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TENNIS

Gauff stuns Sabalenka for French Open glory

AMERICAN COMES FROM A SET DOWN TO WIN SECOND GRAND SLAM TITLE

Reuters
Paris

Coco Gauff continued a spectacular season for American women at the Grand Slams when she battled from a set down to topple world number one Aryna Sabalenka in a lacklustre French Open final for a maiden Roland Garros crown yesterday.

The 21-year-old's 6-7(5) 6-2 6-4 victory helped her become the first American to capture the singles trophy in Paris since Serena Williams in 2015 and the youngest from the United States to achieve the feat since her decorated compatriot in 2002.

Victory, which follows colleague Madison Keys' Australian Open triumph, helped the erase memories of Gauff's crushing loss to Iga Swiatek in 2022 and confirmed her pedigree on the biggest stage after a breakthrough triumph at the 2023 US Open.

"I was going through a lot of things when I lost here three years ago," said Gauff, who has won both her major titles after rallying from a set down to beat Sabalenka.

"I'm just glad to be back here. I was going through a lot of dark thoughts. Three finals... I guess I got the most important win. That's all that matters," added the American who had tripped up at the final hurdle in the Madrid and Rome finals last month.

Gauff provided some comic relief later when she dropped the lid of the Suzanne Lenglen Cup while posing for a photo, before dedicating her victory to 'Americans who look like me' during her press conference.

UNFORCED ERRORS

Paris was guaranteed a new champion but the first clash between the top two women in the world rankings in a major final since the 2018 Australian Open failed to live up to its billing on Court Philippe Chatrier with 100 unforced errors



Coco Gauff of the US celebrates with the trophy after winning the French Open final against Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka in Paris yesterday. (Reuters)

in total. Competing in her third straight Grand Slam final but first on the sport's slowest surface, Sabalenka broke to love in the third game with smart play at the net and mixed delicate drop shots and raw power to lead 4-1 in the first set.

Gauff was undeterred and broke back from 0-40 down after a shaky service game by Sabalenka and hung on to draw level after eight games as the vocal centre court crowd spurred her on to prolong the contest.

What followed was a festival of mistakes from both players in blustery conditions, before Gauff forced a tiebreak with a neat backhand winner, only to squander a

4-1 advantage as Sabalenka roared back to take the opening set.

Second seed Gauff barely flinched and she dialled up the intensity in the second set by claiming four of the opening five games and levelled the match after her opponent's staggering unforced error count climbed to 51.

"It was super tough when I walked on the court and felt the wind, because we warmed up with the roof closed," Gauff said.

"I was like, 'this is going to be a tough day' and I knew it was just going to be about will power. It came down to the last few points, but overall I'm just really happy with the fight that I managed to day. It wasn't pretty, but it got the

job done, and that's all that matters."

WILD CELEBRATIONS

The 2022 Paris runner-up stepped up another level in the deciding set to build a 3-1 lead before Sabalenka clawed her way back, but she composed herself just in time and wrapped up the win to spark wild celebrations among her fans.

Gauff dropped to the ground in disbelief before shedding tears of joy and racing up the stands to meet her team, while Sabalenka was left to digest another major final defeat after losing the Australian Open title clash to Keys in January.

The result denied the 27-year-

old the chance to become the only active woman on tour to lift singles titles at three of the four Grand Slams after her success at the Australian Open in 2023-24 and the US Open last year.

"You're a fighter, a hard worker, so congratulations to you and your team," a tearful Sabalenka said.

The three-times major champion said it was a forgettable final after a solid two weeks.

"It was honestly the worst tennis I've played in the last, I don't know how many months," Sabalenka added. "The conditions were terrible and she simply was better in these conditions. It was the worst final I've ever played."

After seeing her bid for a third



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka reacts as she holds her runner-up trophy in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

straight Australian Open crown ended by Madison Keys in January, Sabalenka slid to another painful loss on the clay.

"I definitely have to, you know, step back and learn something, because I cannot keep doing the same mistake," she said.

Sabalenka was full of confidence after knocking out Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen and then ending Iga Swiatek's 26-match winning streak at Roland Garros.

But she couldn't deliver when it counted most, as Gauff avenged her loss to Sabalenka in last month's Madrid final.

"It just hurts. Honestly hurts. I've been playing really well, and then in the last match, go out there and perform like I did, that hurts."

Sabalenka revealed her plans for a quick break in Greece, to help her switch off and reset before preparing for the transition to grass and Wimbledon.

FOOTBALL

Ronaldo says he does not plan to play at Club World Cup

Reuters
Munich

Portugal forward Cristiano Ronaldo said yesterday he did not plan to play at the Club World Cup in the United States, despite being courted by clubs participating in the expanded 32-team tournament.

Speculation over the 40-year-old's future intensified last month when FIFA President Gianni Infantino said discussions were underway about Ronaldo playing in the Club World Cup, despite Al Nassr failing to qualify. Al Nassr's sporting director Fernando Hierro said last month they were negotiating with Ronaldo over a contract extension but faced competition from a host of clubs eager to sign the five-times Ballon d'Or winner.

Ronaldo himself added to the uncertainty after Al Nassr's season-ending match at Al-Fateh, posting on social media: "This chapter is over. The story? Still being written."

