who made 37-ball 51 (2x4s, 3x6s) shared an opening stand of 45 runs with Jamshaid Anwar (33) and a 70-run second-wicket association with Syed Kazim (35). Imdad Hussain (17) and Zaigham Abbas (26) later added to Black Hawks' total of 181 for 5 in 20 overs.

Chasing the target of 182, Arabian Knights were bowled out for 125 runs in 18.3 overs. Riaz, who opened the bowling with Zabih Ullah, was the most successful returning figures of 3.3-1-13-4. Kazim claimed two wickets while Ullah, Abdullah Shahzad and Saad Abbasi claimed a wicket each. Wasim Muhammad made the highest score of 23 runs for Arabian Knights. Adnan Irshad was named Man of the Match. A total of 36 teams participated in the tournament which was played from January 17-May 30, 2025.

TENNIS

Swiatek, Sabalenka set up French Open semi clash

'EVEN THOUGH THE FIRST SET, THE SCORE LOOKS PRETTY STRAIGHTFORWARD, IT WASN'T'



Poland's Iga Swiatek celebrates after winning against Ukraine's Elina Svitolina during their French Open quarter-final on Court Philippe-Chatrier at the Roland-Garros Complex in Paris yesterday. *(AFP)*



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka celebrates after winning against China's Zheng Qinwen during their quarter-final yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Paris

Three-time defending champion Iga Swiatek set up a blockbuster French Open semi-final clash with world number one Aryna Sabalenka yesterday.

Swiatek, the fifth seed, got past Ukrainian Elina Svitolina 6-1, 7-5, after top women's seed Sabalenka won a tense quarter-final against Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen, 7-6 (7/3), 6-3.

Eighth-seed Musetti won 6-2, 4-6, 7-5, 6-2 against 15th seed Frances Tiafoe after over two hours and 45 minutes of battle on Court Philippe Chatrier.

The 23-year-old achieved his second Grand Slam semi-final after Wimbledon last year.

"(Aryna) has been having a great season so I'm not going to lie, it is going to be a tough match. But I'm happy for the challenge," said Swiatek, after reeling off her 26th win in a row at the French Open.

Both players have shared the number one ranking between them since April 2022.

Sabalenka ended Swiatek's 11-month reign as world number one last October but the Pole leads 8-4 in their previous meetings.

World number five Swiatek has been struggling for her best form and has not reached a final since winning the French Open title last year.

But she gave 13th seed Svitolina little opportunity on her favoured clay surface, breaking in the fourth game to ease through the first set.

The pair exchanged consecutive breaks of serve early in the second set, before Swiatek forced the breakthrough at 5-5 with a powerful forehand down the line.

She then sealed the win with back-to-back aces.

"Even though the first set, the score looks pretty straightforward, it wasn't," said Swiatek.

"I had to fight for every point."

Swiatek is aiming to become the first woman to win four straight Roland Garros crowns since Suzanne Lenglen 102 years ago.

Earlier, reigning US Open champion Sabalenka defied the windy conditions and Zheng to avenge her recent loss to the Chinese star in Rome.

"The last tournament I was pretty exhausted," said Sabalenka. "Today I was more fresh, I was ready to battle."

Sabalenka once again got the upper hand over Zheng, who had been on a winning streak of 10 matches on the Paris clay after her run to Olympic gold last year.

Zheng broke and led 4-2 in the first set. But numerous unforced errors – 31 in total – allowed the Belarusian to come back.

The second set was also tight before Sabalenka broke back to lead 4-3, taking advantage of her opponent's errors.

"I gave her the chance, so easy," said Zheng, who has lost seven times in eight meetings with Sabalenka, including in last year's Australian Open final.

Madrid Open champion Sabalenka feels she is ready to go all the way in Paris, where her previous best performance was reaching the semi-finals two years ago.

"It's high-level matches. I'm super excited to go out there and to fight and to do everything I need to get the win," said Sabalenka of her tie against Swiatek.

SABALENKA CALLS FOR MARQUEE WOMEN'S MATCHES TO START LATER

World number one Aryna Sabalenka and Paris Olympics champion Zheng Qinwen began their French Open quarter-final in front of a small crowd yesterday, prompting calls for such high-profile matches to be moved to later slots to showcase them better.

A sumptuous lunch often takes priority for fans in Court Philippe Chatrier's corporate seats and the Parisian cultural practice leaves many seats unoccupied in the showcourt when matches begin at 11am local time.

