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CRICKET

Markram takes  
South Africa to brink  
of WTC final glory  
against Australia

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FOOTBALL

Qatar, Saudi Arabia to host fourth round of Asia’s World Cup qualifiers

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been awarded the hosting rights for the fourth round of Asia’s 2026 World Cup preliminaries in October, the Asian Football Confederation said yesterday.

The pair have reached the next phase of the continent’s qualifiers and will be joined by Iraq, Oman, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates in the draw, which takes place on July 17. The decision to award the

rights to Qatar and Saudi Arabia comes after Iraq confirmed earlier this week that they had bid to host one of the groups.

Teams will be divided into two groups of three nations and the winners of each will join Japan, Australia, Iran, Uzbekistan, South Korea and Jordan in qualifying for the newly-expanded 48-nation finals from the continental preliminaries.

Games will be played across three match days from October 8 to 14.

The runners-up in each group will advance to a playoff in November, with the winners of that clash featuring in an intercontinental playoff tournament in

March to determine the two remaining World Cup spots.

The six competing nations qualified for the fourth phase by finishing either third or fourth in their respective groups in the third round of qualifying, which was completed on Tuesday.

Qatari, who hosted the 2002 World Cup, have never qualified to global showpiece on merit. They advanced to the Asian play-off matches after finishing fourth in Group A of the third stage of the qualifiers with 13 points from ten matches, while the Iran topped the group with 23 points, followed by Uzbekistan and UAE.



Play off matches will be played across three match days from October 8 to 14.

SPOTLIGHT

Club World Cup marks ‘new era’ for football: FIFA chief Infantino

The 32-team competition gets under way with Inter Miami facing Egypt’s Al Ahly

AFP  
Miami

FIFA president Gianni Infantino says the Club World Cup, which kicks off today, marks a historic “new era” for the game, comparing it to the first World Cup held in 1930.

In an interview, Infantino also took aim at critics of FIFA’s ticketing policy and said that sceptics who had questioned the need for the tournament would quickly change their minds. The 32-team competition, with clubs from all continents, gets under way with Inter Miami facing Egyptian club Al Ahly at Hard Rock Stadium.

“It starts a new era of football, a new era of club football. A little bit like when, in 1930, the first World Cup, right, started,” he said. “Everyone today speaks about the very first World Cup. That’s why it’s also, this World Cup here is historic.”

The first World Cup was held in Uruguay in 1930 and Infantino noted that only European and South American teams took part, adding that the Club World Cup would give a chance to clubs from outside of football’s traditional heartlands to play on the global stage. “We want to be inclusive. We want to give opportunities to clubs from all over the world,” he said.

“It’s really to globalise football, to make it truly, truly global. Because when you scratch the surface, we say it’s the number one sport in the world, and it is but then the elite is very concentrated in very few clubs, in very few countries,” he said.

The Swiss official, who was general secretary of European body UEFA before taking the helm at FIFA in 2016, said that the club tournament also offered chances to players from over 80 countries. “Countries who would never have a chance to play in a World Cup are suddenly part of a World Cup and they feel to be part of it, the fans of these players and of these clubs,” added Infantino, who noted several great players of the past who never played in a World Cup.

“A very good friend of mine is George Weah...former legend, great player, Ballon d’Or winner, only African player who ever won the Ballon d’Or, by the way. He never played in a World Cup. He would have been playing in a Club World Cup and made not only his club and also his country proud,” he added.

Infantino dismissed concerns that the tournament added to fixture congestion but acknowledged that some fans were yet to be sure of the value of the tournament, saying though that would quickly change. “I believe, I’m convinced that, you know, as soon as the ball starts rolling, the whole world will realise what is happening here. It’s something special,” he said.

Reports of low uptake of tickets for some games has led to criticism of FIFA’s ticketing policy with ‘dynamic pricing’, increasingly common in the United States, allowing for prices to rise and fall according to



Inter Miami co-owner David Beckham (left) looks on as Lionel Messi takes part in a training session ahead of their FIFA Club World Cup match against Al Ahly in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, yesterday. (AFP)



FIFA president Gianni Infantino says the Club World Cup offers chances to players from over 80 countries.

demand. But Infantino defended the approach and the decision to offer heavy discounts to students in Miami.

“I’m a positive person generally, but they criticise FIFA if the prices are too high, then they criticise FIFA if the prices are too low. “Then they criticise FIFA if we make tick-

eting promotions with students. Students! I mean, when I was a student and I didn’t have money, I would have loved FIFA to come to me and say, you want to come and watch a World Cup match? We don’t want to see empty stadiums. I believe the stadiums will be pretty full,” he said.

The FIFA president said that the tournament, which secured a global broadcasting deal with DAZN reported to be worth \$1 billion, was already an economic success and stressed that all the money generated from commercial deals would be ploughed back into the game.

Asked how he would judge whether the tournament had been a success, Infantino said he would feel it in his ‘heart’ but said he was confident. “In terms of inclusivity, in terms of economy, in terms of fan interest, you take all of these criteria, we’ll speak again at the end of the club World Cup, but already now, I (feel positive), when I look at the number of tickets sold, and I look at the TV rights,” he said, noting that the games were available on DAZN’s streams for free.

