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FOOTBALL

Qatar eye strong finish against World Cup-bound Uzbekistan

Coach Lopetegui challenges his players to show consistency and character against Uzbekistan



Qatar players train in Tashkent yesterday, on the eve of their 2026 World Cup Qualifiers final group stage match against Uzbekistan.



Qatar's head coach Julen Lopetegui and veteran midfielder Abdulaziz Hatem (below) speak at a press conference.



Uzbekistan are on a high after qualifying for their first-ever World Cup.

By Sports Reporter
Tashkent

Fresh off a morale-boosting 1-0 win over Iran, Qatar will look to carry that momentum into today's final group stage match against newly-qualified Uzbekistan in the 2026 World Cup Qualifiers.

The match at Bunyodkor Stadium in Tashkent marks another key test for new head coach Julen Lopetegui, who began his tenure with a vital result that secured Qatar's place in the fourth round of the qualifiers – where an additional two spots to the World Cup will be at stake.

With one eye on October's next phase, the Spaniard has challenged his players to show consistency and character against an Uzbek side riding high after qualifying for their first-ever FIFA World Cup.

“We are very excited to face Uzbekistan for the first time,” Lopetegui said in the pre-match press conference yesterday. “It's an important competitive match and a real test to measure our readiness for what's to come. Winning to-

morrow will be a step toward our next goal – qualifying for the World Cup.”

“We are required to continue playing high-quality football and controlling the flow of play. I am confident in the players’ ability to do their best and demonstrate the value of the work that preceded the match. Everyone is determined to perform at their best,” he added.

Lopetegui was quick to acknowledge the strength of the opposition, adding: “We are aware of the strength of tomorrow's match against Uzbekistan, which is one of the best teams in Asia. We must do our utmost and perform at our best.”

Veteran midfielder Abdulaziz Hatem echoed the coach's sentiments, stressing the importance of the fixture in maintaining momentum. “Our preparations were good following the important win over Iran. Tomorrow's match will be an important test in our preparation for the next round, so we must take it very seriously,” said Hatem. “Our matches against Uzbekistan are always intense and exciting, and we expect the same tomorrow.”

While Qatar prepare for the long road ahead,

Uzbekistan are in celebration mode after sealing qualification to the World Cup with a game to spare. A party-like atmosphere is expected at the Bunyodkor Stadium, when Uzbekistan take the field today and the home fans will want their team end the campaign with victory.

Last Thursday's qualification was greeted with joy as Uzbekistan ended their long wait to appear on the global stage, with head coach Timur Kapadze applauding his players for getting across the finish line despite the immense pressure.

“We overcame a lot of pressure. Before the game, fans, sports websites and experts expressed their confidence in our team's victory and expected a good result from us. This confidence also became a great responsibility and pressure for us. But we managed to overcome this pressure and complete the task,” he said.

“For the next match, we will prepare adequately although several players who have not featured much may be given the chance to play,” Kapadze added, with there still being a possibility of Uzbekistan topping the group with a win should Iran lose to North Korea.

FOCUS

Australians wary of Saudi ‘games’ ahead of key tie

Reuters
Hong Kong

Australia's Connor Metcalfe has warned his teammates to avoid reacting to Saudi Arabia's gamesmanship when the nations face off in Jeddah today with automatic qualification for next year's World Cup finals on the line.

Tony Popovic's outfit go into the meeting at the King Abdullah Sports City with one foot on the plane to North America after a 1-0 win over Japan on Thursday bought the Socceroos breathing room in their quest for a place at the finals.

Despite that advantage, Metcalfe has sought to ensure the Australians do not allow their focus to slip ahead of a crucial 90 minutes that will be played out in front of more than 50,000 fans and in stifling heat.

“There's going to be a lot of diving, a lot of acting, but it's about just blocking the noise out, focusing on ourselves and doing the best we can,” said the St. Pauli midfielder. “You can't get affected by any of it, because if you get affected by any of their little games or noise or whatever it is, then it's just going to affect the game, and they're going to get that little advantage over you.”

Australia hold a three point lead over Herve Renard's side and a large enough



goal difference to leave the Saudis needing to win by five goals to climb into second and claim the last automatic berth from the current phase of Asian preliminaries.

Japan have already secured top spot in Group C while Iran, Uzbekistan, South Korea and Jordan have taken the other berths available to Asian nations at the expanded World Cup from the third phase of qualifying. A further two spots will be up for grabs from a fourth round of qualifiers to be played in October.

Anything other than a significant win

over the Australians would see Saudi Arabia finish third in Group C and enter that next phase, where they would join the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iraq and Indonesia. Also battling for a place in the fourth round are Oman and Palestine, with the pair looking to secure either third or fourth place in Group B on Tuesday.

The two countries face off against each other in Amman with the Palestinians needing to win to climb above Rashid Jabbar's side and keep their World Cup qualification dream alive. Neither nation has

played at the World Cup and Palestine go into the meeting having handed Kuwait a 2-0 defeat on Thursday to stay in the hunt for a spot in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

PALESTINE AND OMAN BATTLE FOR SPOT IN NEXT ROUND OF QUALIFIER

Palestine and Oman are set for a blockbuster affair when they meet in Group B match in Amman. At stake is a spot in the playoffs, with Oman a point ahead of Palestine in the standings.