Sabalenka overcame her Chinese opponent 7-6(3) 6-3 in just under two hours to leave her with the rest of the day off but the Belarusian said organisers could do better despite fans trickling in later to improve the atmosphere.

"I didn't really look in the crowd, but it felt like it was a lot of people. Yeah, it was a big match and it probably would make more sense to put us a bit later just so more people could watch it," Sabalenka told reporters.

"At the same time, I'm happy to finish earlier and then I have a half-day off, and I can just enjoy the city and do all the things that I have to do."

Reuters has contacted organisers for comment.

The French Open's scheduling decisions have come under a harsh spotlight again this year with no women's match featured in the evening sessions which begin at 8.15pm local time and are exclusively broadcast by Amazon Prime in France.

French Open tournament director Amelie Mauresmo said last week that women's matches, played over a maximum of three sets as opposed to the five on the men's side, could finish "really fast" and having an extra match in that slot was unfeasible.

"We deserve the equal treatment," Sabalenka said.

"There were a lot of great battles, a lot of great matches, which would be cool to see as a night session (match), just more people in the stands watching these incredible battles and to show ourselves to more people.

"I definitely agree that we deserve to be put in a bigger stage, like better timing and more people watching."

Sabalenka will continue her bid for a maiden French Open title against four-times champion Iga Swiatek.

"I love tough challenges," she added.

"These are the matches where you actually improve as a player, and where you get much stronger. I'm always excited to face someone strong and someone who can challenge me.

"I will go out there and fight, and I'm ready to leave everything I have to get the win."

BADMINTON

Top seeds An and Shi shine as Sindhu enters second round

Reuters
Jakarta

World number one An Se-young eased past Busanan Ongbamrungphan 21-14 21-11 in the opening round of the Indonesia Open while men's top seed and defender Shi Yuqi beat Lakshya Sen 21-11 20-22 21-15 yesterday.

Olympic champion An, who saw her unbeaten run this season snapped by Chen Yufei in the Singapore quarter-finals last week, faced little trouble beating her Thai opponent in 41 minutes.

Defending women's champion Yufei, seeded fifth, will face Thailand's Pornpicha Choeikeewong in her opener today. P.V. Sindhu was the only Indian singles player to reach the second round yesterday after her three-game win over old rival Nozomi Okuhara of Japan, who she last played in 2023.

"We played after a long time. I'm glad that we're still there, because we've been playing for more than a decade. It was always good to play with Nozomi," she said. India's Sen, returning from an back injury that forced him to retire in his opening round match of Singapore Open, came back from a 9-2 deficit to win the second game but Shi eventually took control to close out the match.

Home hope Jonatan Christie, who last won a Super 1000 title at the 2024 All England Open, beat Singaporean Jason Teh after losing the first game.

Another local favourite Alwi Farhan beat Indian H. S. Prannoy and will meet Dane third seed Anders Antonsen in the second round. The 20-year-old Indonesian stunned Antonsen in their only meeting at the Sudirman Cup in May. Malaysia's world number one pair Goh Sze-Fei and Nur Izzuddin Rumsani beat Taiwan's Lee Fang Chih and Lee Fang Jen to set up an all-Malaysian round of 16 clash with Nur Mohammed Azriyn Ayub and Tan Weekiong. Indian pair Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty also advanced.



India's Pusarla V. Sindhu reacts to a point against Japan's Nozomi Okuhara during their Indonesia Open match in Jakarta yesterday. *(AFP)*

FOCUS

World Aquatics acts to protect sport from doping enablers

Reuters
London

World Aquatics introduced a new bylaw yesterday that will prevent any athlete or official who supports or endorses doping from competing or holding any positions after a Greek swimmer supported by the Enhanced Games 'broke' the world record.

With the help of the controversial programme, Greece's Kristian Gkolomeev swam the men's 50 metres freestyle in 20.89 seconds to shave 0.02 seconds off the long-standing record set by Brazil's Cesar Cielo in 2009.

Gkolomeev, who has competed at four Olympics and came fifth in the event at the Paris Games last year with a time of 21.59 seconds, said he had gained "an extra 10 pounds of muscle" before the attempt.

Enhanced Games had declined to disclose which "performance enhancements" the 31-year-old used.