“Tell me one top competition today, where you can watch football for free?” he asked. The Club World Cup has also been caught up in the US’s fierce debates over immigration control with games being held near Los Angeles, scenes of violent clashes between protestors and immigration officers.

“Security for me and for us is a top priority, always. So when something is happening, like in Los Angeles we are obviously monitoring the situation, we are in constant contact with the authorities, we want fans to go in games in a safe environment,” he said.

With Kane’s curse broken, Bayern eye Club World Cup treasures

Berlin: Fresh from lifting a first team title of his career, Harry Kane and Bayern Munich head to the Club World Cup in the United States eyeing more than just another shot at silverware.

Long on the receiving end of jibes about not winning a team trophy in his 15-year career despite a glittering array of individual honours, the 31-year-old striker finally broke through when Bayern won the Bundesliga this season. Besides adding another title to Bayern’s bulging trophy cabinet, a Club World Cup win would be incredibly lucrative for the German giants.

In a bid to boost club buy-in for the expanded tournament, FIFA has put together a whopping \$1bn prize money pool, with the winner expected to pocket \$125mn. As with most of the big European sides competing in the tournament, Bayern have been handed a relatively simple task in the group stages.

Bayern face Auckland City in Cincinnati today, before rounding out the group stage with matches against Boca Juniors in Miami and Benfica in Charlotte. Member-run Bayern may dwarf all but a handful of European rivals financially, but the Club World Cup money could make an important difference at an uncertain time.

Despite winning back the Bundesliga title this season after Bayer Leverkusen broke an 11-year Bavarian streak last term, Bayern are facing a rebuild this summer. Normally the one and only destination for top German talent, in-demand midfielder Florian Wirtz spurned their advances and looks set for a move to Premier League side Liverpool.

With veteran Thomas Mueller leaving after the Club World Cup and wingers Leroy Sane and Kingsley Coman also reportedly headed for the exit, Bayern will need to bring in more attacking talent this transfer window. In defence, Eric Dier has left while Kim Min-jae, Dayot Upamecano and Hiroki Ito have all nursed long-term injury complaints of late.

The free-agent signings of Germany duo Jonathan Tah, a centre-back, and midfielder Tom Bischof have however helped tackle two problem areas for the German giants – and at a fraction of the cost. Both players were released early by former clubs Leverkusen and Hoffenheim respectively, with Bayern paying nominal fees to allow them to make the trip to the US.

After recently scoring two goals in two games for England, Kane heads to the US optimistic of a further taste of silverware. “We’re certainly one of the favourites. I think this season has shown what kind of a team we are,” Kane said. “On a good day, we can beat any opponent in the world.”

Kane said the players were “taking the tournament seriously and preparing well”, despite the long season behind them. “It’s a new format with the best teams in the world competing. I’m happy to be part of it.”



CRICKET

# Markram and Bavuma put South Africa in sight of glory

PROTEAS ON THE BRINK OF A DRAMATIC VICTORY IN WTC FINAL AGAINST AUSTRALIA AT LORD'S



South Africa's Aiden Markram hits a boundary to reach his century on day three of the ICC World Test Championship final against Australia at Lord's cricket ground, in London, yesterday. Right: South Africa's Temba Bavuma in action at Lord's yesterday. (AFP/Reuters)

AFP  
London

Aiden Markram's superb century yesterday left South Africa on the brink of a dramatic victory in the World Test Championship final against Australia after decades of heartbreak in major tournaments. South Africa reached the close on the third day at Lord's on 213-2 in their second innings, needing just 69 runs to win, with eight wickets still standing. Opener Markram, dismissed for a duck in the first innings, was 102 not out and South Africa captain Temba Bavuma unbeaten on 65 de-

spite spending most of his innings limping with a hamstring injury. The pair have shared an unbroken stand of 143 as South Africa pursue what will be, if they achieve it, the second-highest successful run chase in a Test at Lord's. The highest chase was the 344 made by the West Indies in 1984. But South Africa, whose last International Cricket Council title came at the 1998 ICC Knockout, have such a long history of folding under pressure that their supporters will not be taking anything for granted against serial winners and WTC title-holders Australia. Australia's Mitchell Starc had starred earlier yesterday with both bat and ball to put his team in

charge. The tailender made 58 not out in Australia's second-innings total of 207 and then, in his main role of left-arm fast bowler, dismissed Ryan Rickelton (six) and Wiaan Mulder (27) to leave the Proteas 70-2. Starc almost had a third wicket when Bavuma got a thick edge only for Smith, in a helmet at an advanced slip position, to drop a fast-travelling catch and leave the field with a finger injury. But with any early moisture in the surface long gone, conditions for batting at a sun-drenched Lord's were now as good as at any time in the match. Markram, aggressive from the outset, punched and pulled Aus-

tralia captain Pat Cummins for well-struck fours. With Australia appearing to miss absent former captain Smith's tactical input, Bavuma produced the occasional gem of a shot, including a glorious drive down the ground off Cummins. Australia spinner Nathan Lyon almost dismissed both batsmen, with Markram aiming a booming drive at a sharply turning off-break, only to miss the ball completely before it also beat wicketkeeper Alex Carey. Bavuma had made 43 when a slog-sweep off Lyon just evaded a diving Sam Konstas at deep mid-wicket as the substitute fielder attempted to pull off a low catch only