Appearing at this stage of the World Cup qualifiers for the first time, victories in their last two matches have pulled Palestine back in the running for the playoffs, which will offer an additional two tickets to next year's global showpiece. Head coach Ihab Abujazar applauded his players after the win against Kuwait on Thursday and will expect another rousing performance from his charges.

Oman's hopes of automatic qualification were dashed by a rampant Jordan, who cruised to a 3-0 win on Thursday but head coach Rasheed Jabar was quick to urge his players to shift their focus to today's encounter.

“We still have a chance to qualify via the playoffs and we must now concentrate on getting ready for Palestine,” said Jabar, with Oman seeking an inaugural appearance at the FIFA World Cup.

Iraq applies to host Asian World Cup qualifying group

The Iraqi Football Association (IFA) has submitted an official request to host one of the two groups in the fourth round of Asian qualifiers for next year's World Cup in North America. Iraq will finish third or fourth in Group B in the third round, with 12 points ahead of their final match against Jordan in Amman today.

“We had sent a letter to International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) calling for the highest levels of transparency and fairness in the process of selecting the host country or countries for the fourth round of the Asian qualifiers,” IFA said in a statement on Facebook.

The IFA has said it is fully prepared to assume all organisational, security and financial obligations associated with hosting matches, with support from the Iraqi government and state institutions. In the fourth round of qualifying, the six teams who finished third and fourth in the third-stage groups will be divided into two groups. The top team in each group will qualify directly for the World Cup finals and the two teams finishing second will compete in a playoff to decide who will represent Asia in an international playoff.

FOCUS

‘Flawed’ Test Championship reveals world cricket’s underlying problems

AFP
London

Reigning champions Australia face South Africa in the World Test Championship final at Lord’s from tomorrow amid a chorus of criticism over the competition’s format.

Wisden, cricket’s ‘bible’, was scathing in its assessment, with editor Lawrence Booth writing in this year’s edition that the WTC is a “shambles masquerading as a showpiece”.

Former England captain Michael Atherton said “everyone knows the WTC in its present guise is flawed”.

One fundamental problem is that political tensions mean India and Pakistan, two of cricket’s leading nations, have not played a Test against each other since 2007.

The nine-nation WTC is further skewed because the teams are not all required to face each other or to play the same number of matches. Countries are free to decide how many Tests they want to play in the two-year qualifying

cycle and positions are calculated based on the percentage of available points won by teams.

South Africa have played just 12 Tests in the current cycle - all of them two-match series - compared to England’s 22 - and have not played either England or Australia. South Africa also sent a weakened side to New Zealand in early 2024, and lost, with the best players staying at home to appear in the domestic T20 competition - a sign of the times in modern cricket. Booth wants the cycle doubled to four years, with teams playing each other home and away over series that last at least three Tests.

South Africa reeled off six straight wins to book their place in this year’s final, only for former England captain Michael Vaughan to say they had got there “on the back of beating pretty much nobody”.

But Proteas coach Shukri Conrad objected that South Africa had beaten teams who had beaten the ‘Big Three’ of India, Australia and England. “One of the nobodies we beat won a Test match in Australia - West Indies beat Australia in a Test match. They are not nobody,”



Australia will take on South Africa in the World Test Championship final at Lord’s from tomorrow. (Reuters)

insisted Conrad. “New Zealand beat India, three- zip in India. New Zealand is not a nobody. Sri Lanka won Test matches (against England and New Zealand). I don’t buy this thing about us beating nobody”.

Victory in the final in London would be a huge boost to South Africa following years of near-

misses in ICC white-ball tournaments. “It’s the biggest thing for South African cricket at the moment,” said Conrad.

One of those involved in devising the points system, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP it was tricky to come up with a workable format.

“It’s difficult to come up with a

solution where everyone is happy given the barriers to an orthodox table that exist, such as the India-Pakistan situation,” he said.

“Commercial considerations will also mean the ‘Big Three’ will want to play each other in five-Test series.”

But the WTC, set up to boost Test cricket’s profile in an era of

many competing formats, matters to players and fans. New Zealand’s win in the inaugural 2021 World Test Championship final was welcomed as a long-overdue global triumph for a popular side. Australia’s failure to qualify for that match was labelled a “big missed opportunity” by skipper Pat Cummins, who made amends with victory in an Oval final two years ago.

That India were beaten finalists in both 2021 and 2023 indicated there is still a place for the five-day game in world cricket’s economic powerhouse, where Twenty20 cricket holds sway.

Former India captain Virat Kohli, speaking after securing his long-awaited first Indian Premier League title last week with Royal Challengers Bengaluru, left no room for doubt about his views on where Test cricket sits in the hierarchy. “If you want to earn respect in world cricket all over, take up Test cricket and give your heart and soul to it,” he said.

But the awkward question for the sport’s chiefs is whether the WTC is helping or hindering that aim.

CRICKET

Australia’s Smith wary of SA pace attack in WTC final

‘I THINK IT’S BEEN PRETTY DRY START TO SEASON OVER HERE’

AFP
London

Australia batting great Steve Smith is expecting a tough examination from South Africa’s impressive pace attack in this week’s World Test Championship final at Lord’s.