"Individuals who support, endorse, or participate in sporting events that embrace the use of scientific advancements or other practices ... will not be eligible to hold positions with World Aquatics or to participate in any World Aquatics competitions, events, or other activities," World Aquatics said.

The practices can include either prohibited substances or prohibited methods.

"This ineligibility would apply to roles such as athlete, coach, team official, administrator, medical support staff, or government representative," the governing body added.

The Enhanced Games operate under the principle that banning performance-enhancing drugs in major competitions does not protect athletes but rather stifles their performance, and called on athletes to join the competition.



The World Anti-Doping Agency had condemned the Enhanced Games as "dangerous and irresponsible", while Olympic 50 metres freestyle champion Cam McEvoy said Gkolomeev's time was 'irrelevant' to the sport.

"Those who enable doped sport are not welcome at World Aquatics or our events," World Aquatics president Husain Al Musallam said.

"This new bylaw ensures that we can continue to protect the integrity of our competitions, the health and safety of our athletes, and the credibility of the global aquatics community."

The Enhanced Games have set their inaugural competition for May 2026 in Las Vegas, with swimming, athletics and weightlifting on the agenda.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Fernandes confirms he rejected Saudi move to stay at United

AFP
Munich, Germany

Bruno Fernandes confirmed yesterday he rejected a huge offer from Saudi Arabia to stay at Manchester United, saying he wanted to "continue to play at the highest level".

Speaking to media in a Portugal camp ahead of today's Nations League semi-final against Germany in Munich, Fernandes confirmed he received an "exciting offer" from Al Hilal but wanted to be part of Ruben Amorim's rebuild at Old Trafford.

Reports said Al Hilal were willing to pay United up to £100mn for the 30-year-old Portugal international. "The president of Al Hilal called me and asked me if I wanted to move there," Fernandes confirmed, saying the club "waited for me to think about my future".

"I talked to the gaffer and he asked me not to go," Fernandes revealed, adding: "Man United said they didn't want to sell me. They said if I wanted to go I could but they didn't need the money."

The player said a transfer would have been "easy" with several Portuguese players already in Saudi Arabia, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Joao Cancelo and Ruben Neves, but added: "I want to play at the highest possible level. I want to play major competitions. I know I still can and I want to be happy doing the thing I love the most. For better or worse, this is how I see football and I'm passionate about football and this is the decision I've made."

United endured their worst finish of the Premier League era, finishing 15th. They also lost the Europa League final to Tottenham. United captain Fernandes was one of the few players to emerge with credit from a disastrous season, scoring 19 goals and making 19 assists across all competitions.



Al Hilal were willing to pay Manchester United up to £100mn for Bruno Fernandes.

Former United captain Gary Neville, now a pundit, said the development was "significant". "I think that there was an element of this situation that meant United getting that level of money, for someone of Bruno's age, obviously, you couldn't say that it would have been a bad deal," he said. "But, on the other hand, Manchester United's star player - only player at times - for the last four, five, six years, has been Bruno Fernandes. He's so important."

Neville added: "To turn that money down at a point where Manchester United are at their lowest ebb and say, 'No, I want to fight through this, I want to see it through the other side, I want to come out and achieve things,' I think it says a lot about him as a person, as a character. The club needs people who are going to run through a brick wall for them."

United are expected to be busy in the transfer market as Amorim reshapes his under-performing squad. The club have already signed Matheus Cunha from Wolves and are being heavily linked with Brentford forward Bryan Mbeumo. Departures could include Jadon Sancho, Marcus Rashford, Antony and Alejandro Garnacho. Fernandes has made 290 appearances and scored 98 goals for United since his £47mn move from Sporting Lisbon in January 2020.

NATIONS LEAGUE

Playing at home is a 'privilege' for Germany

Portugal have not beaten Germany since 2000 and have lost their past five games

AFP
Munich, Germany

Hosts Germany insisted that playing the Nations League finals at home was a "privilege", dismissing suggestions of additional pressure ahead of today's semi-final against Portugal in Munich.

The winners at Munich's Allianz Arena will face either holders Spain or France in the final on Sunday at the same venue. Last year's Euros hosts beat Italy in the quarter-finals, winning the right to hold the remainder of the tournament on home soil as well as progression to the final four.

Germany's hopes of winning Euro 2024 at home were dashed with a quarter-final loss in extra time to eventual champions Spain in July last year. Midfielder Leon Goretzka, recalled into the Germany fold after being dropped for Euro 2024 on form grounds, knocked back the idea his side were under pressure to make short work of underdogs Portugal. "I don't see it like that," Goretzka said, adding: "I see it as a privilege to play in front of your home fans."