for the ball to run away for four. Soon afterwards, the diminutive Bavuma, who has a history of hamstring trouble, completed a gritty 83-ball fifty. Markram went to 97 with a brilliant straight-driven boundary off Josh Hazlewood and, shortly before stumps, clipped the fast bowler through midwicket to complete his hundred with an 11th four in 156 balls faced. It was only the 30-year-old's eighth hundred in 84 Test innings. Earlier yesterday South Africa enjoyed an early breakthrough when Kagiso Rabada had Nathan Lyon plumb lbw to leave Australia 148-9 in their second innings. But tailender Starc, dropped in

the gully on 14 by Marco Jansen late on the Thursday, kept the Proteas at bay, ably assisted by Hazlewood, reaching the 11th fifty of his 97-Test career. Part-time spinner Markram eventually succeeded where the frontline bowlers had failed when Hazlewood holed out to end a 59-run partnership for the last wicket. Paceman Rabada took 4-59 to finish with nine wickets in the match.

**BRIEF SCORES (Day 3 at Lord's)**  
**South Africa 138 and 213 for 2** (Markram 102\*, Bavuma 65\*, Starc 2-53) **need 69 runs to beat Australia 212 and 207** (Starc 58, Carey 43, Rabada 4-59, Ngidi 3-38)

CYCLING

## Pogacar back in Dauphine yellow after sixth stage victory

AFP  
Combloux, France

Tadej Pogacar soloed to victory in the sixth stage of the Criterium du Dauphine yesterday to reclaim the yellow jersey and put himself firmly in contention for overall victory. With this 97th victory of his career, the Slovenian, who cruised in 1min 15sec ahead of Denmark's Jonas Vingegaard, becomes the active rider with the joint-most victories – on a par with French sprinter Arnaud Demare. Belgian Remco Evenepoel, who was leading the overall classification, finished fifth at 1min 50sec. Pogacar now has a 43sec lead over Vingegaard, 54sec over German Florian Lipowitz and 1min 22sec over Evenepoel. The Slovenian had already worn the yellow jersey before in this 77th edition of the Dauphine after claiming victory in the first stage last weekend. “I’m super happy to be back in yellow. It was a very good day for us,” said Pogacar. “I’m getting very good answers from this Dauphine. I wasn’t too stressed after the time-trial (on Wednesday) and the shape is here.” Yesterday, in the first of three mountain stages and competing under a baking sun, he took his revenge on Vingegaard on the Cote de Domancy, where the Dane had outclassed him in a time-trial at the 2023 Tour de France.



The world champion put in an acceleration with 7km to go that left everyone in his wake. Only Vingegaard managed to hang on to his wheel for a few metres before settling back, unable to keep up with his rival. It was an important marker for Pogacar to put down to his leading Tour de France rivals ahead of his title defence following the 26-year-old's sub-par showing in Wednesday's time-trial at the Dauphine. Today's queen stage is a mountainous 132km run from Grand-Aigueblanche to Valmeinier 1800.

SPOTLIGHT

## San Francisco's Allen hits record 19 sixes against Washington in MLC

Reuters  
New York

San Francisco Unicorns opener Finn Allen smashed a record 19 sixes in his incendiary 151 off 51 balls against defending champions Washington Freedom in the opening match of this year's Major League Cricket (MLC) on Thursday. Allen's knock was the Twenty20 league's highest individual score since its 2023 debut season, while his six-hitting display passed the previous mark of 18 in a T20 match held by West Indian Chris Gayle and Estonian Sahil Chauhan. The Unicorns amassed 269-5, an MLC team record, with Allen taking 34 balls to bring up his 100 against a bowling attack that included New Zealand compatriots Bean Sears, Rachin Ravindra and Glenn Phillips. Phillips took a catch at long on to dismiss the 26-year-old opener off Mitchell Owen's bowling in



the 18th over of the innings. Freedom, led by Australian Glenn Maxwell, were all out for 146 in 13.1 overs in reply, suffering a comprehensive 123-runs defeat.

FOCUS

## From samurai threat to Asian Games as Japan cricket fights obscurity

AFP  
Sano, Japan

Legend has it that death threats from disgruntled samurai warriors were behind Japan's first cricket match in 1863 and the sport has battled for recognition in the baseball-mad country ever since. But Japan's cricket association, which operates out of a disused school near a wooded mountain, says the sport is slowly gaining popularity and hopes next year's home Asian Games and the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics can take it to a new level. “My whole 11 years here have been about trying to provide people with opportunities to play,” said Englishman Alan Curr, Japan