Asked about the possibility of signing for another club in the coming days in order to play at the Club World Cup later this month, Ronaldo told reporters: "It's irrelevant, at the moment it doesn't make sense to talk about things other than the national team. There has been plenty of contact (from clubs), I see things that make sense, others that don't. You can't go to all of them (clubs), you have to think short, medium and long term. It's something that's practically decided on my part, which is not to go to the Club World Cup, but I've had plenty of invitations."

On Wednesday, Ronaldo scored the winner as Portugal beat Germany 2-1 to go into the Nations League final, where they will face Spain. Many have labelled today's final as a face-off between Ronaldo and 17-year-old Barcelona sensation Lamine Yamal but the Portuguese forward said he did not see it as such.

"It's always been like that, whenever I've played football, whenever I've played a big game it's always been Cristiano against



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo takes part in a training session of the team in Munich yesterday, on the eve of the UEFA Nations League final against Spain. (AFP)

this one, against that one," he said. "It's been 20-something years and it's still the same, it doesn't keep me up at night anymore, it's a normal thing. They're completely different generations, a generation

that's starting out, another that's finishing, which is my case.

"In reality it's not like that, it's a team against a team. It will always be like that... What I want most is for Portugal to be at a good level,

confident that things can go well, that we can play a great game and win against a very good team, possibly the best in the world."

'Ballon d'Or' should go to Champions League winner

Five-time Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo also said the individual honour should be awarded to a player who won the Champions League. The veteran said "tropies" should determine who wins the Ballon d'Or. "In my opinion, whoever wins it should be on a team that has won trophies. The Ballon d'Or winner should be in a team that has won the Champions League," the 40-year-old forward told reporters.

First awarded in 1956 by French magazine France Football, the Ballon d'Or is awarded to the player considered the best over the previous season. Paris Saint-Germain's 5-0 thumping of Inter Milan in the Champions League final last Saturday led to growing calls for Ousmane Dembele to win this season's gong.

Spain starlet Lamine Yamal's

superb display in Thursday's 5-4 Nations League semi-final win over France however had some arguing the teenager should be awarded the Ballon d'Or, which would make the 17-year-old the youngest winner in its history. France coach Didier Deschamps backed Dembele for the award, saying "considering the season Ousmane is having, he deserves it and that's all I wish for him".

At a press conference in Stuttgart, France captain Kylian Mbappe told reporters he backed Dembele.

"Does anyone really need me to explain? Right now we're talking about Lamine Yamal and Ousmane Dembele, but I'm voting for Dembele."

Ronaldo said he "cannot tell you who deserves it" this season. Ronaldo's five wins is bettered only by Argentinian Lionel Messi, who has won the award eight times.

The duo had a monopoly on the award for a decade from Ronaldo's first win in 2008 to his last in 2017. The current holder is Spain and Manchester City midfielder Rodri.

CRICKET

South Africa seek end to trophy misery in WTC final against holders Australia

AFP
Johannesburg

South Africa captain **Temba Bavuma** believes his team can put their shocking record in knockout games behind them when they face defending champions Australia in next week's World Test Championship final.

The Proteas have won just one International Cricket Council trophy - the ICC Knockout - a fore-runner of the Champions Trophy, back in 1998, alongside a list of agonising near-misses.

By contrast the top-ranked Australians, who beat India in the 2023 WTC final, have an enviable record at the sharp end of tournaments in the white-ball game.

They have won the one-day World Cup a record six times, lifted the Champions Trophy twice and have also triumphed at the T20 World Cup.

"It is different," Bavuma said ahead of the WTC final at Lord's starting on Wednesday.

"Australia have had success.

They know what they need to do."

But the 35-year-old batsman is adamant South Africa will not be overawed when facing Pat Cummins' team.

"For us it is about being confident in our ability," said Bavuma. "We haven't been handed this opportunity to play in the final, we have performed accordingly. We respect them (Australia) but it is still a 50-50 chance in our eyes."

Heartache has been the recurring theme of South Africa's history at global events going back to the 1992 World Cup, when they returned to the international fold after two decades of exclusion as a result of the country's apartheid regime.

South Africa reached the semi-finals only for a cruel rain rule, that left them needing 21 off one ball, to wreck their chances against England in Sydney.

That set a pattern for the next three ODI World Cups.

South Africa dominated their group stage in Pakistan in 1996 before falling to a Brian Lara-inspired West Indies in the quarter-finals.



A farcical run-out with the scores tied in a 1999 semi-final against Australia meant they were eliminated on net run-rate.

On home soil in 2003, rain and a miscalculation of the run-rate formula against Sri Lanka led to an embarrassing group-stage exit.

Not until last year's T20 World Cup did South Africa reach a major final. Finally, a trophy was in sight as a rampant Heinrich Klaasen took South Africa to within 30 runs of victory with 30 balls and six wickets remaining.

But Klaasen was dismissed, Jasprit Bumrah bowled superbly and David Miller fell to a sensational boundary catch in the last over as South Africa fell short yet again.

Test cricket, however, is one format in which South Africa have ruled the world.

They topped the rankings under Graeme Smith's leadership in 2009 and held the ICC Test Mace - before the World Test Championship was introduced - from 2013 until 2015.