Portugal have not beaten Germany since 2000 and have lost their past five games against the Germans. Of the remaining teams, Germany is the only one yet to win the Nations League, with Portugal, France and Spain winning in 2019, 2021 and 2023 respectively.

Calling the tournament "a mini-Euros", Goretzka said "it's a chance to gift our country a title, even if it's a small one".


Germany midfielder Florian Wirtz (right) trains with teammates yesterday, on the eve of the Nations League semi-final against Portugal.

Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann has repeatedly said Germany's Nations League campaign is a crucial component of their preparation for the 2026 World Cup. "It's a small title, but for us as a group it's very important," the coach added.

Four Portugal players won the Champions League with Paris Saint-Germain in Munich on Saturday. Nuno Mendes, Vitinha, Joao Neves all started the match, with Goncalo Ramos coming off the bench. Nagelsmann said facing Portugal's PSG stars so soon "had advantages and disadvantages".

"Recently they've had a bit more to do than other players," Nagelsmann said, adding that "the game wasn't that long ago". "They might have celebrated a bit, too. I don't know how well they're doing now, but they probably had a beer or two."

Portugal midfielder Bruno Fernandes toasted his teammates' success, but said "regardless of how many beers they've had, they're amazing players, ambitious players – and more motivated than ever. "I'm sure they're more than ready."

Portugal coach Roberto Martinez said the energy of Portugal's PSG contingent was "contagious", calling them "winners". Even if the quartet had partied hard, Martinez said "for Portugal it's better to have players who have that experience with winning". "I'll wait until tomorrow to see how they are physically, but emotionally they are over the moon."

Fernandes said the absence of injured Jamal Musiala boosted the Portuguese, calling the Germany midfielder "if not the best, then one of the best number 10s in the world".

"He's very talented and has so much to give football – we're lucky he's not in the game."

Al Duhail sign Polish striker Piatek

Doha: Al Duhail announced the signing of **Krzysztof Piatek**, with the Polish striker to add firepower to the Qatar Stars League club.

Piatek, 29, joins Al Duhail from Basaksehir, having netted 21 goals in the 2024/25 season for the Turkish club.

Piatek will be a welcome addition for Al Duhail, who parted ways with all-time topscorer Michael Olunga on Saturday, with the Kenyan striker having netted 130 goals in his time with the club. Piatek has extensive experience in European leagues, having previously played for Italian clubs AC Milan, Genoa and Fiorentina, and Hertha BSC in Germany.

He has been capped 35 times by Poland, scoring 12 goals. Al Duhail, who finished second in the Qatar Stars League, will make a return to the AFC Champions League Elite after missing out on the last edition.



SPOTLIGHT

Inzaghi leaves Inter after Champions League final thrashing

Reuters
Milan

Simone Inzaghi has left his position as manager of Inter Milan, the Serie A club said, after a humiliating 5-0 loss in the Champions League final against Paris St Germain capped a trophyless season.

Inter suffered a dismal end to their campaign with Saturday's thrashing in Munich coming after they finished second in Serie A, one point behind champions Napoli, and were knocked out in the Coppa Italia semi-finals 4-1 on aggregate by city rivals AC Milan. Inter face a race against time to appoint a new manager before the Club World Cup, with their campaign getting underway against Mexican side Monterrey on June 17. "The time has come for me to say goodbye to this club after a four-year journey, during which I gave everything," Inzaghi said in a separate statement.

Inzaghi won six trophies at Inter: one Serie A title, two Coppa Italia triumphs and three Italian Super Cups. "I want to dedicate one last word to the millions of Nerazzurri (Inter) fans who cheered me on, cried and suffered in difficult moments and laughed and celebrated in the six triumphs we experienced together," he added. "I will never forget you."

Italian media reported that Inzaghi will join Saudi Pro League club Al Hilal and will lead them in the Club World Cup in the United States. Inter confirmed that the decision for Inzaghi to leave the club was taken by mutual agreement earlier in the day.



"I would like to thank Simone Inzaghi for the work done, for the passion shown and also for the sincerity in today's discussion, which led to the common decision to separate our paths," club president Giuseppe Marotta said.