Cricket Association's chief operations officer. “That's a lot easier if they know the sport exists. Ultimately, you can't be what you can't see.” Curr says cricket is growing annually in Japan with more than 5,000 adults and children playing the game regularly and about three times as many having tried it in some form. That is still a drop in the ocean compared to Japanese baseball, which is played by millions and produces global superstars such as the Los Angeles Dodgers' Shohei Ohtani. The two sports arrived in Japan at roughly the same time, although cricket's origins were slightly less auspicious. A samurai threat to kill all foreigners who refused to leave Japan

prompted a group of European residents to seek protection from the British navy in Yokohama. They had a game of cricket to pass the time, playing with loaded guns tucked into their belts to guard against possible attack. A Scottish tea merchant founded the first cricket club in Japan five years later but it failed to catch on beyond expatriate circles. Fast forward to the late 1980s and several universities began playing – “students were looking for something unique”, according to global governing body the ICC. The sport has maintained a niche presence, although rising numbers of South Asian residents in Japan have boosted the playing population. Japan's national teams reflect the sport's Commonwealth roots,

featuring several players with parents from cricket-playing countries. The JCA, founded in 1984, has worked hard to introduce cricket to people with no previous experience, concentrating their efforts on selected hubs around the country. Japan women's Twenty20 captain Mai Yanagida told AFP she “knew the name but didn't really know what kind of sport it was” until she took up cricket at Waseda University in Tokyo. “I played softball and baseball before that, but in cricket you can hit the ball 360 degrees,” she said at the Women's Sano City International Trophy this month. “I think it's more a sport where you need to play together as a team.” The Sano City tournament was

played at Japan's cricket headquarters about 100km (60 miles) outside of Tokyo, on the playing field of a high school that closed its doors more than a decade ago. After losing their opening game, Japan went on to lift the trophy, beating Hong Kong in the final of a tournament that also featured fellow cricketing minnows China, the Philippines and Mongolia. The win came weeks after Japan's men qualified for next year's Under-19 World Cup in Zimbabwe and Namibia. Cricket will feature at next year's Asian Games in Japan before it returns to the Olympic programme for the first time since 1900 at the Los Angeles Games. Japan's women won bronze at the 2010 Asian Games and the men made their debut at the 2023 edi-

tion, finishing with one win and one defeat. The men's team featured former professional baseball player Shogo Kimura, who took up cricket in 2017 after a 14-year career with some of Japan's biggest teams. Yanagida believes the Asian Games in Nagoya-Aichi and the Olympics can “have a really big impact” on cricket's profile in Japan. “It will be in the news as an Olympic sport so the media can help the name cricket become more widely known,” she said. Qualifying for LA will be a tall order for Japan, whose men's T20 team are ranked 42nd in the world, with the women 43rd. All the players are amateurs and Curr says organising games against teams from outside Asia can be difficult.



TENNIS / STUTTGART OPEN

# Zverev set to face Shelton in semis, Fritz also through

‘I’m really happy on the court right now. I’m really happy in Stuttgart’

Reuters  
Stuttgart

Top seed and home favourite Alexander Zverev beat Brandon Nakashima 7-5 6-4 to advance to the semi-finals of the Stuttgart Open yesterday while Americans Taylor Fritz and Ben Shelton also reached the last four.

Zverev is seeking his first grass-court title and he was involved in a tight opening set which was tied at 5-5 when the German switched gears in the final two games to clinch it.

But Zverev was far more dominant against his American opponent in the second set as he finished the match with 31 winners in a contest that lasted 90 minutes.

“I’m in the semi-finals now and now I really want to focus on trying to do the best I can,” Zverev said.

“I know the opponents are going to get tougher but I’m really happy on the court right now I’m really happy in Stuttgart and I’m looking forward to the next two days.”

Zverev will play third seed Shelton next after the American, who was virtually unstoppable on his first serve, beat Jiri Lehecka 6-4 6-4, firing 18 aces.

Shelton was so dominant in the second set that he did not lose a single point on serve while



Alexander Zverev of Germany in action against Brandon Nakashima during their Stuttgart Open match yesterday. (bossopen.com)

he won 100% of his first-serve points in the match, with victory ensuring he will break into the top 10 for the first time in his career.

#### FRITZ ON TOP

Marton Fucsovics had beaten Fritz in straight sets in Stuttgart two years ago but this time the American, who has yet to drop a set at the tournament, came out on top in a dominant 6-3 6-4 vic-

tory. Although Fritz was involved in some long baseline rallies, he relied on his serve, sending 12 aces past the Hungarian to set up a semi-final clash with Felix Auger-Aliassime, who beat the 17-year-old German Justin Engel 7-6(3) 6-3.

Engel had claimed his first professional victory on grass earlier this week when he beat James Duckworth, following it up with

an upset win over seventh seed Alex Michelsen, but beating Auger-Aliassime proved to be a step too far for the teenager.

“His serve was so incredibly good today that I felt pressure in my own service games,” Engel said.

“But it was great fun playing in front of this crowd again.

“I can’t wait to play here again next year.”

FOCUS

## Opelka beats Medvedev to reach semi-finals

Reuters  
’S-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands

American lucky loser Reilly Opelka put up an intense battle to stun top seed Daniil Medvedev 7-6(5) 7-6(5) and reach the Libema Open semi-finals in Den Bosch yesterday.

Medvedev, who on Thursday edged a first set tiebreak against Frenchman Adrian Mannarino, hit three double faults in the second set tiebreak and five overall, compared to no such error by Opelka, who also hit 24 aces.

The 2021 US Open champion, currently ranked 11th in the world, needed to match or better Ben Shelton’s result in Stuttgart this week to return to Top 10 on Monday.