Reigning champions Australia, who beat India in the WTC final in 2023, are favourites against the Proteas in the five-day match, which starts on Wednesday.

“South Africa have a particularly good bowling attack led by Kagiso Rabada, his record speaks for itself. Marco Jansen - they are a good side, they are here for a reason,” Smith said yesterday.

Rabada, 30, has taken 327 wickets at an average of 22 while Jansen, 25, has 73 wickets at 21.76 in his 17 matches.

But former Test captain Smith also expects conditions at Lord’s to favour spin bowling later in the game, which could work to the advantage of Australia off-break bowler Nathan Lyon. “I think spin will play a big part, particularly as the game wears on,” Smith added. “We’ve only been here a week, but I think it’s been pretty dry start to the season over here.

“There hasn’t there been too much rain, which is rare for England. It does look like quite a dry surface and I think the footmarks will definitely come into play as the game wears on.”

Smith has a superb Test record at London’s Lord’s ground, with 525 runs in five matches, including a double century and a hundred, at an average of 58.33.

“I’ve had a bit of success here,” said the 36-year-old. “It takes a bit of time getting used to the slope, one end thinking you are



Australia’s Steven Smith batting in the nets during a practice session ahead of the ICC World Test Championship final against South Africa at Lord’s cricket ground in London yesterday. (AFP)

falling over, the other you feel a bit tall. “It’s a nice wicket to bat on but if there’s a bit of cloud about and the balls swing around, it can get tricky.”

Several members of the Australia squad have not played much first-class cricket in recent months but Smith was confident they would quickly find their rhythm. “All the batters feel like they’re in a good place, so now we’re just excited to go out and play,” he said.

“Lord’s is a place we traditionally played pretty good cricket, so we’re excited about the prospect of coming up against South Africa.”

England have repeatedly emphasised how their long-term planning is designed to created

capable of winning an Ashes series for the first time in a decade when they tour Australia in 2025/26.

But Smith said Australia were fully focused on the task in front of them.

“The Ashes is a big series but you can’t look too far ahead,” said Smith, winner of the Compton-Miller Medal for player of the Ashes series in 2017/18 and 2019.

“You’ve got to keep playing each game as it comes. Every game is important with the World Test Championship on the line.

“That’s the reason it came in: to make every Test more relevant.”

Australia’s last Test at Lord’s, during the 2023 Ashes witnessed an extraordinary row in the Pavilion between a couple of players and Marylebone Cricket Club

members, one of whom was expelled and two others suspended.

Asked about what sort of reception he is expecting from MCC members this week, Smith replied: “Unsure, and I’m actually not fussed either way.”

His career was almost derailed by his involvement in a 2018 ball-tampering scandal against South Africa in Cape Town.

But he said relations between the two teams were now “pretty relaxed”.

There have been suggestions the WTC final should be played over several games rather than being just a one-off match.

“Maybe a three-match series would be good but good luck fitting it in the schedule, it’s pretty jam-packed as it is,” said Smith.

SPOTLIGHT

South Africa team boosted by Broad chat ahead of final

AFP
London

South Africa coach Shukri Conrad said his side had enjoyed an “enlightening” evening with England fast-bowling great Stuart Broad ahead of their World Test Championship final against Australia at Lord’s.

Broad bowed out of international action two years ago, having taken 604 wickets in 167 Tests, with many of his best performances reserved for arch-rivals Australia.

The 38-year-old met with the South Africans over a meal on Sunday to help with their preparations for the match against the reigning champions, starting tomorrow.

“It was just a casual chat but if the guys hadn’t called time at 10:30pm (2130 GMT) we’d still be there chatting,” Conrad told reporters at Lord’s yesterday.

“Everybody walked away thinking that was great.”

Conrad said he also welcomed a visit to Sunday’s training session from former South Africa captain Graeme Smith.

“He’s a legend in South African cricket, the most successful Test captain we have had,” he said. “He’s not going to impose himself but if anyone wants to have a chat he’s there for that.”

Conrad said the interactions with Broad and Smith were not formal consultations. “It’s just using whatever we can,” he said. “If it adds value, great.”

Conrad also batted back suggestions that South Africa had an easy route to the final, having not played against Australia or England during the championship cycle.

“I’m tired of speaking about it. We’re here and we’ve got a chance to walk away as world Test champions,” he said.

“Playing Australia, it doesn’t get any bigger than that. What’s gone before counts for absolutely nothing at the minute. We’re quietly confident going into this game that we can pull one over them.

“We still hold Test cricket very dearly. Our fixture list might not speak to that, but this is the biggest final all of our players have ever been involved in and their biggest match.”

South Africa go into the five-day match with a novice batting line-up.

“The inexperience is very apparent in terms of the number of Tests played and their place in the ICC rankings,” said Conrad.

“So, I think it’s pretty normal that the chat is all about the bowlers when you’ve got guys like Kagiso Rabada, ranked two in the world, and Marco (Jansen) and (spinner) Keshav (Maharaj).”

“But I think there’s a quiet confidence among the batting group. They got a lot of confidence, with hundreds for different players at different stages. So yeah, while there might not be superstar names among them, I think as a collective we’re pretty confident.”