Como's Cesc Fabregas and Olympique de Marseille's Roberto De Zerbi are potential candidates to replace Inzaghi at Inter. Several managers have left their clubs since the Serie A season wrapped up. Marco Baroni left Lazio after leading the club to a disappointing seventh-placed finish, paving the way for Maurizio Sarri's return a year after resigning.

Atalanta are also searching for a new coach after Gian Piero Gasperini confirmed his departure on Saturday. Massimiliano Allegri returned as AC Milan coach for a second stint on Friday after the club sacked Sergio Conceicao after a season that saw them fail to qualify for any European competition.

After Madrid penalty furore, football's lawmakers rule for retakes

Paris: If Julian Alvarez slips while taking a spot kick for Atletico Madrid at the Club World Cup this month, he will get the second chance he was denied in the Champions League in March, after international football's rule-making body yesterday clarified the double-touch rule.

Football's rule-making International Football Association Board (IFAB) announced that if players unintentionally touch the ball twice while taking a spot kick and still find the net, they should be allowed a retake. Alvarez slipped as he netted his penalty kick in a shootout to decide a Champions League Madrid derby.

Video review (VAR) detected that he touched the ball twice and the referee ruled the shot a miss under Law 14, which deals with the penalty kick. Real went on to win 4-2. After the match, European governing body UEFA said that "under the current rule, the VAR had to call the referee signalling that the goal should be disallowed".

UEFA said it would hold talks with world football's governing body FIFA and and the rule-making International Football Association Board (IFAB). Yesterday, IFAB issued its ruling. It was to come into force on July 1, but FIFA at once announced the change would apply to the Club World Cup, which kicks off in the United States on June 15 with both Madrid clubs among the 32 teams.

"The situation where the penalty taker accidentally kicks the ball with both feet simultaneously or when the ball touches the penalty taker's non-kicking foot or leg immediately after they have taken the kick... is rare," wrote Lukas Brud, IFAB's secretary in a circular. "As it is not directly covered in Law 14, referees have understandably tended to penalise the kicker for having touched the ball again," he wrote.

However, he added, the law "is primarily intended for situations where the penalty taker deliberately touches the ball a second time before it has touched another player".

"This is very different from the penalty taker accidentally kicking the ball with both feet simultaneously or touching the ball with their non-kicking foot or leg immediately after they have taken the kick, which usually occurs because they have slipped."

Brud pointed out that even an accidental second touch could be unfair to a goalkeeper because it changes the ball's trajectory. Therefore, he wrote, IFAB had decided that "if the kick is successful, it is retaken".

If a kick during the game is unsuccessful, the result is an indirect free kick, as it would be for a deliberate second touch, unless the referee decides to play an advantage for the defending team. In a shootout it remains a miss.

FOCUS

Netherlands 'obligated' to top World Cup qualifying group, says coach Koeman

Reuters
Amsterdam

The Netherlands are obligated to win their World Cup qualifying group, coach **Ronald Koeman** said as they began preparation for their opening Group G clash against Finland in Helsinki on Saturday.

It will be their first match in their bid to qualify for next year's finals in North America, followed by a second fixture on Tuesday when they host Malta in Groningen. The Dutch belatedly kick off their qualifiers because they played in the Nations League quarter-finals in March where they drew twice with Spain before being eliminated on penalties.

"Maybe it is easier to play football against Spain," Koeman told a press conference. "Because no one expects anything from us then.


Finland and Malta are different types of opponents. We will have more of the ball, and they try to stop us. We are obligated to finish first in this group, but we do not underestimate anyone and we need to bring the energy that we have shown in our last few matches."

The group also includes Lithuania and Poland, who top the standings after two wins in March. The winners qualify for the World Cup while the runners-up advances to a playoff competition. "We want to be good for all the matches and perform much more consistently," Koeman said. "We have shown that against one of the best countries in the world, which gives us confidence."

One problem Koeman admitted, however, was the lack of a recognised centre forward. "We don't have top strikers now. I don't know what is coming through the ranks with the 15-16-year-olds, but it is clear that at the moment we do not have the classic striker of the past. Players like (Patrick) Kluivert, (Klaas-Jan) Huntelaar, and (Ruud) Van Nistelrooy. You don't see players like them around anymore."

Koeman is not sure who would lead the line in the qualifiers over the next week. "It will probably be Memphis (Depay) or Wout (Weghorst) at the top of the attack," he said. "But (Cody) Gakpo and (Donyell) Malen are all possibilities in that position."