The American, ranked 12th, will beat him to it after he overcame Czech Jiri Lehecka 6-4 6-4 to advance to the Stuttgart semi-finals. Former Wimbledon junior

champion Opelka will contest a an ATP grasscourt semi-final for the second time in his career having reached the same stage at Newport last year.

He will face Estonian qualifier Mark Lajal or Belgium’s Zizou Bergs today for a spot in the final.

French second seed Ugo Humbert will play Canadian Gabriel Diallo in the other semi.

Diallo knocked out third seed Karen Khachanov 7-6(6) 6-4 while the Frenchman eliminated Portuguese Nuno Borges, seeded seventh, 6-1 6-4.

In the women’s draw, second seed Ekaterina Alexandrova came from a set down to beat Veronika Kudermetova 5-7 6-4 6-2.

In the semi-finals, she will face Belgian third seed Elise Mertens, who ousted China’s Yue Yuan 6-0 6-4.

Romanian qualifier Elena-Gabriela Ruse upset Canadian wildcard Bianca Andreescu 6-2 6-4 and will face Elisabetta Cocciaretto.

SPOTLIGHT

## Rybakina, Raducanu dumped out of Queen’s

AFF  
London

Former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina was dumped out of the Queen’s Club Championships yesterday by qualifier Tatjana Maria, who set up a semi-final against Australian Open champion Madison Keys.

German mother of two Maria regrouped after failing to serve for the match to complete a 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) win.

Also yesterday, hugely popular Britain’s Emma Raducanu was hammered by China’s Zheng Qin-

wen who won their match 6-2, 6-4.

A single break in the first set put the 37-year-old Maria in charge and she maintained her grip, breaking twice to lead 5-3 in the second. But Kazakh fourth seed Rybakina, Wimbledon champion in 2022, upped her game to level at 5-5 and the set went to a tie-break.

The players were locked at 4-4 before Maria, ranked 86th in the world, won the last three points, sealing victory with an ace in one hour and 45 minutes.

Earlier, US second seed Keys came from a set down to beat Russian fifth seed Diana Shnaider 2-6, 6-3, 6-4.

SWIMMING

## O’Callaghan, Stubblety-Cook send worlds message at Australian trials



Mollie O’Callaghan reacts after winning the women’s 100m freestyle final during the Australian Swimming Trials at the SA Aquatic and Leisure Centre in Adelaide yesterday. (AFP)

AFF  
Adelaide, Australia

Mollie O’Callaghan swam a sub-53 seconds 100m freestyle to coast home first at the Australian world championship trials yesterday, while Zac Stubblety-Cook booked a rematch with French superstar Leon Marchand in the 200m breaststroke.

Olympic 200m champion O’Callaghan hit the wall at Adelaide in 52.87 ahead of Olivia Wunsch (53.38) with all eight finalists under the qualifying time for the event in Singapore next month.

Four of them were teenagers as the next generation steps up after the retirement of Emma McKeon and Cate Campbell, with coveted 4x100m relay spots at stake.

A dominant Australia were unbeaten in the relay at the worlds from 2019 until last year when their under-strength team was usurped in Doha by the Dutch.

They have won 4x100m relay gold at the last four Olympics,

spearheaded by O’Callaghan, McKeon, Meg Harris and Shayna Jack in Paris last year.

Harris opted out of the Adelaide final after swimming the fastest heat yesterday but is expected to be on the team, but Jack only came eighth in the final to miss out.

“This is probably only my fourth 100m of the season, so definitely a tough one,” said O’Callaghan on day five of the six-day meet.

“The depth just shows in this 100 how much pressure there is to perform and to get to the top.

“I’m pretty proud of these ladies, that they could show up, especially the younger ones, to step up and fill in the roles of the older girls who’ve retired.”

O’Callaghan won three gold, along with a silver and a bronze in Paris.

But she was beaten into fourth over 100m by Swedish great Sarah Sjöström, American Torri Huske and Hong Kong’s Siobhan Haughey despite being the favourite.

Tokyo Olympic champion Stubblety-Cook made sure he is on the plane to face off again with

Marchand, who edged him into silver at the last Games.

The last time he raced over 200m in Adelaide he stopped the clock in a world record 2:05.95 at the 2022 trials.

That mark has since been surpassed by China’s Qin Haiyang, with Stubblety-Cook, who is on the way back from injury, content with 2:09.09.

“Pretty happy with that, to get the job done,” said the Australian, and is now being coached by Mel Marshall, who long mentored British breaststroke great Adam Peaty. “Probably wanted to go a little bit faster, but just building into the summer.”

Ella Ramsay (2:23.92) led a one-two with fellow rising star Tara Kinder (2:24.61) in the women’s 200m breaststroke, mirroring their feat in the 200m medley.

In other races, Joshua Edwards-Smith (1:56.94) and Bradley Woodward (1:57.14) were under the qualifying time in the men’s 200m backstroke while Sam Short (14:52.43) won the 1,500m freestyle.

GOLF

## Spaun tames Oakmont for US Open lead while big names struggle

Reuters  
Oakmont, Pennsylvania

Unheralded JJ Spaun outshined the game’s top players and led the US Open by one shot after the first round on Thursday at steamy Oakmont Country Club where the big names like Scottie Scheffler, Bryson DeChambeau and Rory McIlroy all struggled.