South Africa’s coach Shukri Conrad speaks during a press conference at Lord’s cricket ground in London yesterday. (AFP)

ITALIAN SPRINTER MILAN GRABS DAUPHINE STAGE VICTORY AND OVERALL LEAD

Issoire, France: Hulking Italian sprinter Jonathan Milan surged away from the pack to win the second stage of the Criterium de Dauphine in Issoire yesterday to take the overall lead from Tadej Pogacar. The 1.93m (6-foot-4) 87kg Milan had to battle to keep up on a hilly 204.6km run through central France from Premilhat. When the pack hit the home straight, he rocketed away from his rivals to collect a 10-second victory bonus and the yellow jersey.

“That was really tough,” said Milan. “I was dropped at one point and I was really on the limit, but I have to say thanks to my teammates because they brought me back and guided me until the last metres.” Briton Fred Wright was second and Dutchman Mathieu van der Poel third. Pogacar and his main rivals for overall victory, both in the Criterium and the Tour de France, Jonas Vingegaard and Remco Evenepoel, rolled home safely in the main pack just behind Milan. Pogacar, who col-

lected a 10-second bonus on Sunday, has the same overall time as Milan, but braked hard in the final metres to surrender places and hand the Italian the tie-break edge and the daily media responsibilities that go with the yellow jersey. The eight-day race, with four hilly stages, a time trial and three final days in the Alps, has attracted an A-list roster of 154 riders from 22 teams. It offers Tour de France contenders a chance to hone their form and gain a

psychological edge before the main event starts on July 5. Pogacar, who won his third Tour de France last year ending Vingegaard’s two-year reign, had struck the first blow the previous day, edging the Dane to take the opening stage and the overall lead. On Monday, support riders for Pogacar’s Team UAE and Vingegaard’s Visma spent much of the stage jostling, sometimes angrily, for position at the front of the pack. The stage was briefly animated when

local-boy Romain Bardet, riding the final race of his 14-year professional career, launched an attack on the last small climb just before a corner where his fan club was waiting with a huge banner. The 34-year-old was caught with 10 kilometres to go as Milan’s Lidl-Trek team took control. The Frenchman will have another chance on Tuesday when stage three starts from his home town Brioude for a hilly 207.2km run to Charantonnay. (AFP)

TENNIS

Young guns Alcaraz, Sinner set for enduring rivalry

‘Three winners in Paris today: Carlos Alcaraz, Jannik Sinner and the beautiful game of tennis’

AFP
Paris

After producing one of the greatest Grand Slam finals of all time, Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner served an explicit reminder they are the two main forces set to reign in men's tennis for years to come.

In the first French Open final in more than three decades between two players aged 23 or under, Alcaraz and Sinner delivered undoubtedly the most electrifying chapter in an increasingly captivating rivalry.

It was the first time the pair had met in a Grand Slam final and it didn't disappoint, with twists and turns, high drama and outrageous shot-making from start to finish.

"This one was the most exciting match that I've played so far, without a doubt," said Alcaraz after winning the longest final in Roland Garros history.

"Today I think the match had everything."

The five-hour, 29-minute epic indeed had it all, as Alcaraz saved three championship points in the fourth set on his way to a fifth Grand Slam title in as many finals.

That he reached the milestone

at exactly the same age as Rafael Nadal – 22 years, one month and three days – was "destiny", according to Alcaraz.

The manner in which he won was equally as striking as Nadal's fifth major at Wimbledon in 2008, when he beat Roger Federer in another of the sport's all-time great finals.

Alcaraz was reluctant to rank his win against that match but suggested Novak Djokovic's triumph over Nadal at the 2012 Australian Open was even better than Sunday's match.

"If people put our match on that table, it's a huge honour for me," said Alcaraz.

"I don't know if it is at the same level as those matches. So I let the people talk about it if for them (they) are almost the same.

"But I'm just happy to put our match and our names in the history of the Grand Slams, in the history of Roland Garros."

'Taken tennis to another level'

The spectacle in Paris lent more weight to the comparisons that had already been made between the sport's new rivalry and those shared by Djokovic, Nadal and Federer.

Sinner said it was hard to com-



Jannik Sinner of Italy and Carlos Alcaraz of Spain pose together at the trophy presentation after the French Open final in Paris on Sunday. (AFP)

pare different generations but appreciated being a part of it all.

"I think every rivalry is different," said the Italian.

"It's good to see that we can produce also tennis like this, because I think it's good for the whole move-

ment of tennis." Federer and Nadal were among those to congratulate the finalists for an extraordinary performance.

"Three winners in Paris today: Carlos Alcaraz, Jannik Sinner and the beautiful game of tennis. What

a match!" Federer wrote on social media. "What a great Roland Garros final," added Nadal.

So gripping was the contest that Spain's footballers huddled around a mobile phone to watch before their Nations League final loss on

penalties to Portugal. With Federer and Nadal retired, and Djokovic now 38, this removed any remaining doubt of the dawn of a new era and answered the question as to who will fill the void left by the 'Big Three'.

"I cannot believe how lucky we are that we are going to have this rivalry as they have taken our sport to another level," seven-time Grand Slam champion Mats Wilander told TNT Sports.

"I never thought I would say that after the big three with Rafa, Roger and Novak but it is actually faster than ever, it is at a level (where) it is hard to believe they can do this."