Bavuma is the only survivor from an era when South Africa could boast world-class players including Smith, Jacques Kallis, Hashim Amla, AB de Villiers, Dale Steyn, Morne Morkel and Vernon Philander.

Fast bowler Kagiso Rabada is the only current player who would be a contender for a place in a South Africa all-time team.

But Bavuma has an impressive record of eight wins and a draw in the nine Tests in which he has captained.

The skipper lauded coach Shukri Conrad for helping create a strong team spirit, saying: "We don't boast legendary names. For us to achieve what we have is a tribute to him."

Conrad has spent time with Springbok coach Rassie Erasmus in a bid to sharpen his side's winning edge.

Erasmus has guided South Africa to back-to-back Rugby World Cup titles, with the Springboks showing extraordinary mental strength in winning three successive knockout matches by a single point on the way to their 2023 triumph in Paris.

"Obviously they are doing a lot of things right," said Conrad, who was clear about the key lesson he had learned from Erasmus.

"Playing for the Springboks has got to be the biggest thing - playing for the Proteas has got to be the biggest thing for our players," he explained. "That is what we have to hone in on."

MOTORSPORT

Marc beats brother Alex for 7th sprint win of season

'I WAS CALM AND THEN IN THE END OF THE RACE FEELING WAS GREAT'

Reuters
Alcañiz, Spain

Ducati's world championship leader Marc Marquez recovered from a poor start to win yesterday's sprint at the Aragon Grand Prix ahead of his brother Alex and Fermin Aldeguer of Gresini Racing for an all-Spanish podium on home soil.

Marc's seventh sprint victory of the season in eight rounds moved him 27 points clear of Alex in the championship, with the Ducati rider winning by more than two seconds.

Marc had broken the lap record in qualifying to take pole but he started poorly, losing traction due to wheelspin, to briefly drop to fourth when he was shoulder-barged aside by Pedro Acosta.

Alex, meanwhile, shot off the line to take the lead going into turn one but Marc moved up to second with a neat overtake on turn one of the second lap, setting his sights on Alex.

The younger brother managed to hold on for a few laps but Marc pounced once again on turn one, diving in on the inside at the start of the sixth lap to take first place as the home crowd roared in appreciation.

"I had a small problem in the start because I started spinning the rear tyre and then I was able to manage and not lose a lot of positions," Marc said.

"My plan was try to lead from the beginning until the end but I saw that Alex was pushing a lot on the first two-three laps. That was my weak point, with the soft rear tyre.

"(But I) was calm and then in the end of the race the feeling was great, it was perfect."

Once Marc moved into the lead, the two brothers disappeared into the distance, even as Marc continued to widen the gap, while Alex's Gresini team mate Aldeguer reeled in Franco Morbidelli and eased past him to take third with three laps left.

VR46 Racing's Morbidelli finished fourth and Red Bull KTM's Acosta pipped Fabio Di Giannantonio to fifth place.

Marc's team mate and twice MotoGP champion Francesco Bagnaia had another race to forget as the Italian, who started fourth on the grid, finished 12th as he continued to struggle with his Ducati bike.



Team Ducati Lenovo Team's Marc Marquez celebrates winning the sprint race of the MotoGP Aragon Grand Prix at the Motorland circuit in Alcaniz, northeastern Spain, yesterday. (AFP)

Bagnaia is still third in the championship but he now sits 84 points behind Marc.

ARAGON MOTOGP SPRINT RESULTS

1. Marc Marquez (ESP/Ducati) 19min 43.026sec, 2. Alex Marquez ((ESP/Ducati-Gresini) at 2.080sec, 3. Fermin Aldeguer (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 4.630, 4. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 5.944, 5. Pedro Acosta (ESP/KTM) 6.095, 6. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 6.379, 7. Maverick Vinales (ESP/KTM-Tech3) 7.213, 8. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Aprilia) 8.343, 9. Brad Binder (RSA/KTM) 9.982, 10. Raul Fernandez (ESP/Aprilia-Trackhouse) 11.427, 11. Fabio Quartararo (FRA/Yamaha) 13.331, 12. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 14.017, 13. Jack Miller (AUS/

Yamaha-Pramac) 16.494, 14. Alex Rins (ESP/Yamaha) 17.202, 15. Miguel Oliveira (POR/Yamaha-Pramac) 18.287, 16. Johann Zarco (FRA/Honda-LCR) 19.284, 17. Enea Bastianini (ITA/KTM-Tech3) 19.841, 18. Lorenzo Savadori (ITA/Aprilia) 23.763, 19. Somkiat Chantira (THA/Honda-LCR) 31.069

DNF: Augusto Fernandez (ESP/Yamaha-Pramac), Joan Mir (ESP/Honda)

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP STANDINGS

1. Marc Marquez (ESP/Ducati) 208 pts, 2. Alex Marquez (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 181, 3. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 124, 4. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 104, 5. Johann Zarco (FRA/Honda-LCR) 97, 6. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 92, 7. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Aprilia) 71, 8.