Much of the talk this week has been how the notoriously challenging course would keep scores in check, and while the layout did bare its teeth Spaun managed the day’s only bogey-free round and eighth ever in a US Open at Oakmont.

Spaun, who lost to McIlroy in a playoff at The Players Championship in March, fired a four-under-par 66 that marked his lowest round in a major and left him one shot clear of South African Thriston Lawrence.

“I hit a lot of good shots and tried to capitalise on any birdie opportunities, which aren’t very many out here,” said Spaun. “But I scrambled really well, too, which is a huge component to playing well at a US Open, let alone shoot a bogey-free round.”

South Korean Kim Si-woo, whose birdie attempt at his final hole just missed the cup, was two shots off the pace and in a three-way share of third place with five-times major champion Brooks Koepka and Im Sung-jae.

Spaun, who started on the back nine, made his move early and reached the turn with four birdies on his card to become the first player ever to play his first nine holes in the opening round of the US Open at Oakmont at 31 strokes or fewer.

From there, Spaun, whose previous best position after a major championship round was a share of 16th (2022 Masters), drained a number of big putts while stringing together nine consecutive pars to reach the clubhouse in control.

#### ‘BRUTAL TEST’

Defending champion DeChambeau, one of 14 LIV Golf players in the field and looking to become the first repeat US Open winner since Koepka in 2018, spent too much time in Oakmont’s penal rough and opened with a 73.



JJ Spaun of the US walks to the first green during the second round of the 125th US Open at Oakmont Country Club in Oakmont, Pennsylvania. (AFP)

“It was a brutal test of golf. But one that I’m excited for tomorrow,” said DeChambeau.

Im, who went off with the late starters from the back nine, roared out of the turn with two consecutive birdies to grab the outright lead from Spaun but handed it back just as quickly after bogeying his next two holes.

Koepka, who counts two US Open titles among his majors, cancelled out an early eagle with two bogeys on the back nine but birdied his final two holes to move up the leaderboard.

For Koepka, who missed the cut at the year’s first major, being back on the leaderboard at one of the game’s biggest events was a welcome relief. “I would say from the first weekend in April until about last week, you didn’t want to be around me,” said Koepka. “It drove me nuts. It ate at me. I haven’t been happy. It’s been very irritating ... I wouldn’t have wanted to be around me.”

McIlroy, still looking to re-

gain the form that helped him complete the career Grand Slam at the Masters in April, started on the back nine and made two early birdies to reach the turn just two shots back of Spaun before a wayward second nine.

World number two McIlroy made four bogeys over a seven-hole stretch out of the turn followed by a double-bogey at the par-three eighth where he left his tee shot in the thick rough and failed to get out on his first attempt. He signed for a 74.

World number one Scheffler, the pre-tournament favourite who counts the PGA Championship among his three wins in his last four starts, opened with a 73 that would have been higher had he not made up for errant drives with a decent putting game.

Twice major winner Jon Rahm, who started on the back nine, eagled the par-five fourth en route to a 69 that left him part of a five-way group sitting three shots back of leader Spaun.



## ATHLETICS

# Warholm ensures hurdles rivalry remains centre stage

AFP

Oslo

**K**arsten Warholm has ensured his hurdling rivalry with Rai Benjamin and Alison Dos Santos will remain centre stage this season, which culminates with the world championships in Tokyo in September.

Warholm streaked to 32.67 seconds in the 300m hurdles at the Diamond League meet Thursday on his home track at Oslo's Bislett Stadium. It was the fastest time ever clocked over the rarely-run event that has recently been given official status by World Athletics, albeit still without a ratified world record.

The 29-year-old Norwegian's victory over American Benjamin – who succeeded him as Olympic champion in Paris last year – and Dos Santos of Brazil certainly caught the attention of a partisan 15,000 sell-out crowd. The starting eight racers were introduced over the stadium tannoy to a hushed silence from knowledgeable spectators appreciating the build-up to the last event of a heady evening's fill of track and field.

That stillness was interrupted by the sudden clacking of folding plastic seats clicking upwards as the fans rose to their feet in unison just seconds before starter's orders. "On your marks. Set," and then the gun, the crowd erupting into an ear-shattering crescendo of cheers for their local hero.

Warholm did not disappoint, although he had to work his way back into the race down the home straight as Benjamin



Norwegian hurdling great Karsten Warholm destroyed his own world best time in the rarely run 300 metres hurdles at the Oslo Diamond League meeting on Thursday, chasing down American Rai Benjamin in a stunning finish. (Reuters)

threatened to pull away but eventually faltered after clipping the seventh and final hurdle. "The race went well although I was rather worried with how much Rai was closing on me," said Warholm, the reigning world champion and world record holder in the 400m hurdles. "But I knew I could push on over the last hurdle to home. I usually fade at the end of the 400 so the 300 suits me to some degree."

Benjamin came in second in 33.22sec, with 2022 world champion Dos Santos rounding out the podium (33.38) in what was the first time the trio had all met in this discipline. They now move on to the 400m hurdles at today's Diamond League meeting in Stockholm.