Alcaraz and Sinner first faced off in the second round of the Paris Masters in 2021. Alcaraz has won eight of 12 meetings – including the last five – but both players have already contributed so much with the prime of their careers seemingly still ahead.

"Federer and Nadal played a couple of good finals, but nothing comes close to this," said Wilander, who won the previous longest Roland Garros final in 1982. "I thought: 'This is not possible – they're playing at a pace that is not human.' These are two of the best athletes the human race can put forward and they happen to be tennis players."

BEATEN SINNER EXTENDS LEAD AT TOP OF ATP RANKINGS, BOISSON JUMPS 296 PLACES

Paris: Italy's Jannik Sinner extended his lead at the top of the ATP world rankings yesterday despite his defeat to second-ranked Carlos Alcaraz in the French Open final.

Sinner, who lost to Alcaraz in the semi-finals last year, gained 500 points for reaching this year's final.

Spaniard Alcaraz lifted the title for the second straight year, gained no points and remained second.

Germany's Alexander Zverev remained third despite his quarter-final elimination to Novak Djokovic.

At 38, Serb Djokovic, who was unable to take a set from Sinner in the semi-finals despite a strong fight, climbed one place to fifth, still behind Jack Draper. The Briton also climbed one place to a career-high fourth after his memorable loss in the round of 16 to Alexander Bublik.

The latter, who was then swept aside by Sinner, jumped 19 places to 43rd. Italy's Lorenzo Musetti, forced to retire against Alcaraz in the semi-final, continued his ascent with another place gain to reach world number six for the first time. Taylor Fritz, eliminated in the first round, dropped three places to seven with fellow American Tommy Paul climbing to eighth, his best ranking ever.

Casper Ruud, a two-time French Open finalist, dropped eight places to No. 16 in the ATP rankings after losing in the second round this year.

ATP RANKINGS:

1. Jannik Sinner (ITA) 10,880 pts
2. Carlos Alcaraz (ESP) 8,850
3. Alexander Zverev (GER) 6,385
4. Jack Draper (GBR) 4,800 (+1)
5. Novak Djokovic (SRB) 4,630 (+1)

6. Lorenzo Musetti (ITA) 4,560 (+1)
7. Taylor Fritz (USA) 4,485 (-3)
8. Tommy Paul (USA) 3,510 (+4)
9. Holger Rune (DEN) 3,440 (+1)
10. Alex De Minaur (AUS) 3,285 (-1)
11. Daniil Medvedev (RUS) 3,100
12. Ben Shelton (USA) 3,080 (+1)
13. Frances Tiafoe (USA) 3,015 (+3)
14. Arthur Fils (FRA) 2,935
15. Andrey Rublev (RUS) 2,920
16. Casper Ruud (NOR) 2,905 (-8)
17. Jakub Mensik (CZE) 2,322 (+2)
18. Francisco Cerundolo (ARG) 2,285
19. Grigor Dimitrov (BUL) 2,205 (-2)
20. Ugo Humbert (FRA) 2,195 (+1)

Boisson improves rankings after French Open run

France's Lois Boisson, a surprise French Open semi-finalist, has jumped 296 places in the latest WTA rankings released yesterday to a career-high 65.

Aryna Sabalenka and Coco Gauff hold the top two spots after their run to the finals in Paris where American Gauff defeated world number one Sabalenka in three sets.

Boisson received a wildcard entry a year after undergoing surgery on her left knee, playing her first Grand Slam ranked 361th in the world.

The 22-year-old beat world number three Jessica Pegula and sixth ranked Mirra Andreeva before falling to Gauff in the semi-finals.

Iga Swiatek, the defending three-time French Open champion, falls two places to seventh after her semi-final defeat to Sabalenka.

China's Zheng Qinwen moves up to fifth after reaching the quarter-finals in Paris where she won Olympic gold medal last year

WTA RANKINGS

- 1 Aryna Sabalenka (BLR) 11,553 pts
2. Coco Gauff (USA) 8,083
3. Jessica Pegula (USA) 6,483
4. Jasmine Paolini (ITA) 4,805
5. Zheng Qinwen (CHN) 4,668 (+2)
6. Mirra Andreeva (RUS) 4,636
7. Iga Swiatek (POL) 4,618 (-2)
8. Madison Keys (USA) 4,484
9. Paula Badosa (ESP) 3,684 (+1)
10. Emma Navarro (USA) 3,649 (-1)
11. Elena Rybakina (KAZ) 3,358
12. Diana Shnaider (RUS) 3,168
13. Elina Svitolina (UKR) 3,035 (+1)
14. Karolina Muchova (CZE) 2,929 (-1)
15. Amanda Anisimova (USA) 2,804 (+1)
16. Daria Kasatkina (AUS) 2,801 (+1)
17. Barbora Krejickova (CZE) 2,724 (-2)
18. Liudmila Samsonova (RUS) 2,390
19. Ekaterina Alexandrova 2,378 (+1)
20. Jelena Ostapenko (LAT) 2,200 (+1)

GOLF

Niemann wins in Virginia for sixth career LIV title

Reuters
Gainesville, Virginia

Joaquin Niemann birdied Nos. 14-17 to cap off a bogey-free, 8-under-par 63 for his final round and hung on to win LIV Golf Virginia on Sunday in Gainesville, Virginia.

