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FOOTBALL

Qatar fall to Uzbekistan, face playoff path to World Cup

Reigning Asian champions will have to navigate the playoffs, where two additional places are on offer



Uzbekistan's Dor Shomurodov scores against Qatar during the World Cup qualifying match in Tashkent. (Reuters)

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Qatar wrapped up their disappointing qualifying campaign with a 3-0 loss to Uzbekistan in Tashkent yesterday, having already fallen out of contention for a direct place at the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

The reigning Asian champions finished fourth in Group A with 13 points and will have to navigate the playoffs, where two

additional places are up for grabs in October.

Uzbekistan, on the other hand, capped a memorable campaign with a commanding win. Timur Kapadze's side had already secured their first-ever FIFA World Cup berth and finished in second place with 21 points from 10 matches.

A slow first 20 minutes was highlighted by a bold-hearted try by Qatar's Amro Syrag, a looping header by Uzbekistan's Husniddin Aliqulov and a run down the middle from his captain Eldor Shomuro-

dov, who outran three defenders only to be dispossessed. The game burst into life in the 28th minute when Azizbek Turgunboev evaded two tackles down the right and sent a screamer that rocked the underside of the bar and gave keeper Salah Zakaria no chance at all.

Zakaria and the Qatari defence were kept on their toes in the following minutes by the twin strikeforce of Shomurodov and Jaloliddin Masharipov, who combined to make three attempts at goal.

The custodian later kept his side in the



Before the match in Tashkent, Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev awarded the team members and support staff with electric cars in honour of securing their first-ever FIFA World Cup berth.

match when he pulled off a fine save on the stroke of half time from Shomurodov down the right and then held on to a close-range effort by Abbosbek Fayzullaev five minutes into time added on.

The hosts started the second half with a fierce strike from Masharipov, who sprinted down the left and curled his shot wide past the right post.

Qatari were constantly kept on the back-foot, with Zakaria making yet another crucial save when he shielded Khojikbar Alijonov's shot from the edge of the six-yard box in the 63rd minute.

Shomurodov scored their second in the 86th minute when he latched on to a long pass from Jamshid Iskanderov, controlled the ball with his right foot and unleashed a shot with his left that flew past an outstretched Zakaria.

Uzbekistan sealed the match in the second minute of stoppage time when Igor Sergeev, who had come on a minute earlier in place of Shomurodov, scored with a close range header.

Before the match began, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev awarded the team members and support staff each with environmentally friendly and modern electric cars.

Uzbek coach Timur Kapadze said: "Today, the players controlled the game without giving Qatar a chance. I thank everyone who believed in us, prayed for us, and came to the stadium to support us. Our national team's qualification for the World Cup was not only a great achievement on the football stage, but also a great pride for the entire country. Now it's time for proper preparation for a big tournament."

FOCUS

Heartbreak for Palestine as Oman reach playoffs

By Sport Reporter

Amman

Issam al-Sabhi converted a penalty seven minutes into stoppage time to give Oman a 1-1 draw against Palestine in their final Group B clash in the World Cup qualifiers in Amman yesterday.

Al-Sabhi's goal at Jordan's King Abdullah II Stadium cancelled out Oday Kharoub's first international goal for Palestine, giving Oman 11 points and booking them the last spot in the playoffs for the FIFA World Cup 2026 Palestine, a point behind Oman going into the match, signalled their intent as early as the fourth minute when Michel Termanini hit the bar with a stinging header that left Oman captain and keeper Faiyz al-Rusdi rooted.

Palestine's efforts paid off in the 49th minute when Kharoub headed home at the near post off a corner by Adamhamza Kayed, who had come on after the break.

Oman were dealt another blow in the 73rd minute when Harib al-Saadi received a second yellow card for a foul on Hamed Hamdan.

Wessam Abou Ali had two chances in the last 10 minutes to double Palestine's lead, but saw his first shot saved by al-Rusdi.

and his second go just past the right post. Issam then stepped up to send Oman into the playoffs after a foul by Taha on Muhsen al-Ghassani as Palestine suffered heartbreak right at the very end.

Australia qualify for 2026 World Cup

Australia booked their place at the 2026 World Cup in North America with a 2-1 win over Saudi Arabia in Jeddah. The Socceroos will play in a sixth consecutive World Cup finals after finishing second in Group C in the third round of Asian qualifiers, as the Saudis head into the fourth round.

Meanwhile, Crystal Palace forward Daichi Kamada scored twice for Japan and Paris Saint Germain's Lee Kang-in netted for South Korea as the Asian giants rounded off successful World Cup qualifying campaigns in style. Japan romped to a 6-0 thrashing of Patrick Kluyver's Indonesia in Osaka, while South Korea cruised to a 4-0 win over Kuwait in Seoul where fans were treated to a late appearance by their idol Son Heung-min.

Kamada struck twice in the first half for already qualified Japan, who finished as Group C winners. Takefusa Kubo, Ryoya Morishita, Shuto Machino and substitute Mao Hosoya were also on target against Indonesia.