Fermin Aldeguer (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 63, 9. Pedro Acosta (ESP/KTM) 63, 10. Fabio Quartararo (FRA/Yamaha) 59, 11. Maverick Vinales (ESP/KTM-Tech3) 48, 12. Ai Ogura (JPN/Aprilia-Trackhouse) 43, 13. Luca Marini (ITA/Honda) 38, 14. Brad Binder (RSA/KTM) 35, 15. Enea Bastianini (ITA/KTM-Tech3) 31, 16. Jack Miller (AUS/Yamaha-Pramac) 29, 17. Alex Rins (ESP/Yamaha) 26, 18. Raul Fernandez (ESP/Aprilia-Trackhouse) 19, 19. Joan Mir (ESP/Honda) 18, 20. Takaaki Nakagami (JPN/Team HRC) 10, 21. Lorenzo Savadori (ITA/Aprilia) 8, 22. Augusto Fernandez (ESP/Yamaha-Pramac) 3, 23. Miguel Oliveira (POR/Yamaha-Pramac) 2, 24. Somkiat Chantira (THA/Honda-LCR) 0, 25. Aleix Espargaro (ESP/Team HRC) 0, 26. Jorge Martin (ESP/Aprilia) 0

SPOTLIGHT

England's Dawson relishing return from international wilderness

AFP
Chester-le-Street, United Kingdom

Liam Dawson is determined to make the most of his surprise recall to international duty after believing his England career had come to an end.

The 35-year-old left-arm spinner had won just 20 caps across all three formats since making his debut in 2016.

He appeared surplus to requirements as England selected a succession of other slow bowlers in red and white-ball cricket, many of whom had inferior county records to Hampshire mainstay Dawson.

But he produced a reminder of his quality with 4-20 and a player-of-the-match award as England marked Harry Brook's first T20 as captain with a 21-run win over the West Indies at Chester-le-Street on Friday.

"I had got to an age where I probably thought international cricket was gone," said Dawson after taking his best figures in T20 internationals.

"In my domestic career, I've tried to go out there and just enjoy playing for whoever I'm playing for. It was about going out there and not worrying about playing for England.

"I think that can hamper you sometimes so I've not really worried about that. I'm at an age now where I know that I'm close to finishing."

Brook gave Dawson the new ball in Durham, a sign of his confidence in the bowler, and perhaps a marker for next year's T20 World Cup on turning pitches in India and Sri Lanka.

"Personally, I think he's been knocking on the door for years to try and solidify that spot and the performance we saw from him was awesome," said Brook of Dawson.

"Him and Adil Rashid working in tandem at both ends is going to be good to watch in the coming years. He can also help the younger lads along the way, to have him in the inner circle when they are bowling is going to help us a lot."

The three-match series continues in Bristol today before finishing at Dawson's home ground in Southampton on Tuesday.

Well though he bowled in Durham, Dawson is taking nothing for granted.

"I know how cricket works, you've got to be consistent and it's only one game," he said. "So I'll park this and go again. It would be nice to play at my home ground, if selected."



England's Liam Dawson bowls during the first T20 match against West Indies at Chester-le-Street, in northeast England, yesterday. (AFP)

FRENCH OPEN

Alcaraz puts title on line against scorching Sinner

‘HE’S THE BEST TENNIS PLAYER RIGHT NOW. I MEAN, HE’S DESTROYING EVERY OPPONENT’

AFP
Paris

Carlos Alcaraz bids to defend his French Open title against Jannik Sinner as the two stars of a new generation face off in a Grand Slam final for the first time today.

The 22-year-old Alcaraz and Sinner, 23, have together scooped up the last five majors to usher in a new era in men's tennis after two decades defined by the dominance of Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Alcaraz hopes to become the third man this century to retain the Coupe des Mousquetaires after Gustavo Kuerten and Nadal. Sinner is chasing his third successive Grand Slam triumph - and fourth overall - after winning last year's US Open and retaining his Australian Open crown in January.

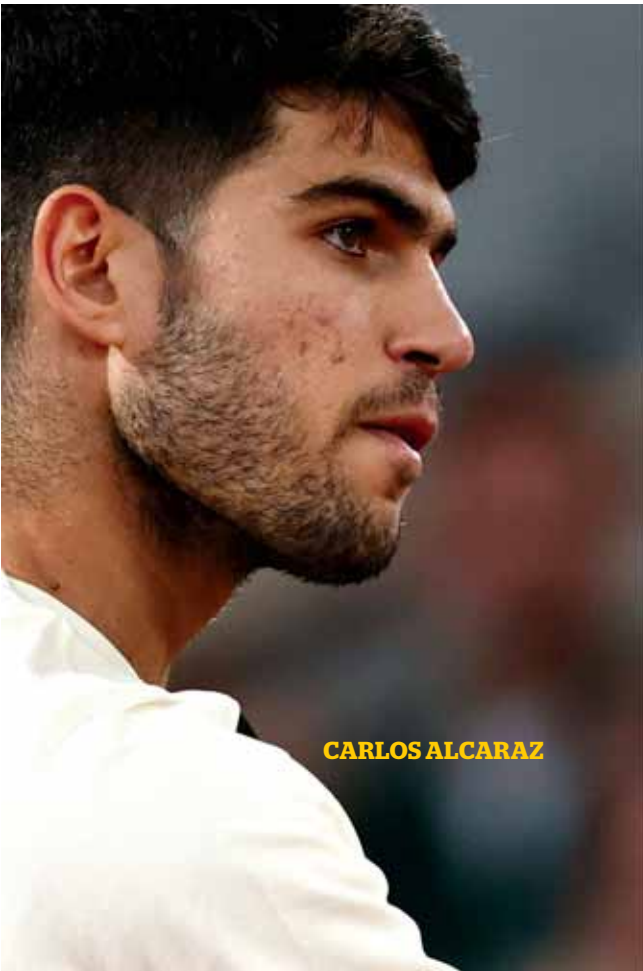
The world number one has lost just seven matches since the start of 2024 but four of those defeats have come against Alcaraz, including a five-set reverse in last year's Roland Garros semi-finals.