The 26-year-old from Chile went 15-under 198 for the week at Robert Trent Jones Golf Club and beat Northern Ireland's Graeme McDowell (66) and Anirban Lahiri of India (68) by a single stroke.

Lahiri had a birdie attempt at his final hole to force a playoff with Niemann but could not convert.

Niemann's sixth LIV win – all coming in a 17-month span – broke a tie with Brooks Koepka for the most victories in the Saudi-backed league's brief history.

He had to endure a rain delay and fend off a crowded field of players to finish the job.

"I felt like there was a lot going on during the rain delay," Niemann said. "Tried to keep my mind on the right thoughts, and having Bryson (DeChambeau) coming off pretty clutch at the end, Phil (Mickelson) as well, Anirban..."

"It could have been for anybody, and I felt like I was all day just behind, especially since the beginning of the week, and I feel like the only word that I was telling myself from last night was just have faith. There's nothing else I can do, have a good attitude, and just wait."

The win propels him into next week's US Open, where he is in the field on an exemption re-



Joaquin Niemann celebrates with the championship trophy after winning the LIV Golf Virginia at Robert Trent Jones Golf Club. (AFP)

served for one of the top players in the league.

"I feel like I'm still pretty far away of winning (a major)," Niemann said. "I'm just happy to be playing at the US Open. It's going to be a great course, pretty tough conditions. I'm just looking forward for that challenge and have a fun week."

After a two-putt birdie at the par-5 14th hole, Niemann sank a 9-footer at the 15th and a 10-footer at the par-3 16th. He reached 15 under par when he

stuck his second shot at No. 17 to about a foot from the pin to set up a tap-in birdie.

DeChambeau and Mickelson each shot 6-under 65s to get into a tie for fourth at 13 under with Belgium's Thomas Pieters (63) and Bubba Watson (67).

Mickelson made an improbable birdie at No. 17 on a flop shot from the greenside rough. He stood in a bunker, well below his ball, and sent it high in the air and on a perfect line to gently roll into the cup.

In the team standings, the

DeChambeau-captained Crushers GC went 15 under for the day to finish 36 under par and secure the team title by two strokes over 4Aces GC. It is Crushers' second straight team victory following the last event in South Korea.

"It was funny, going into Korea we were all looking at each other going, 'What are we doing? Let's kick it into gear,' and we have," DeChambeau said. "Definitely a force to be reckoned with, and I'm looking forward to the rest of the season."

ANNOUNCEMENT

Strycova to replace Pala as Czech Billie Jean King Cup team captain

AFP
Prague

Two-time Wimbledon doubles champion Barbora Strycova will take over as captain of the Czech Billie Jean King Cup team from Petr Pala, the national tennis federation confirmed yesterday.

Pala took the helm in 2008 and led the Czechs to six Fed Cup victories in 2011-2018, leaning on the likes of Petra Kvitova, Lucie Safarova, Karolina Pliskova and Strycova herself.

The Czechs have been less impressive since the women's team competition changed to the Billie Jean King Cup in 2020, also because of a generational shift.

"I have realised the girls are younger and younger and I'm not getting any younger with them, it's rather the contrary," Pala, 49,

told Czech media yesterday. Pala will remain in charge for November's Billie Jean King Cup play-offs before handing over to Strycova in January 2026.

Strycova, 39, who was on five of the six Czech Republic teams that won the Fed Cup, said she was relishing the opportunity.

"Playing tennis is quite different from leading the Fed Cup team," said Strycova.

"But I know I will give my best and try to lead the girls to another trophy."

Strycova retired before giving birth to the first of her two children in 2021, but returned for one last season in 2023.

She won the Wimbledon doubles with Taiwan's Hsieh Su-wei in her last year, having also won in 2019.

The top-ranked Czech players at the moment are Karolina Muchova (14) and Barbora Krejickova (17).

Kupcho wins in New Jersey



Jennifer Kupcho of the US takes a selfie as she poses with the trophy on the 18th green after winning the ShopRite LPGA Classic at Seaview Bay Course in Galloway, New Jersey. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Emotional Ronaldo rejoices Portugal's Nations League win

'I have many titles with clubs, but nothing is better than winning for Portugal'

Reuters
Munich

Portugal skipper Cristiano Ronaldo shed tears of joy as they won their second Nations League title on Sunday night, insisting that winning trophies with his country beats all club honours.

Ronaldo's 138th international goal in the second half took the final to penalties after a 2-2 draw with Spain, with the substituted 40-year-old forward looking on from the sidelines as Portugal netted all five spot kicks to claim the title.

Alvaro Morata's miss proved costly for Spain as Ruben Neves struck the winning spot kick to spark wild scenes of celebration, emotion overwhelming the veteran.

The triumph, which left the five-times Champions League winner in tears, was Ronaldo's third on the international stage, accompanying his 2016 European Championship and 2019 Nations League winners' medals.

"What a joy," Ronaldo said. "First of all for this generation, which deserved a title of this magnitude, for our families. My children came here, my wife, my brother, my friends. Winning for Portugal is always special. I have many titles with clubs, but nothing is better than winning for Portugal. It's tears. It's duty done and a lot of joy. When you talk about Portugal it is always a special feeling. Being captain of this generation is a source of pride. Winning a title is always the pinnacle in a national team."