SHOOTING

Qatar wins silver in trap at Asian Championship

Qatar added another medal at the Asian Shotgun Championship in Linfen, China, after clinching silver in the men's trap team event. The trio of Mohammed al-Rumaihi, Saeed Abu Shareb and Nasser al-Humaidi delivered an impressive performance to finish second behind the Kuwaiti team, while Iran claimed bronze.

Al-Rumaihi stood out by setting a new personal best and matching the Asian record, hitting 124 out of 125 targets across five rounds. He registered perfect scores in the first, third, fourth, and fifth rounds and dropped just one target in the second.

With this result, Qatar has now secured five medals in the championship. The team's campaign has already been highlighted by a gold medal in the mixed skeet event, won by Rashid Saleh al-Athba and Reem al-Sharshani. The women's skeet team – comprising Hajar Mohammed, al-Sharshani and Aisha al-Ansari – took silver, while the men's skeet team of al-Athba, Abdulaziz al-Attiyah and Ali al-Ishaq earned bronze. Hajar Mohammed also claimed individual bronze in the women's skeet competition. The championship concludes today, with Qatar's shooters aiming to finish strong in the mixed trap event, their final contest of the tournament.



Qatar's trio of Mohammed al-Rumaihi, Saeed Abu Shareb and Nasser al-Humaidi delivered an impressive performance to finish second behind the Kuwaiti team, while Iran claimed bronze.

Qatar swimmer Sayed qualifies for World Championships

Doha: Qatar swimmer Ali Sayed has qualified for the World Aquatics Championships - Singapore 2025, after clocking the qualifying time in the 100m butterfly during his participation in the Bell Canadian Swimming Trials, held in Canada.

Sayed completed the race in

53.54 seconds, surpassing the minimum qualifying standard for the world championships. This achievement adds to the growing record of success for Qatari swimming and reflects the continued development of national swimmers on the international stage.

Ali Sayed expressed his great

joy at reaching this milestone, attributing the success to hard work and the technical and administrative support he received. He dedicated the achievement to the Qatari swimming community and to the fans who have supported him throughout his journey.





PREVIEW

Labuschagne set to open in WTC final against SA

Australian captain confirms decision ahead of Lord's battle

AFP
London

Marnus Labuschagne will fill Australia's problem position of opening batsman in the World Test Championship final against South Africa, captain Pat Cummins announced yesterday.

Reigning champions Australia have struggled to plug the hole at the top of their order left by the retirement of David Warner 17 months ago.

Steve Smith was promoted but only lasted four Tests before dropping back down to four and giving Nathan McSweeney a chance.

McSweeney struggled against India late last year, with teenager Sam Konstas thrust into the side during the home series.

He scored a blazing 60 on debut, but was less effective in the next Test and was jettisoned in favour of Travis Head for Australia's tour of Sri Lanka.

But with Head reverting to five, Labuschagne, best known as a number three, has been promoted to open for the first time in his Test career.

The 30-year-old, who has not scored a Test century for nearly two years, will form a first-wicket partnership with Queensland teammate Usman Khawaja, while the fit-again Cameron Green returns at number three following back surgery.

"Cam Green, the last few weeks, he's had coming back in great form, we thought he deserves a spot somewhere in the batting line-up," Cummins said on the eve of the final.

"We thought three probably



Australia's Marnus Labuschagne during practice ahead of the 2025 ICC World Test Championship Final against South Africa at Lord's Cricket Ground, London, yesterday. (Reuters)

suits him best. And then with Marnus moving, we thought it's one spot up, it's not too different to batting at three. He's done well here in England in the past."

'Unfortunate' Boland

Fast bowler Josh Hazlewood has been selected ahead of Scott Boland, with all-rounder Beau Webster included to provide back-up overs given Green is still not fit to bowl.

Boland took 10 wickets in his last Test as Australia defeated India in Sydney to reclaim the Border-Gavaskar Trophy and secure a spot in the WTC final.

But he has never played at Lord's, where Hazlewood, only recently returned from a shoulder problem in the Indian Premier League, has taken 13 wickets in three Tests.

"There are some guys where you genuinely say, you've done nothing wrong, don't change a thing and that's Scotty," said fellow paceman Cummins. "He is just really unfortunate to miss out."

The match, starting today, is only the third WTC final but Cummins said: "It's a trophy we've spoken a lot about over the last couple of years."

"Test cricket is my favourite format," added the skipper, who also led Australia to 50-over World Cup glory in 2023 with a win against hosts India.

"You've got to basically win in all different conditions to make it into this final. If we can retain that mace, that's a pretty awesome thing for this team."

AUSTRALIA TEAM

Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Cameron Green, Steve Smith, Travis Head, Beau Webster, Alex Carey (wk), Pat Cummins (capt), Mitchell Starc, Nathan Lyon, Josh Hazlewood

SPOTLIGHT

Drugs ban gives Rabada extra motivation for WTC final, says Bavuma

South Africa's Kagiso Rabada and team consultant Stuart Broad during practice at Lord's Cricket Ground, London, Britain. (Reuters)

Reuters
London

South Africa are backing fast bowler Kagiso Rabada to bring extra motivation to the World Test Championship final against Australia after serving a one-month drugs ban.

Rabada tested positive for cocaine in January, which was only revealed in April, and served a one-month ban while competing in the Indian Premier League.