Alcaraz holds a 7-4 head-to-head edge over Sinner, winning the Italian Open final in Rome three weeks ago as the latter made his return to competition after a three-month doping ban.

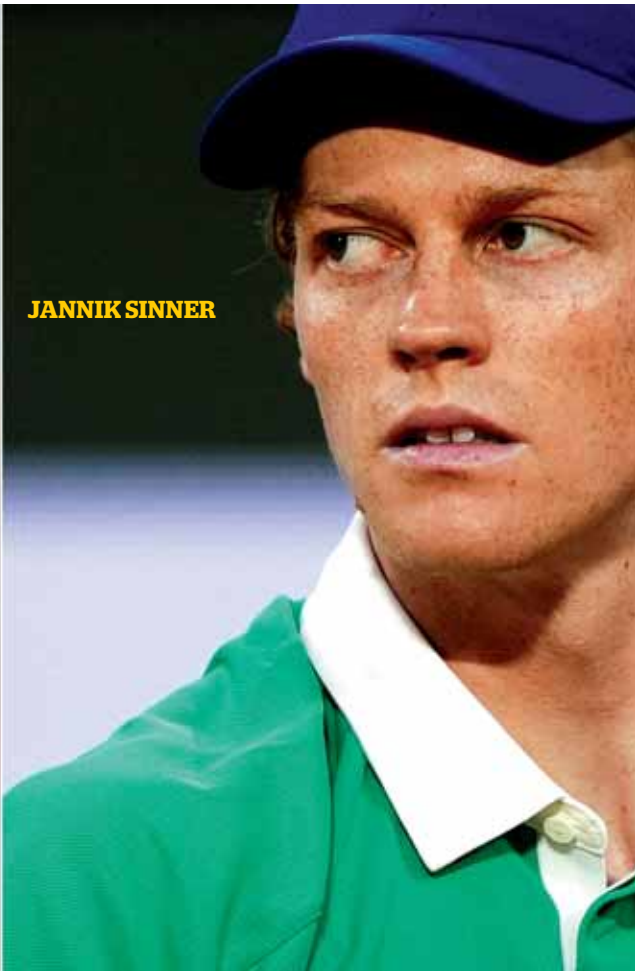
The Spaniard warned after that final that Sinner would be an even greater threat in Paris with more matches under his belt, and so it has proved with the Italian yet to drop a set at the French Open.

"He's the best tennis player right now," said Alcaraz. "I mean, he's destroying every opponent."

Alcaraz is battle-tested having won just two of his six matches in straight sets but had a shorter outing in the semi-finals than perhaps anticipated after Lorenzo



CARLOS ALCARAZ



JANNIK SINNER

Musetti was forced to retire.

Second seed Alcaraz has little doubt that Sunday's showpiece - the first Grand Slam men's final between two players born in the 2000s - will be one to remember.

"It's going to be a really great Sunday for

fans of tennis," said Alcaraz, who knows he will need to be at his best to deny Sinner a maiden French Open trophy.

"I love that battle. But most of the time is just about suffering, because (he pushes) you to the limit."

Sinner is 18-1 this year and has picked up where he left off in Melbourne after a doping controversy which forced him off the courts for the Sunshine Swing in the US and the start of the clay-court season.

He twice tested positive for traces of

the banned anabolic steroid clostebol in March last year, a contamination doping authorities accepted was accidental.

Sinner has always maintained the product entered his system unintentionally through a massage from his physiotherapist, who had used a spray containing it to treat a cut.

He has looked in prime form in Paris, extending his winning streak in majors to 20 matches to reach a first Roland Garros final.

Adriano Panatta was the last Italian man to win the French Open in 1976.

Sinner dashed Djokovic's hopes of a record-setting 25th Grand Slam on Friday with a fourth straight win over the 38-year-old Serbian, who admitted the loss may have been his final French Open match.

With the last remaining member of the old guard out of the picture, the stage is set for Alcaraz and Sinner to embark on the biggest clash so far in their already gripping rivalry.

Both are unbeaten in Grand Slam finals, but that will change come Sunday.

"The stage, it doesn't get any bigger now. Grand Slam finals against Carlos, it's a special moment for me and for him, too," said Sinner.

"The tension you feel before the match and during the match is a little bit different in a way, because we are both very young, we are both different, but talented."

Comparisons have already been made between the sport's new rivalry and those shared by the big three of Djokovic, Nadal and Federer, but Sinner said it was too early for such talk.

"It takes time to compare us with the big three," said Sinner.

"I believe that tennis or every sport needs rivalries, no? This could be potentially one of these, but there are amazing players coming up."