Spain's exhilarating 5-4 victory over France in Thursday's semi-final ensured Luis de la Fuente's side had continued an unbeaten run that stretched back to March 2023 coming into Sunday's showpiece final in Munich. They appeared



Portugal captain Cristiano Ronaldo lifts the trophy as he celebrates with teammates after winning the UEFA Nations League final against Spain in Munich on Sunday. (AFP)

on course for yet another trophy, on the back last year's European Championship triumph, as Martin Zubimendi tapped home his second international goal in the 21st minute.

The holders' lead did not last long, however, as flying Portugal full-back Nuno Mendes slotted home the equaliser after good work from Ronaldo in the build up. A sublime pass from midfielder Pedri helped Mikel Oyarzabal, who netted the winner against England in last year's European Championship final, restore Spain's lead before the break.

The tussle between the Iberian neighbours was billed as a clash between old and new - 40-year-old and five-times Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo and Spain's teen-

age sensation Lamine Yamal. While Yamal, among the favourites to take home one of the most prestigious individual awards this year, struggled to make inroads, Ronaldo pounced on his chance, firing Portugal level from close range just past the hour mark.

Ronaldo went off injured late on and neither side could find a winner in extra time, with the game going to a shootout and Portugal netting all five of their penalties to claim the trophy.

Meanwhile, Ronaldo's future remains uncertain. He said last week he did not plan to play at the Club World Cup in the United States, which starts later this month, despite being courted by clubs taking part in the 32-team tournament.

The Al Nassr forward said he had several offers from other teams to play in the US, while his side's sporting director, Fernando Hierro said last month they were negotiating with Ronaldo over a contract extension but faced competition from clubs eager to sign the five-times Ballon d'Or winner.

For now, however, he is only focused on celebrating his latest triumph, having played in the final with an injury.

"It's beautiful," he added. "It's for our nation. We are a small people, but with a very big ambition. The future is short term. Now is the time to rest well. I had the injury and that was the maximum, the maximum... I pushed, because for the national team you have to push."

FOCUS

Inter gamble on novice Chivu after end of Inzaghi era

AFF
Milan, Italy

Inter Milan have chosen Cristian Chivu to lead the Serie A club into a new era, confirming the former Romania defender as Simone Inzaghi's replacement ahead of the upcoming Club World Cup.

Still reeling from humiliation at the hands of Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League final, Inter have gambled on novice Chivu after failing to get Cesc Fabregas from Como.

"Inter Milan is pleased to welcome Cristian Chivu as the new head coach of the first team. The coach has signed a contract with Inter until 30 June 2027," Inter said in a statement.

Chivu has agreed a deal with Inter worth a reported 2.5mn a season, taking charge of one of Europe's biggest clubs only a few months after beginning his senior coaching career with Parma.

Parma confirmed Chivu's departure earlier on Monday, setting up his arrival at Inter where he won three Serie A titles and the 2010 Champions League as a player.

Chivu was part of the iconic Inter team which won the treble under Jose Mourinho 15 years ago, a feat which the San Siro club tried and spectacularly failed to repeat this season.

In total Chivu played 169 times over six seasons with Inter, and he also knows Serie A well due to the four seasons he spent at rivals Roma before moving north in 2007.

The 44-year-old replaced Fabio Pechia in February and guided Parma to Serie A safety in his first job in football of any

form since leaving Inter's youth set-up last summer.

"I thank the club, staff, players and fans for having believed in me and our project," said Chivu on Instagram.

"Together we overcame obstacles and wrote a page (in Parma's history) which will remain in my heart."

Chivu's first match in charge of Inter will be against Monterrey in the Club World Cup next week, in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California.

He will lead a group of players who looked dead on their feet during their 5-0 hammering against PSG in the Champions League final late last month.

Inzaghi left Inter in the wake of the Italians' thumping in Munich, taking the job at Saudi Pro League club Al Hilal who are also participating the Club World Cup.

He had made light of serious financial problems in turning Inter into one of Europe's best teams in his four seasons at the Milan giants, but his final campaign ended in a bitter fashion and with no trophies.

Inter had looked a decent bet for the Serie A, Champions League and Italian Cup treble when they booked a place in the semi-finals of Europe's top club competition by knocking out Bayern Munich.

At that point Inter were three points clear at the top of Serie A, but they ended up conceding the Scudetto to Napoli on the final day of the season and were knocked out of the Italian Cup by AC Milan.

That left the Champions League as Inter's only hope of a trophy but they lost in embarrassing fashion their second final in three years under Inzaghi.



BOTTOMLINE

Lewandowski 'betrayed and hurt' by way he lost Poland captaincy

Reuters
Warsaw

Poland striker Robert Lewandowski said his trust had been betrayed and he was very hurt by the way coach Michal Probiez told him he was being replaced as team captain.

The country's record goalscorer immediately announced on social media that he would not play for the national team under Probiez who made the decision to appoint midfielder Piotr Zielinski as captain. Lewandowski said yesterday that he received a short call from Probiez as he was putting his children to sleep and that a statement about him losing the captaincy soon appeared on the Polish football federation (PZPN) website.