It has been an embarrassing episode for the 30-year-old Rabada, second in the world test bowling rankings, but his captain Temba Bavuma said he expected it would

fire him up for the game at Lord's starting today. "It's definitely a motivation. It's been a couple of weeks now that everything has unfolded," Bavuma told a press conference yesterday.

"He had a conversation with the team and put himself on the spot for further questioning from any of the players. As far as we are concerned, that's kind of behind us, we really come here with the focus of what we need to do."

"And I think he's in the best shape that he's ever been. Playing against the Australians as well, that'll be extra motivation for him. I think he's in a very good space."

Rabada will lead the attack along with Marco Jansen, with Lungi

Ngidi as first change after he was preferred in the team to veteran seamer Dane Paterson, who had been in contention for a place because of his experience on English wickets. "It's probably one of the tougher decisions that we've have to make. It was more from a tactical point of view; probably a little bit more pace coming from Lungi," Bavuma said.

South Africa have also promoted all-rounder Wiaan Mulder up to number three in the batting order.

"He's quite young, obviously, in that position. But having seen the way he's kind of grown in the last two years within the red-ball game, it's about giving him a lot more confidence, backing him,

and just allowing him to do what he does best," Bavuma said.

Mulder failed to make a half-century in his first 24 Test innings before scoring 54 and 105 not out batting down the order in successive Tests against Bangladesh last October.

South Africa are competing in the final for the first time while Australia are defending champions.

SOUTH AFRICA TEAM

Aiden Markram, Ryan Rickleton, Wiaan Mulder, Temba Bavuma (captain), Tristan Stubbs, David Bedingham, Kyle Verreyne, Marco Jansen, Kagiso Rabada, Keshav Maharaj, Lungi Ngidi

FOCUS

Dhoni, Amla and Smith added to ICC Hall of Fame

AFP
London

India's Mahendra Singh Dhoni and South Africa's Hashim Amla and Graeme Smith were among seven new inductees into the International Cricket Council Hall of Fame announced Monday.

Also included were Australia's Matthew Hayden and New Zealand's Daniel Vettori, with former Pakistani captain Sana Mir and England's Sarah Taylor recognised for their contributions to the women's game.

The induction ceremony took place at London's Abbey Road Studios, where the Beatles recorded many of their hit songs.

Abbey Road is just a short walk from Lord's, where the World Test Championship final starts on Wednesday and both captains were among the audience - Australia's Pat Cummins and South Africa's Temba Bavuma.

Former India captain Dhoni led his country to 2011 one-day international World Cup glory on home soil, the wicketkeeper-

batsman hitting the winning runs on a memorable night in Mumbai.

He is also the only captain to have won all three ICC white-ball trophies, after skipping India to the inaugural 2007 T20 World Cup title as well as the 2013 Champions Trophy.

Dhoni finished his ODI career with an average above 50, having played 350 matches and scored over 10,000 runs - often expertly helming a run-chase.

"It is an honour to be named in the ICC Hall of Fame, which recognises the contributions of cricketers across generations

and from all over the world," said Dhoni, who featured in this year's Indian Premier League aged 43.

The stylish Amla was the first South Africa batsman to score a Test-match triple century, making 311 not out against England at the Oval in 2012. He often found himself playing alongside Smith.

Thrust into the captaincy aged just 22, Smith led South Africa in a world-record 109 Tests, with the former opening batsman the only player to captain a Test team for over 100 matches.

"It is an honour to be inducted into the ICC Hall of Fame, especially alongside Graeme," Amla said. Smith added: "This is also a proud moment for South Africa, as two of us have got recognition this year."

Hayden was a mainstay of Australia's dominant sides of the early 2000s, with the powerful opener scoring 30 Test centuries and averaging above 50.

Former left-arm spinner Vettori, now an assistant coach with Australia, is one of only three players to score 4,000 runs and take 300 wickets in Tests.

Wicket-keeping great Taylor helped England win several global titles, including a 2017 ODI World Cup on home soil, while Mir is the first woman from Pakistan to be included in the Hall of Fame.

Off-spinner Mir took 151 ODI wickets and led Pakistan to two Asian Games gold medals, in 2010 and 2014. "From dreaming as a little girl that one day there would even be a women's team in our country to now standing here, inducted among the very legends I idolised long before I ever held a bat or a ball - this is a moment I couldn't have dared to imagine," Mir said.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Pooran retires from international cricket

Reuters
Barbados

Former West Indies white-ball captain Nicholas Pooran announced his retirement from international duty.

Pooran hit 13 half-centuries in 106 Twenty20 Internationals and amassed 2,275 runs to become West Indies' leading scorer in the shortest format.

One of the world's most explosive batters, the 29-year-old smashed 149 sixes in T20 Internationals to stand fifth overall.

He served as West Indies' limited overs skipper but gave up the captaincy after their first-round exit from the 2022 T20 World Cup.

"This game we love has given and will continue to give so much - joy, purpose, unforgettable memories, and a chance to represent the people of the West Indies," the Trinidadian said in a social media post.

"Wearing that maroon, stand-

ing for the anthem, and giving everything I had each time I stepped on the field... it's hard to put into words what that truly means to me."