ATHLETICS

Chebet shines as Bromell scorches 100m at Rome DL

AFP
Rome

Kenyan Beatrice Chebet came close to breaking the women's 5,000m world record on Friday at the Rome Diamond League when she clocked 14:03.69, a meeting record that was just 2.5 seconds shy of Gudaf Tsegay's 1997 world mark of 14:00.21.

Chebet, who recorded the second-fastest ever time in the women's 3,000m - running 8:11.56 in Rabat last month behind Wang Junxia's 8:06.11 set in 1993 - appears determined to shave further seconds off her times.

"I can see that my body is in good shape and that I am capable of achieving the world record. Now I am going home to prepare for it. Everything is possible," the 25-year-old said after the race.

There was a first Diamond League win since 2022 for Sandi Morris in the women's pole vault, the American clearing 4.80m for the victory. "Today is monumental for me on a personal level," said Morris, a three-time world silver medallist.

"I have been fighting with problems with my shoulder so I have to keep the volume of jumps lower. I really wanted to keep jumping but I also listen to my goals."

Jamaica's Andrenette Knight dominated the women's 400m hurdles, finishing in 53.67 seconds, while American Anavia Battle won the women's 200m in 22.53 seconds. Irish Sarah Healey triumphed in the 1500 metres with a time of 3:59.17.

THRILLING VICTORIES

The men's 110m hurdles produced the evening's closest finish, with Swiss athlete Jason Joseph clocking 13.14 seconds and snatching victory from American Cordell Tinch, who finished in the same time.

There was also a nail-biting race in the men's 400m, with American Quincy Hall finishing in 44.22 seconds, just a hundredth of a second ahead of South Africa's Zakithi Nene.

"I have been working hard. We are coming there. I want to be the best. It is coming down. You do not know about the time, but it is coming down this year," Quincy said.

In the men's 1,500m, France's Azeddine Habz surged in the closing stages to beat former world champion Kenya's Timothy Cheruiyot. Habz won by three-hundredths of a second with a time of 3:29.72, while Cheruiyot finished in 3:29.75.

American Trayvon Bromell claimed victory in the 100m, finishing in 9.84 seconds. Bromell, a two-time world outdoor bronze medallist and 2016 world indoor champion, dominated the field, with compatriot Fred Kerley coming in fifth in 10.06sec.

Cameroon's Emmanuel Eseme (9.99) and



Kenya's Beatrice Chebet celebrates after winning the women's 5,000m event of the Diamond League meeting at the Olympic stadium in Rome. (AFP)



Trayvon Bromell poses with a world lead board after winning the men's 100m event in Rome. (AFP)

Kenya's Ferdinand Omanyala (10.01) rounded out the podium in the blue riband event.

Tokyo Olympics high jump gold medallist

Gianmarco Tamberi failed to reach the podium as South Korea's Woo Sanghyeok took the win with a jump of 2.32m.

BADMINTON

Chou to meet Antonsen in Indonesia Open final as top two seeds exit

Reuters
Jakarta

Chou Tien-chen of Taiwan beat world number one Kunlavut Vitidsarn 21-16 23-21 in the Indonesia Open in Jakarta yesterday to set up a final against Anders Antonsen, who defeated defending champion Shi Yuqi.

Second seed Vitidsarn shot out of the blocks in both games and racked up 5-1 leads but the 35-year-old Chou showed great resilience, fighting back to secure a spot in his first final since last month's Taipei Open.

China's Shi began his semi-final strongly, taking the first game 21-9, while third-seeded Antonsen was much more competitive in the second game and pounced on a string of errors from the top seed to wrest con-

trol of the match.

Shi had the lead early in the tight third game but Antonsen rose to the challenge to win 9-21 21-18 21-19 - his first victory over the two-times Asian Games gold medallist since January 2024.

In the women's draw, top seed An Se-young of South Korea faced third-seeded Akane Yamaguchi, the second time the pair had met in the semi-finals of a Super 1000 tournament this year.

Much like their meeting at the All England Open in March, reigning Olympic champion An held off her Japanese opponent to win 21-18 21-17 and secure a spot in the Indonesia Open final for a third time in her career.

An will come up against Wang Zhiyi in Sunday's final after the Chinese world number two beat compatriot Han Yue 21-12 21-13 in 39 minutes.



Taiwan's Chou Tien-chen hits a return against Thailand's Kunlavut Vitidsarn during the Indonesia Open semi-final yesterday. (AFP)

Ledecky holds off Weinstein to win 400m free at US Swimming Championships

CHICAGO: Nine-time Olympic champion Katie Ledecky notched another impressive victory at the US Swimming Championships on Friday, clocking 3min 58.56sec to win the 400m freestyle to add another event to her 2025 World Championships programme. Ledecky, who had already punched her ticket to the World Championships in Singapore with a victory in the 800m free, was under world record pace at the 200m mark and came home 1.49sec in front of Claire Weinstein - who led Ledecky in a one-two finish in the 200m free this week. Ledecky, who is also slated to swim the 1,500m free as the championships, will be heading to worlds in Singapore next month on a high note. In May she swam the second-fastest 1,500m free in history behind her own world record, her second-best 400 free ever and an 800m free world record. Kate Douglass surged past world record-holder Lilly King in the final 20m to win the 100m breaststroke in 1:05.79, three-time Olympic gold medallist King taking second in 1:06.02.