"I wore the armband for 11 years, and I've been playing in the national team for 17," Lewandowski was quoted as saying.

"It seemed to me that such matters should be handled differently... we have an important match ahead of us, and everything was communicated over the phone. This is really not how it should be. The coach betrayed my trust."



Lewandowski said the national team had always been the most important thing for him and that he was "very hurt" by the way the decision to strip him of the armband was communicated.

Probiez told a news conference that he thought delivering the news by phone was "natural".

"Robert's answer was that the captain's armband means nothing and it won't change anything," Probiez said.

"From his perspective it may not change anything, but from mine I think it changes a lot."

Zielinski declined to comment on Lewandowski's decision, but said it was a great honour to re-

ceive the captain's armband. Lewandowski is not in the current Poland squad, citing physical and mental exhaustion after a long season as the reason for his absence.

The 36-year-old, who has scored 85 goals for his country in a record 158 appearances, had held the captaincy since 2014.

Probiez replaced the sacked Fernando Santos as Poland manager in 2023, taking them to Euro 2024 where his side were the first team to be eliminated.

Poland defeated Moldova 2-0 in a friendly on Friday and are away to Finland in a World Cup qualifier today.

FRIENDLY

Saka to feature in much-changed England team against Senegal

Reuters
London

Arsenal winger Bukayo Saka will feature in a much-changed England team for the friendly against Senegal today, manager Thomas Tuchel said. England laboured to a lacklustre 1-0 win over Andorra in World Cup qualifying on Saturday.

"After the last (Premier League) game of the season I had a little strain," Saka told reporters.

"Fair play to England, they managed me well. The manager left me out (on Saturday) and said I will play tomorrow. I love coming to England camps and playing for England. It has been a bit of frustrating year with injuries but I am here now and looking forward to tomorrow."

Tuchel was very critical of his team's "lack of urgency" after the win over Andorra which put them in command of Group K. "I protect my players, I said no names of players, it is not an individual matter," Tuchel said at the team's training base at St. George's Park. "But as a team we did not reach our standards.



I felt we didn't play seriously enough in what we needed to do in a World Cup qualifier. Why should we sugar coat it? You have been in the stadium, why should I tell you that we had a good game? No harm done. We can handle criticism."

England should face a tougher

test against Senegal. The African side, who lost 3-0 to England at the 2022 World Cup in the only previous match between the teams, are unbeaten in their last 23 matches across all competitions. England have won all three games under Tuchel and their last six matches in all competitions, keeping a clean sheet in each of the last five.

Saka sidestepped a question about how Tuchel's managerial style compares to his predecessor Gareth Southgate. "I don't really like to compare, if I'm honest," Saka said. "Since I have come into the camp (Tuchel) has been quite demanding, quite intense on the pitch and off the pitch he's been more relaxed. He's a nice guy, he let us enjoy ourselves and created a nice environment for all the players to enjoy."

The team spent Sunday evening watching Portugal beat Spain in the Nations League final. "It was high level in the final. High-quality football," Tuchel said. "That's the benchmark, we will try to hunt that, to reach that and I'm convinced we have everything it takes to match that when we play these teams."

TOTTENHAM CLOSING IN ON BRENTFORD'S FRANK IN SEARCH FOR NEW MANAGER

London: Brentford manager Thomas Frank is the man Tottenham have targeted to replace Ange Postecoglou, according to multiple reports. Postecoglou was dismissed after two seasons in charge on Friday despite ending Spurs' 17-year trophy drought by winning the Europa League last month. Frank, who has been in charge of the Bees since 2018, led Brentford back to the top flight in 2021 after an absence of 74 years and has established the west London club in the Premier League. Hir-

ing the Dane, whose contract runs until 2027, would cost Spurs around £10mn in compensation. Spurs will play in the Champions League next season thanks to their Europa League success in Bilbao, where they Manchester United 1-0. However, Postecoglou paid the price for a miserable Premier League season as Tottenham finished 17th after losing 22 of their 38 games. Frank began his coaching career in the youth set-up of the Danish national team before a three-

year stint at Brondby. He initially joined Brentford as an assistant coach before stepping to replace Dean Smith, when he left to join Aston Villa. After losing out in the 2020 Championship play-off final, Brentford bounced back to win promotion through the play-offs a year later. Since then, Frank has established the Bees as a competitive Premier League force recording 13th, ninth, 16th and 10th-place finishes despite consistently selling some of his best players.

Bryan Mbeumo is set to become the latest big-money departure from Brentford, with Man United interested in the Cameroon international.

Premier League's first Black referee Rennie dies aged 65

Uriah Rennie, the first Black referee in the Premier League, has died aged 65, the Sheffield and Hallamshire County Football Association said on Sunday. Jamaican-born Rennie, who grew up in Sheffield,

made history in 1997 when he refereed a Premier League match between Derby County and Wimbledon. He went on to officiate in over 300 games - including 175 in England's top flight. Rennie retired in 2008 and 15 years passed before another Black official took charge of a Premier League game, Sam Allison refereeing Sheffield United against Luton Town in 2023. In April, Rennie told the BBC he was learning to walk again after being left paralysed from the waist down by a rare condition.