"To have led the team as captain is a privilege I will always hold close to my heart."

Pooran last played for West Indies in their 3-0 T20 series defeat by Bangladesh in December last year, while his most recent ODI appearance came in July 2023 against Sri Lanka.

"Nicholas officially informed the leadership of his decision to retire from international cricket, bringing to a close a significant chapter in his career," Cricket West Indies said in a statement.

"His performances on the field and influence within the team have made a lasting impact on West Indies cricket."

Pooran opted to skip West Indies' ongoing T20 series against England, requesting to be rested after playing for the Lucknow Super Giants in the Indian Premier League.

THREE KEY BATTLES IN WORLD TEST CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL

London: Reigning champions Australia face South Africa in the World Test Championship final at Lord's, starting today. Below AFP Sport looks at three key contests that could determine the course of the show-piece game:

TOUGH TIMES LOOM FOR TOP-ORDERS

Batsmen on both sides face a tough examination given the quality of fast bowlers on show. Australia captain Pat Cummins could get to 300 Test wickets this week, with his 294 in 67 previous matches coming at an average of just 22.43.

He is set to be joined by left-arm quick Mitchell Starc (382 Test wickets at 27.57), with the only real decision for Australia being either to recall the experienced Josh Hazlewood, whose career has been blighted by niggling injuries, or opt for Scott Boland.

Australia faced the same dilemma two years ago when Boland was chosen ahead of Hazlewood, who had been recovering from side issues, for the ultimately successful WTC final against India. Whatever Australia decide, Proteas openers Aiden Markram and Ryan Rickleton are likely to have their work cut out as they look to build a solid foundation to the innings. Nevertheless, South Africa coach Shukri Conrad said: "I think there's a quiet confidence among the batting group... While there might not be superstar names among them, I think as a collective we're pretty confident."

Australia, meanwhile, have struggled to fill the gap left at the top of their order by David Warner's retirement 17 months ago. Four batsmen have been tried as an opening partner for Usman Khawaja in that time, with Marnus Labuschagne set to become the fifth if, as expected, he plays his first Test at the top of the order this week. Kagiso Rabada, back from a one-month ban for recreational drug use, will lead South Africa's attack as he looks to extend an outstanding Test record of 327 wickets at 22 apiece, with the impressive Marco Jansen in support.

SPIN TO WIN?

Spin, however, could yet prove valuable with a drier pitch than usual offering the prospect of turn.

Australia's Nathan Lyon has proved himself an outstanding off-spinner, with 553 Test wickets at an average of just over 30. South Africa left-arm Keshav Maharaj, who arrives at Lord's just two shy of 200 Test wickets, should not be underestimated either.

Both Cummins and Proteas skipper Temba Bavuma will want their spinners to maintain control, so they don't have to overbowl the quicks, as well as taking wickets. "I think spin will play a big part, particularly as the game wears on," said Australia star batsman Steve Smith.

Smith added: "It does look quite a dry surface and I think the footmarks will definitely come into play as the game wears on."

WICKETKEEPERS SET THE TONE

Lord's can prove an awkward ground for overseas wicketkeepers given how often the ball swings markedly after pitching. But if they try to compensate by standing further back than usual, they run the risk of edges not carrying to the slip-cordon. Those technicalities were the least of Australia keeper Alex Carey's concerns two years ago when his controversial stumping of England's Jonny Bairstow - who thought the ball was dead - led to an extraordinary row in the Pavilion between Aussie players and Marylebone Cricket Club members. Carey, who scored his maiden Test hundred against South Africa in December 2022, has proved himself a consistent performer with bat and gloves.

The same is true of South Africa's Kyle Verreyne, who already has four hundreds to his credit in 24 Tests, as well as 77 dismissals.

TENNIS

Raducanu leads British trio into Queen's 2nd round

WIMBLEDON CHAMPION BARBORA KREJCIKOVA CRASHES OUT

Reuters
London

Emma Raducanu had a comfortable straight sets win over Spain's Cristina Bucsa and was one of three Britons to reach the second round of the WTA 500 tournament at Queen's Club yesterday, while Wimbledon champion Barbora Krejcirova crashed out.

Bucsa had won their only previous meeting in the first round of this year's Singapore Open, but this time the Spaniard was no match for the 22-year-old wildcard and Raducanu strolled to a 6-1 6-2 win.

"I'm still trying to find my groove on this surface," Raducanu said.

"I knew today would be a very difficult match, I lost to Cristina earlier in the year so I was trying to make sure that didn't happen again and fight to get myself into the second round."

Raducanu will now face Rebecca Sramkova after the Slovak caused an upset with a 6-4 6-3 win over Czech seventh seed Krejcirova, who only returned to action last month after a back injury kept her out since November.

Top tier women's tennis has returned to Queen's Club for the first time since 1973 and the home crowd had plenty to cheer on day two with Katie Boulter and Heather Watson also winning their first-round matches.



Britain's Emma Raducanu celebrates winning her round of 32 match against Spain's Cristina Bucsa at Queen's Club Championships in London, Britain, yesterday. (Reuters)

"To have the women back here, it feels very special," Boulter, current British number one, said.

"It's something I've dreamt of, actually walking out on this court, after the last couple of years competing as a fan watching the men."