SPOTLIGHT

Italy fear missing yet another WC after Norway loss

Italy make disastrous start to their World Cup qualifying campaign

Reuters

Oslo

Italy's World Cup qualification campaign has barely begun and already the country is worried about the shocking possibility of failing to reach the final tournament for a third consecutive time after a humiliating defeat by Norway.

Norway already had two wins under their belt in Group I before Friday's match in Oslo, while Italy had yet to play, having been involved in the Nations League quarter-finals in March, losing out to Germany. A 2-1 defeat at the San Siro in the first leg left Italy chasing the tie in Germany and they found themselves 3-0 down at the break before staging a second-half comeback to salvage a draw, and some pride.

It was the same story on Friday for Italy at the Ullevaal Stadium, at least as far as the opening act went. Norway roared into a 3-0 lead in the first half but this time there was no Italian fightback in a goalless second half. Italy suffered their third loss in a four-game winless run, with the newspapers in Italy saying that for Italy the "World Cup is already at risk".

Next year's World Cup takes place in the United States, Canada and Mexico but in the two decades since Italy won the tournament for the fourth time, they have struggled to perform or, more recently, to even get there. Berlin 2006 seems a lifetime ago now, with Zinedine Zidane sent off for his head butt to Marco Materazzi's chest and Italy lifting the trophy after a penalty shootout win over France.

The next two World Cups saw Italy exit at the group stage, and while they triumphed at Euro 2020, on either side of that success they missed out on the World Cup after playoff defeats to Sweden and North Macedonia.

With Italy now playing catch-up and only the group winners qualifying automatically, Italy's loss came less than a week after Inter Milan's 5-0 mauling at the hands of Paris St Germain in the Champions League final and on both occasions the tired-looking losers were outclassed by a hungrier, more creative side.

Italy manager Luciano Spalletti was spared following last year's dismal Euros but is now



Four-times winners Italy have not qualified for World Cup since 2014. (AFP)

under real pressure and nothing but a convincing win at home to Moldova on Monday will do, with media and fans increasingly calling for a change of leadership.

Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma offered no excuses for his side's poor showing against Norway, saying their form was not acceptable and the fans deserve better. "I have no explanation at the moment. You just have to go inside and realise the performance tonight. Our fans don't deserve this," Donnarumma said. "We all have to come out of these games together, we need to examine our conscience."

The four-times World Cup winners have not qualified for the global showcase event since 2014. Spalletti said his team were going through a difficult patch and that he would speak with the Italian Football Federation about the situation.

"From us, it has to come from us first of all. We are Italy and these matches are not acceptable... We must be more united than before," said Donnarumma, who won the Champions League, Ligue 1, French Cup and French Super Cup titles with Paris St Germain in the recently concluded season.

former Norway, Denmark and Iceland coach Age Hareide said when asked if Norway would go to the World Cup.

Norway are in pole position in Group I with nine points out of nine and a goal surplus of 10. Israel, Estonia and Moldova are the other nations in the group. The Football Meets Data statistics platform gives Norway a 77% chance of winning the group and qualifying directly for the tournament hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Key striker Erling Haaland, who put himself on the scoresheet against Italy, agreed with the statistics. "We are too good not to play in championships. I will play both the World Cup and the European Championship. Not to put pressure on myself but I will," he said.

While World Cup fever in Norway is reaching a point not seen since 1998, when Norway last participated, manager Stale Solbakken, wise from experience, is lowering expectations. "It is a coach's misfortune that I have to concentrate on the next match, so you can enjoy yourselves and ask those questions. I would have liked to say that it was 100% certain but I can't," he told reporters after Friday's game.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Belmadi returns to coach Al Duhail



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail yesterday announced the return of Djamel Belmadi as head coach, marking the Algerian's third stint with Qatar Stars League side.

Belmadi, who previously led the team from 2010-2012 and again from 2015-2018, enjoyed a highly successful tenure, steering Duhail to four Qatar Stars League titles, two Amir Cups, and one Qatar Cup. His reappointment signals the club's intent to return to the

summit of Qatari football following a disappointing season.

The announcement comes just a week after Duhail's decision to part ways with French coach Christophe Galtier after the expiration of his contract. Galtier, a former Paris Saint-Germain manager, took charge of the team in October 2023, succeeding Argentine Hernan Crespo.

Despite flashes of promise, Duhail ended the season without silverware — finishing runners-up in both the Qatar Stars League and the Qatar Cup, while bowing out of the Amir Cup at the quarter-final stage after a defeat to Al Rayyan.

COMMENT

Mbappe unfazed by PSG winning Champions League without him

Reuters

Stuttgart, Germany

Kylian Mbappe said he was happy to see his former team Paris St Germain win the Champions League for the first time this season despite having left the club a year ago in acrimonious circumstances to join Real Madrid.

PSG thrashed Inter Milan 5-0 last week to win Europe's premier club competition for the first time, having lost in the 2020 final to Bayern Munich.

"I was happy, they deserved it, they've been through so many problems, I've been through that too. I've been through every stage of the Champions League except winning it," Mbappe told reporters. "They were the best team in Europe. I can't remember ever seeing them go 5-0 up. It's 100% deserved, they're becoming the team everyone wants to beat."