Warholm said he had been practising over 200m in a bid to sharpen up. "I was very clean over the hurdles," he said. "The

crowd was amazing as ever and the atmosphere was something else and I am just so happy that I could perform at my best in front of the support. It means a lot to me. There were some top stars here which is great for Bislett and it was lovely to catch up with Usain (Bolt) and tomorrow we will have lunch and chat properly."

After Warholm had streaked through the finish line, ripping his top off in delight

with a roar, he was enveloped by the Jamaican sprint legend and swarms of children in chaotic scenes, Bolt making his first appearance in Oslo since he retired in 2017.

Warholm kick started the transformation of the world of hurdling when he set a new world record when winning gold at the Covid-delayed 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The three podium finishers in Oslo then proceeded to redefine the gruelling event.

Until Warholm broke the world record in 2021, nobody had run the 400m hurdles faster than American Kevin Young in three decades. Four years on, Young's once unbeatable 46.78 is only the 19th-fastest time in history. In the years since, Warholm, Benjamin and Dos Santos have pushed each other to ever greater heights, sharing out the global accolades between them. Benjamin said he was happy with his 300m hurdles debut. "I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but I'm fairly pleased with how I performed. This is my first race since the Olympics in Paris last August so I can't expect too much right now," the American said.

"I want the gold medal in Tokyo at the world championships in September, but it's very early days for me so I have to get back into training and keep on chopping that wood. This here in Oslo was such a great opportunity and I'm glad they set that race up for us, it was special having the three of us face off tonight, it's good for the sport and also for our development."

Dos Santos added: "We want to do something great and I am just happy to be among the best."

## FOOTBALL

# Liverpool bank on Wirtz after record deal

Slot's side are paying club-record deal worth up to £116mn for the midfielder

AFP

Liverpool

**T**he golden boy of German football is set to become the new prince of the Premier League as Florian Wirtz prepares to join Liverpool from Bayer Leverkusen for a club-record fee.

Fresh from winning a 20th English top-flight title, Arne Slot's Reds have broken the bank to land a rising star already labelled as one of the world's best by former Reds midfielder and Wirtz's former coach Xabi Alonso. British media reported that the Premier League champions had agreed a club-record deal worth up to £116mn (\$157mn) to secure the services of the attacking midfielder.

Liverpool can now agree personal terms with a player coveted by a number of top European clubs. Wirtz's abundant potential as a teenager sparked a row between his hometown club Cologne and Leverkusen five years ago when Leverkusen, who are backed by pharmaceutical giants Bayer, swooped to sign him at 17.

Cologne argued that a gentleman's agreement not to poach youth team players had been violated, but Leverkusen said Wirtz was a first-team signing and within months he had made his Bundesliga debut. His rise was interrupted by a cruciate knee ligament injury in March 2022 that forced him to miss the next 10 months.

By the time he returned, Alonso had been installed as Leverkusen boss and together they would spearhead the club's greatest days. Leverkusen ended Bayern Munich's grip on the Bundesliga in stunning fashion, romping to the title and the German



German star Florian Wirtz has already been labelled as one of the world's best by his former coach at Bayer Leverkusen Xabi Alonso. (Reuters)

Cup without losing a single match in the 2023/24 season.

Wirtz netted his first career hat-trick on the day the title was sealed against Werder Bremen, on his way to being crowned Bundesliga player of the year. "Flo is one of the top players in the world, he's world class," said Alonso, who compared his protege to

Lionel Messi in terms of his understanding of the game.

"Why is Messi so good? Because he knows how and when to play simple passes. Messi says: 'You're in a better position? Here, there you have the ball,'" said Alonso, a hero of Liverpool's 2005 Champions League triumph. "It's not always

about making the most brilliant move, but the best and smartest. Florian can do that. That's why he's so good."

Both star player and coach committed to staying with the Leverkusen project for another 12 months, but defeat in the Europa League final to Atalanta to round off the 2023/24 campaign was a sign of things to come.

Bayern restored their grip on the German game last season but could not convince Wirtz to follow the lead of many others in joining from their Bundesliga rivals.

Instead, he made it clear his preference was a move to the Premier League champions and the chance to add his name to Liverpool's cast of legends. "A huge talent, huge future in front of him, so Liverpool is the place for him," said the club's former captain Steven Gerrard.

Despite 57 goals and 65 assists in 197 games for Leverkusen, Wirtz will begin life at Anfield in the shadow of Mohamed Salah. But the Reds are banking on Wirtz's creativity to help maintain the 32-year-old's prolific goalscoring numbers and ease the burden of carrying the Liverpool attack.

The club's previous record signing, £85 million recruit Darwin Nunez, has failed to deliver and could be sold to help recoup some of their major outlay on new faces. Liverpool will hope Wirtz can handle the pressure of his price tag and the physicality of the Premier League to ensure there is no second season slump under Slot.

Former Germany head coach Hansi Flick is in no doubt about what the midfielder has to offer. "He's simply an outstanding technician, loves to play, is very creative, has a good shot, runs hard and is quick," he said. "He's the full package."