Boulter beat Australian qualifier Ajla Tomljanovic 7-6(4) 1-6 6-4 and will face fifth seed Di-

ana Shnaider after the Russian 21-year-old defeated Poland's Magdalena Frech 6-4 6-1.

Watson defeated Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva 6-4 6-3 to earn a second-round clash with another Kazakh, fourth seed former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina.

"Very happy to be through here at Queen's," Watson said.

"It's such a great event so far, and I'm really enjoying playing here, playing on these courts at this amazing club, and staying at home, sleeping in my own bed."

The other Briton in action, Francesca Jones went down 6-2 6-4 to American McCartney Kessler who will meet top seed Zheng Qinwen.

GOLF

Rahm says LIV's smaller fields contribute to top-10 streak

Reuters
New York

Jon Rahm has finished in the top 10 of every LIV Golf event since he joined in 2024, but called himself a "realist" in acknowledging that it's due to the circuit's smaller fields.

After winning twice in 13 events in 2024, the Spaniard has racked up eight more top-10s this year. However, that is without a victory and his highest finish was a tie for second in the season opener in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

LIV's three-day events feature 13 four-player teams and two wild cards competing in daily shotgun starts, so Rahm only needs to be better than 44 players to card a top-10 result.

"I would happily trade a bunch of them for more wins, that's for sure, but I keep putting myself in good position," Rahm said yesterday ahead of this week's US Open at Oakmont Country Club outside

Pittsburgh. "Listen, I'm a realist in this case. I've been playing really good golf, yes, but I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't easier to have top 10s with a smaller field."

"That's just the truth, right? Had I been playing full-field events, would I have (been) top 10 every single week? No. But I've been playing good enough to say that I would most likely have been inside the top 30 every single time and maybe even top 25, which for 21 straight tournaments I'd say that's pretty good. I still would have had a lot of top 10s, that's for sure."

"I think winning is equally as hard, but you can take advantage of a smaller field to finish higher. As much as I want to give it credit personally for having that many top 10s, I wouldn't always give it as the full amount just knowing that it's a smaller field."

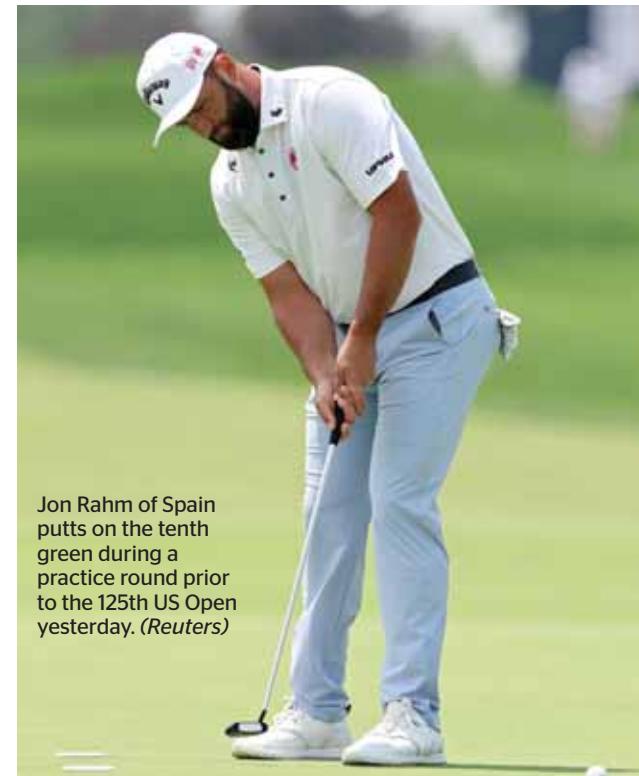
Rahm's other top-10 finish this year was the most impressive to date - a T8 at last month's PGA Championship. That came on the heels of a T14 at the Mas-

ters. He also finished T7 at last year's Open Championship, so Rahm continues to post quality results when up against the most elite fields in the world.

This week he returns to Oakmont, where he finished 23rd in 2016, 11 strokes behind winner and current LIV player Dustin Johnson. Rahm won his lone US Open title to date five years later at Torrey Pines, and said he is embracing the "extreme challenge" of tackling the notoriously difficult Oakmont.

"It never ceases to amaze, in the sense of the history, the old-school feel of the clubhouse," said Rahm, 30. "Even when you just stand on the putting green, seeing the whole property, you know you're somewhere special. It's quite iconic. It's one of those things that makes it a great venue and a great championship."

"I think you embrace it. You know how great it is. Once you start the tournament, all of those things kind of go away. It's business at that point. It's time to post a score."



Jon Rahm of Spain puts on the tenth green during a practice round prior to the 125th US Open yesterday. (Reuters)

Romeo clinches Dauphine third stage to take yellow

Charantonay, France: Spain's Ivan Romeo won the third stage of the Critérium du Dauphine yesterday when he streaked clear at the end of a 207km run from Brioude to Charantonay to cross the line first and claim the overall lead.

Romeo surprised his breakaway companions, including Dutch world champion Mathieu van der Poel, to drop them in the final kilometres and lead the dash into the town of Charantonay. "I've been thinking about this stage for a month now. I can hardly believe it. It was one of the hardest days of my life, I wasn't feeling well," said time-trial specialist Romeo.