Mbappe left PSG on a free transfer last year as the team's all-time top scorer, but the 26-year-old took his former club to court over 55mn euros (\$62.67mn) in unpaid wages. Mbappe scored 43 goals in all competitions for Real Madrid but they failed to win any major trophy, finishing runners-up in La

Liga and the Copa del Rey to Barcelona while getting knocked out in the Champions League quarter-finals by Arsenal.

But the France forward said there were no hard feelings as he watched his former team mates lift the trophy they had coveted for years. "PSG won the Champions League without me, that doesn't affect me. That's a good thing. I think we all face challenges in our careers," Mbappe said.

"I'm a bit more in the eye of the storm, which is good. I've always liked being in these positions, it's up to me to work. I've reversed quite a few trends in my career, I've had a lot of things stuck on my back and I've managed to get them off. Did I leave too soon? No, my story was over, it had to end. There was no bitterness, I'd reached the end of my tether."

Mbappe also said he would vote for PSG forward Ousmane Dembele over Barcelona winger Lamine Yamal to win the Ballon d'Or for the best player of the year. Dembele scored 33 goals and made 15 assists in all competitions as PSG also won the Ligue 1 title and the French Cup to accomplish a rare treble. "Would I vote for Dembele? Yes. Is there really any need to explain?... I'm going for Dembele. It's very clear," he said.



FOCUS

Norway dare to dream big again after a quarter century of heartbreak



Norway's Erling Haaland celebrates with Martin Odegaard after scoring against Italy in the World Cup qualifiers. (Reuters)

Reuters

Oslo

After a quarter of a century of near misses and heartbreak, Norway's rout of Italy in their World Cup qualifier has reignited the country's hope of a return to international football's biggest stage. There was little doubt that Norway were the better team on Friday as they easily dominated Italy in Oslo, pushing on until the scoreboard read 3-0 and taking a big step towards next year's World Cup.

For supporters of the Norwegian team, the result has sparked a glimmer of hope in hearts that have been broken many times over the past decades. Norway have not participated in an international football tournament since the European Championship in 2000, which was hosted in Belgium and the Netherlands.

There have been many close calls since then, with the margins consistently going against the squad, but now there is a shift in attitude after Norway dominated against the four-times world champions. "I am 100% sure",

Venezuela boost qualification hopes as Colombia falter

Montevideo: Venezuela boosted their chances of qualifying for the World Cup for the first time in their history, beating Bolivia 2-0 on Friday, while faltering rivals Colombia were held to a 0-0 draw at home to Peru.

A calamitous fifth-minute own goal from Hector Cuellar and a 30th-minute strike from veteran forward Salomon Rondon ensured the three points for the Vinotinto in Maturin. The victory, which came after a frustrating night for Colombia, left Venezuela in seventh place on 18 points - three points behind Colombia and Uruguay.

Venezuela travel to Uruguay on Tuesday knowing a win would put them in real contention for a top six spot and an automatic place in next year's tournament in the

USA, Canada and Mexico. The final two games for Uruguay come in September when they are away to already qualified Argentina before a potentially crucial last match at home to Colombia on September 6. The top six teams in South America qualify directly for the World Cup with the seventh placed country entering the inter-confederation playoffs.

Colombia, runners-up in the Copa America last year, are making life difficult for themselves after being held by second to last Peru in Barranquilla, extending their winless run in the CONMEBOL qualifiers to five games. Missing the suspended Liverpool winger Luis Diaz, Colombia lacked creativity in attack against a resilient Peru back line and they were booed off the field.

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Kane spares England's blushes against Andorra

Reuters

Barcelona

Lacklustre England laboured to a 1-0 away win against Andorra to maintain their 100% start to World Cup qualification campaign with captain Harry Kane's second-half goal sparing their blushes yesterday.

On a sultry afternoon in Barcelona, Kane's scrambled effort shortly after the interval was all that separated Thomas Tuchel's team of Premier League household names with the side sitting 173rd in the world rankings. As expected, England dominated possession but were short of the quality expected with only Chelsea winger Noni Madueke managing to impress in an instantly forgettable match.

England secured the win, however, and sit comfortably top of Group K with three wins from three.

England are expected to be one of the fa-



England's Harry Kane scores during the World Cup qualification match against Andorra in Cornella de Llobregat, Spain.

vourites for next year's World Cup and while it is difficult to read too much into a turgid

display against a defence-minded Andorra, head coach Tuchel will know big improvements must be made. In six previous games against Andorra, England had scored 25 goals without reply. But even after they eventually went ahead on Saturday there was no sense the floodgates would open.

If anything, Andorra actually created a couple of chances to heap real embarrassment on their visitors. England's build-up play was pedestrian throughout and only Madueke garnished his reputation. He tested Andorra keeper Iker Alvarez with one curling shot and set up a couple of other chances before halftime, one for Jude Bellingham who looked off the pace.

Kane wasted England's best chance in the first half, shooting wide from close range after another dangerous ball across the area by Madueke. If anyone was going to break the stalemate it was likely to be Kane and he finally did so in the 50th minute, stabbing a shot high into the net after his initial effort was saved and Madueke turned the rebound back across goal.