**'I have left a big piece of my heart at Brentford', says new Spurs boss Frank**



**London:** Thomas Frank said he had "left a big piece of my heart" at Brentford after taking on the daunting task of reviving Tottenham's Premier League fortunes.

Spurs announced the Dane as their new head coach on a three-year deal on Thursday, as a replacement for the sacked Ange Postecoglou. Frank, 51, won 136 of his 317 matches across a seven-year spell at Brentford, taking them into the Premier League in 2021.

In an emotional message posted on Brentford's website Frank said: "The time has come for me to move on. But, even as I leave, I know I have left a big piece of my heart at Brentford, not just at the football club but with the community and, of course, the incredible and loyal supporters. I want to extend my profound gratitude to the club for giving me the chance to pursue my dreams and for everyone involved who made the journey such a memorable one."

He said it had been a privilege to be allowed to be part of such a "special community". "Whatever we have achieved, we have achieved together, and our success is built on unity, spirit, courage and ambition at every level of the club and amongst the fans," he said.

"Everybody has contributed, and every contribution has been invaluable. I am not just leaving a football club, I am saying goodbye to friends whose support through good and bad times I will carry with me always."

Frank, who becomes Tottenham's fourth permanent boss since 2021, is tasked with lifting the club back among the Premier League's elite. Spurs will play in the Champions League next season thanks to their Europa League success in Bilbao, where they beat Manchester United 1-0 in the final.

Their first European trophy for 41 years delivered on Postecoglou's boast that he always wins silverware in his second season. However, the Australian paid the price for a miserable Premier League season in which Tottenham finished 17th after losing 22 of their 38 games. Tottenham finished seven places and 18 points below Frank's Brentford.

## ROUND-UP

# Tudor signs new two-year deal with Juventus

**Igor Tudor** has signed a new contract with Juventus which will keep the Croatian coach in Turin for another two seasons, the Serie A club said. In a statement, Juve said that Tudor "will lead the men's first team until 30 June, 2027, with an option to extend by another year until 30 June, 2028".

Juve's new general manager Damien Comolli had already confirmed earlier this week that Tudor, 47, would stay on as coach after the club failed to snatch Antonio Conte from Serie A champions Napoli. Juve had pushed to bring back club icon Conte, who won three straight league titles as coach of the Turin giants between 2011 and 2014. But Conte decided to stay at Napoli and defend the Scudetto, leading Juve to decide to stick with Tudor who replaced sacked Thiago Motta in March and guided the club to next season's Champions League. Tudor will lead Juve at the upcoming Club World Cup in the USA where the Italians face Al Ain, Wydad AC and Manchester City in the group stage. Juve are one of a minority of Serie A clubs to stick with their coach, with a host of changes already made less than three weeks after the end of last season.



**REAL MADRID SIGN RIVER PLATE STARLET MASTANTUONO**

Real Madrid have agreed a deal to sign teenage playmaker Franco Mastantuono from River Plate, the Spanish giants announced. The 17-year-old attacking midfielder cost Madrid just over €3mn, according to a statement by River Plate.

Mastantuono will play in the Club World Cup in the United States this summer with the Argentine club before moving to the Spanish capital. "Mastantuono will be a player at our club for the next six seasons, from 14 August 2025 to 30 June 2031," said Los Blancos in a statement. "At 17, he is

also the youngest player to play an official match for the Argentina national team in its history."

He made his national team debut earlier this month against Chile in a World Cup 2026 qualifier. The midfielder came through the River academy and made his first team debut for the club in January 2024. He is Real Madrid's third signing this summer behind Trent Alexander-Arnold from Liverpool and Dean Huijsen from Bournemouth. Madrid also appointed Xabi Alonso as their new coach to replace Carlo Ancelotti, after failing to win a major trophy this season.

## MILNER EXTENDS BRIGHTON CONTRACT WITH PREMIER LEAGUE APPEARANCES RECORD IN SIGHT

James Milner has agreed a one-year contract extension with Brighton & Hove Albion, the south-coast club said, as the 39-year-old eyes the all-time record for appearances in the Premier League. Milner, who made his Premier League bow as a 16-year-old for Leeds United in 2002, was restricted to just four league appearances in the 2024-25 campaign due to an injury in August, taking his overall tally to 638 Pre-

mier League games. But Milner, who will celebrate his 40th birthday in January, now has the chance to overhaul Gareth Barry's record of 653 Premier League games. Brighton finished eighth in the standings last season, missing out on European qualification.

## FILIPPO INZAGHI LEAVES PISA AFTER HISTORIC SERIE A PROMOTION

Filippo Inzaghi has left Pisa weeks after guiding them to a historic promotion to Serie A, the club announced. In a statement, Pisa said they had "terminated with mutual consent" Inzaghi's contract, which had another two years to run.

The 51-year-old former Italy, AC Milan and Juventus striker is set to stay in the second tier with Palermo. Italian media report Palermo have paid Pisa nearly a million euros to take Inzaghi as the Sicilians, owned by the City Football Group which also owns Manchester City, attempt their own return to Serie A. Pisa finished second in Serie B under Inzaghi and gained promotion to the top-flight for the first time in 34 years. The Tuscan club, whose Arena Garibaldi stadium is in the shadow of the famous leaning tower of Pisa.