"But I followed my instincts in the final. It's the best day of the year for me. Hard work pays off."

It was the second win of the 21-year-old Movistar rider's career, and earned him the yellow leader's jersey on the eve of the first time-trial in this edition of the Dauphine. Romeo completed the hilly run across the southeast of France in 4hr 34min 10sec. Colombian Astana rider Harold Tejada came in second at 14sec, with Frenchman Louis Barre of Intermarie completing the podium. The peloton, containing many of the race favourites, rolled in just over a minute later at the end of a day without any major incidents.

One of those contenders for the general classification is Red Bull leader Florian Lipowitz - in the absence of last year's winner Primoz Roglic - who did well to slip into the breakaway and come in just outside the podium.

The German sits fourth overall, with a 42sec advantage over ninth-placed Slovenian Tadej Pogacar.

The breakaway formed quickly after the start, and was composed of 13 riders. The first big break came on the Côte du Château Jaune, with its average gradient of over 9 percent, situated 19km from the finish. After this final climb, only 10 riders remained amongst the contenders for the stage, and victory seemed to be in the grasp of Van der Poel - the fastest of the bunch. But Romeo had other ideas, attacking for the first time with 9km remaining before going again and quickly opening up a sizeable gap on the chasing pack.

Today's fourth stage will be a 17.4km time-trial between Charmes-sur-Rhône and Saint-Peray.

COMMENT

McIlroy hits reset button ahead of US Open this week

Reuters
Oakmont, Pennsylvania

Rory McIlroy conceded yesterday that he did not know how hard it would be to stay motivated after completing a long-sought career Grand Slam at the Masters in April but hopes to hit the reset button this time for this week's US Open.

McIlroy, speaking to reporters at Oakmont Country Club ahead of tomorrow's opening round, has struggled since the Masters and will need to rediscover both his hunger and form off the tee if he hopes to be in the mix at the year's third major.

"I've always been a player that struggles to play after a big event, after I win whatever tournament," said McIlroy.

"I always struggle to show up with motivation the next week because you've just accomplished something and you want to enjoy it and you want to sort of relish the fact that you've achieved a goal."

"Chasing a certain goal for the better part of a decade and a half, I think I'm allowed a little bit of time to relax a little bit. But here at Oakmont, I certainly can't relax this week."

In his last two starts, McIlroy finished 47th at Quail Hollow for the PGA Championship, where he struggled off the tee using a backup driver after his preferred one was deemed non-conforming, and missed the cut last week in Canada.

While his recent results are well below the five-times major champion's expectations, McIlroy knows they came while he was enjoying the fruits of his labour

and also feels they ultimately serve a purpose.

"Weeks like Quail Hollow or even weeks like last week, it makes it easier to reset in some way, to be like, okay, I sort of need to get my stuff together here and get back to the process and sort of what I'd been doing for that seven months from October last year until April this year," said McIlroy.

The Northern Irishman, like everyone in the 156-player field this week, will have his work cut out for him at Oakmont given errant tee shots on the par-70 layout will be swallowed up by penal rough.

During his media availability, McIlroy said he shot an 81 last week at Oakmont after birdies on the final two holes.

"It felt pretty good. It didn't feel like I played that bad," said McIlroy.



WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

De Bruyne secures Belgium win over Wales in thriller

Italy struggle but give Spalletti winning send-off against Moldova



Belgium's Kevin De Bruyne celebrates scoring the winner against World Cup qualifying match against Wales in Brussels. (AFP)

AFP
Paris

Belgium held off a battling Wales and Italy gave sacked coach Luciano Spalletti a winning send-off in World Cup qualifying on Monday night.

Elsewhere Manchester City star Erling Haaland's goal lifted Norway past Estonia, Luka Modric was among the scorers in Croatia's 5-1 rout of the Czech Republic, and the Faroe Islands left it late to down Gibraltar 2-1.

Giacomo Raspadori and Andrea Cambiaso scored in each half as Italy beat Moldova 2-0 to inject a smidgeon of pride back in the Azzurri camp after last week's 3-0 thrashing by Norway which cost Spalletti his job. The Italians trail Norway by nine points in European qualifying group I and are at risk of missing out on a third straight World Cup.

Even though they have played two games less their ticket to the United States, Canada and Mexico next year is far from certain. Only top spot in each group guarantees automatic qualification with Italy's best hopes appearing to rest on finishing second and reaching the play-offs.

"When you're the national team coach

you have no excuses, it's you who selects the squad," said Spalletti. "It's the coach who has to make the difference and unfortunately I wasn't able to do that."

Spalletti accepted that he isn't leaving the team in a great place for his replacement and has failed to improve them. "I'm disappointed with the result," Spalletti said at his final press conference. "I don't give back to those who come after me a great national team because we didn't play a great match tonight either. I was given the opportunity to work, I tried, I made mistakes and I even tried some experiments. I try to learn everything in whatever I approach, I'm not convinced I'm the smartest one. I haven't been able to get the best out of these players and I have to take note of that."

Spalletti announced his own dismissal on the eve of the Moldova match, which comes after less than two years in the role and included a disappointing Euro 2024 campaign. While he never thought of resigning, he conceded he has failed to improve things. "If you agree to coach the national team like I did, then you have to find the solution. You can't hide behind the fact that you have few players, you start to find alibis," Spalletti said.

"I did badly and in some ways it is right that I go home. But I didn't resign, because I think

I can do better. But, if I am told that I am no longer the one, then I sign the resolution (of the contract). I left the national team as when I found it, just as it is."

Over in Brussels Belgium raced to a three-goal lead over Wales courtesy of Romelu Lukaku, Youri Tielemans and Jeremy Doku inside half an hour. Wales, though, rallied through a Harry Wilson penalty, Sorba Thomas and Brennan Johnson to stun the side ranked eighth in the world. But De Bruyne rode to his nation's rescue, as he has so often in a stellar career, by steering in Tielemans' perfect cross in the 88th minute.

It left Wales sitting second in Group J, one point behind North Macedonia, 1-0 winners over Kazakhstan, and three in front of Belgium, who have two games in hand. This was Wales manager Craig Bellamy's first defeat in his first 10 matches in charge.

Wales captain Ben Davies said: "Getting back as close as we did is probably why it's as painful as it is. We knew we could do a lot better. You could see in the second half, we managed to nick a goal before half-time and it gave us something to hang on to and we pushed them close. We have plenty more games we just have to focus on ourselves and hopefully results go our way."

Comolli said he plans to hire a sporting director for transfers and a technical director to establish a clear structure at the club who have not won the Scudetto since the 2019-20 season when they lifted the trophy for the ninth year in a row. He also confirmed Randal Kolo Muani, who is on loan from Paris St Germain, would play in the Club World Cup even though his contract ends this month.

"We have not reached an agreement for next season, but I am optimistic that we can reach one, because PSG has not closed the door and Kolo Muani wants to stay with us," Comolli said. Comolli also said he wants to speak to Dusan Vlahovic with the Serbian striker reportedly unsettled at Juve. Vlahovic was Juve's top scorer in each of the last three seasons. "I want to understand what he wants to do. He is a top player and something this season didn't work," he said. "He is a top player and we also have to understand his intentions from a contractual point of view. When I understand all these things, I will be able to decide."



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Comolli, previously with French club Toulouse, is no stranger to Tudor's work. "When he was at (Olympique) Marseille he beat us twice. We even laughed about it," Comolli added. "The intensity, the physical and mental stamina that his Marseille had, impressed me. He did an exceptional job at Marseille."

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SERIE A

Tudor to remain as Juventus coach

Reuters
Turin, Italy

Igor Tudor will remain in charge of Juventus next season after Damien Comolli, the club's new general manager, said yesterday that they had faith in the Croatian coach who was handed the reins less than three months ago.

Tudor arrived in March after Juve sacked Thiago Motta, with the club having been knocked out of all the cup competitions and sitting outside the top four in Serie A. Juve lost only one more league game and finished fourth to qualify for the Champions League, but the 47-year-old warned his future must be decided before their Club World Cup campaign kicks off next week.

"I want to confirm that Tudor will be our coach for next season. I have already made this clear to him and we are working together," Comolli told reporters. "We are a great club and there is a lot of speculation, but I want to reiterate

stage, which kicks off on June 14. They also spent more than £172mn in January on Omar Marmoush, Abdulkadir Khushniv, Vitor Reis and Nico Gonzalez.

RANIERI TURNS DOWN ITALY JOB TO STAY AT ROMA AS ADVISOR

Claudio Ranieri said he has turned down the vacant Italy manager's job, after the four-times world champions sacked Luciano Spalletti, and will stay on with AS Roma as their senior adviser.

Former Napoli coach Spalletti, 66, announced his own dismissal on Sunday following Italy's 3-0 drubbing by Norway in their opening World Cup qualifier on Friday. Ranieri, who recently retired for a second time after his spell at Roma last season, said he was honoured to have been offered the job by Italian Football Federa-

tion President Gabriele Gravina.

Ranieri helped Roma finish fifth in Serie A last season to qualify for the Europa League. The 73-year-old Italian has been replaced by former Atalanta manager Gian Piero Gasperini at Roma.

DORTMUND SIGN JOBE BELLINGHAM FROM SUNDERLAND

Sunderland's Joje Bellingham has completed a permanent transfer to Borussia Dortmund, the clubs said as the English midfielder follows in the footsteps of his elder brother Jude by signing for the Bundesliga team.

Financial details were not disclosed by the newly-promoted Premier League club but British media said Dortmund would pay an initial fee of 33mn euros for Joje, who will play in this month's Club World

Cup. Sunderland said it was a club-record fee and that a sell-on clause was also included within the agreement while Dortmund said the England Under-21 international had signed a five-year deal.

The reported fee would make 19-year-old Joje the second-most expensive signing made by Dortmund after they recruited Ousmane Dembele for 35mn euros in 2016. Joje leaves Sunderland after a two-year spell which culminated with the club, who finished fourth in the second-tier Championship, gaining promotion to the top flight with a play-off final victory over Shefford United. Jude Bellingham played for Dortmund for three seasons before making a 103mn euros switch to Real Madrid, where the England international won the La Liga and Champions League titles in his first season.

FOOTBALL

COMMENT

War in Gaza 'hurts my whole body', says Man City's Guardiola

AFP
London

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said the war in Gaza "hurts my whole body" as he delivered an emotional speech while being honoured by the University of Manchester.

Guardiola, 54, was speaking as he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Manchester on Monday. "It's so painful what we see in Gaza, it hurts my whole body," Guardiola said in excerpts of his speech shared on social media. "Let me be clear, it's not about ideology. It's not about whether I'm right, or you're wrong. It's just about the love of life, about the care of your neighbour."

Israel launched a military campaign in Gaza after the attack by the Palestinian militant group Hamas on October 7, 2023 resulted in the deaths of 1,219 people on the Israeli side, mostly civilians, according to an tally of official figures.

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza says at least 54,981 people, the majority civilians, have been killed in the territory since the start of the war. The UN considers these figures reliable. "Maybe we think that we see the boys and girls of four years old being killed by the bomb or being killed at the hospital because it's not a hospital anymore, it's not our business," Guardiola.

"Yes, fine, we can think about that, it's not our business. But be careful. The next one will be ours. The next four or five-year-old kids will be ours. Sorry, but I see my kids, Maria, Marius and Valentina when I see every morning, since the nightmare started, the infants



Pep Guardiola was awarded the honorary degree by the University of Manchester for his unprecedented success at City.

in Gaza, and I'm so scared."

Guardiola has not shied away from voicing political views in the past, throwing his weight behind the campaign for Catalan independence. He was awarded the honorary degree by the University of Manchester for his unprecedented success at City, where he has won six Premier League titles, as well as his work through his family foundation, the Guardiola Sala Foundation.

The organisation takes part in "established projects which strive to support the most disadvantaged". Others within football have spoken out on Gaza. In October 2023, Liverpool and Egypt forward Mohamed Salah called on "world leaders to come together to prevent further slaughter of innocent souls".

The following month Bundesliga club Mainz sacked Dutch wing-back Anwar El Ghazi, now at Cardiff, over social media posts related to the conflict.

Argentina not overly reliant on Messi, says Scaloni

Buenos Aires: Argentina have learned to cope with Lionel Messi's absences and no longer need to rejig the line-up when the Inter Miami forward is not available, manager Lionel Scaloni said ahead of today's World Cup qualifier against Colombia.

Since making his senior debut in 2005, Messi has scored 112 goals in 192 appearances for Argentina, winning the World Cup in 2022, two Copa America titles and a gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The 37-year-old captain missed Argentina's 1-0 win over Uruguay and 4-1 thrashing of rivals Brazil in March due to injury, with Scaloni's side securing their place at the 2026 World Cup during that international break.

He returned to the squad for this month's World Cup qualifiers and made a substitute appearance in Argentina's 1-0 win over Chile last week. "The team is now in a moment where it can play in the same way with Leo (Messi) or without Leo, which used to be more complex in the past as we had to change some players," Scaloni told reporters ahead of the match in Buenos Aires. "But now we don't have this necessity and the team works in the same way, that's good."

While Argentina have already qualified for the World Cup in North America, Colombia are in the sixth and final automatic qualification spot and will be looking to put some distance between themselves and seventh-placed Venezuela with a win. Colombia beat Argentina 2-1 when the sides last met in the World Cup quali-



fiers in September. "It's a great team, and with great players, and it has a clear style that can put you in trouble," Scaloni said. "We've analysed it, we've shown the players their strengths and what we want to take advantage of. It's going to be a nice game, especially because we play at home, so it's good for our people to see the players."

ROUND-UP

Manchester City sign Cherki from Lyon in time for Club World Cup

Manchester City completed the signing of French international Rayan Cherki from Lyon, in time to beat the deadline to register new players for the start of the Club World Cup.

Cherki, 21, joins a new-look City, seeking to bounce back after a dismal trophyless season for Pep Guardiola's men, for a fee of 36.5mn plus an extra six million euros in add-ons.

Cherki joins Rayan Ait-Nouri, who joined City from Wolves on Monday, as new signings for the Club World Cup, while a deal for AC Milan midfielder Tijani Reijnders is expected to be completed before Tuesday's deadline. City will face Moroccan side Wydad AC and Emirati club Al Ain before a clash of European heavyweights with Juventus in the group

stage, which kicks off on June 14. They also spent more than £172mn in January on Omar Marmoush, Abdulkadir Khushniv, Vitor Reis and Nico Gonzalez.

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GREENLAND CHIEF DECREES LACK OF DEMOCRACY AFTER CONCACAF SNUB

Greenland's application to join CONCACAF has been rejected, with the country's football federation (KAK) president declaring it "is not a victory for the democracy of football". They had applied to CONCACAF - which numbers Northern/Central America and Caribbean members - a year ago prior to US President Donald Trump threatening to take over the autonomous Danish territory. KAK, founded in 1971, opted to try their hand with CONCACAF as they did not fulfil the criteria on independence and governance to meet UEFA requirements. Greenland, according to its federation, is the only territory in the world which does not belong to a regional confederation, ruling it out of playing official international matches.