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CRICKET

South Africa end title drought with historic WTC triumph

In 18 previous attempts in the ODI's and T20 World Cups, Proteas had only reached solitary final

AFP
London

Aiden Markram's magnificent century was the cornerstone of South Africa's five-wicket victory over Australia in the World Test Championship final at Lord's yesterday as the Proteas ended decades of cricket heartbreak by at last winning a major global title.

South Africa, set 282 to win, finished on 282-5 before lunch on the fourth day, with opening batsman Markram falling for 136 after taking South Africa to within six runs of the title. "It's special in a lot of ways," said Proteas captain Temba Bavuma in front of what was effectively a 'home' crowd given the large number of South Africa fans who had packed into Lord's. "Also, it's a chance for South Africa to be united," said Bavuma, who has now joined Springboks Rugby World Cup-winning captain Siya Kolisi in becoming a black African skipper of a South Africa side that has won a major global title.

The Proteas resumed on 213-2, needing just 69 more runs for victory. Markram, dismissed for a duck in the first innings, was 102 not out and Bavuma unbeaten on 65 despite spending most of his innings limping with a hamstring injury.

But South Africa have such a long history of folding under pressure they could not take anything for granted against serial winners and defending WTC title-holders Australia.

In 18 previous attempts in the one-day international and T20 World Cups, South Africa had only reached a solitary final. That was in last year's T20 World Cup in Barbados, when they lost to India despite needing just 30 runs from their last 30 balls, with six wickets standing.

But South Africa, so often labelled "chokers" for their failure to close out knockout games, held their nerve as a largely unheralded side succeeded where star players such as Allan Donald, Shaun Pollock, AB de Villiers and Jacques Kallis had failed. South Africa's path to the final was criticised, with the Proteas playing just 12 Tests in the WTC cycle and none against England or Australia.

But with Australia strong favourites to retain their title, South Africa posted an eighth successive Test win in impressive style. "I hope our performance gives credit as to why we were in the final," said Bavuma. "Whilst we were batting, we could hear the Aussies using that dreaded word 'choke'. We've been etched in history,



South Africa's captain Temba Bavuma lifts the ICC Test Championship Mace as he celebrates with teammates after winning the final against Australia at Lord's, London. (Reuters)

we're part of something that has never been done."

The celebrations spread across the Lord's turf as each of the players took their turn with the silver and gold mace. "It is emotional, it's been a very long time coming," said Markram, who was named player of the match. "We've got close in the past couple of years and not got over the line. The first one is always going to be the toughest."

Australia led by 74 runs on first innings but never got completely away from South Africa, with Proteas fast bowler Kagiso Rabada returning superb match figures of 9-110. "Unfortunately, it was a bridge too far," said Australia captain Pat Cummins, who led Australia to the 2023 WTC title after New Zealand won the inaugural 2021 final. "They (South Africa) were fantastic in that fourth innings. There wasn't a lot in the wicket but they didn't give us a chance." South Africa suffered a setback early

yesterday when Bavuma, who had added just one run to his overnight score, was caught behind off Cummins to end a stand of 147 with Markram. But Markram got the target down to 50 by pulling Cummins for four before left-arm quick Mitchell Starc (3-66) bowled Tristan Stubbs.

Australia took the new ball with South Africa needing just 14 more runs to win and Markram subsequently drove Josh Hazlewood for four and three to settle any nerves. He couldn't quite finish the job, though. His pull off Hazlewood was brilliantly caught by Travis Head at midwicket to end a 207-ball innings featuring 14 fours. As Markram received a standing ovation on his way back to the pavilion, several Australia players shook his hand. It was left to Kyle Verreynne to hit the winning run as South Africa completed the second-highest chase to win a Test at Lord's, behind the West Indies' 344-1 against England in 1984.

SCOREBOARD

Australia 1st innings 212 (B Webster 72, S Smith 66; K Rabada 5-51, M Jansen 3-49)		Did not bat: M Jansen, K Maharaj, K Rabada, L Ngidi
South Africa 1st innings 138 (D. Bedingham 45; P Cummins 6-28)		Fall of wickets: 1-9 (Ricketlon), 2-70 (Mulder), 3-217 (Bavuma), 4-241 (Stubbs), 5-276 (Markram)
Australia 2nd Innings 207 (M Starc 58 no; K Rabada 4-59, L Ngidi 3-38)		Bowling: Starc 14.4-1-66-3; Hazlewood 19-2-58-1; Cummins 17-0-59-1 (1nb); Lyon 26-4-66-0; Webster 5-0-13-0 (1nb); Head 2-0-8-0
South Africa 2nd Innings (target 282, overnight 213-2)		Australia: Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Cameron Green, Steve Smith, Travis Head, Beau Webster, Alex Carey (wkt), Pat Cummins (capt), Mitchell Starc, Nathan Lyon, Josh Hazlewood
A. Markram c Head b Hazlewood 136		Result: South Africa won by five wickets
R. Rickelton c Carey b Starc 6		Player-of-the-match: Aiden Markram
W. Mulder c Labuschagne b Starc 27		Toss: South Africa
T. Bavuma c Carey b Cummins 66		
T. Stubbs b Starc 8		
D. Bedingham not out 21		
K. Verreynne not out 4		
Extras (b8, lb4, nb2) 14		
Total (5 wkts, 83.4 overs, 410 mins) 282		

FOOTBALL

After conquering Europe, PSG set sights on Club World Cup glory



Paris Saint-Germain captain Marquinhos takes part in a training session in Los Angeles yesterday, on the eve of the Club World Cup match against Atletico Madrid.

AFP
Los Angeles, United States

Freshly crowned kings of Europe, Paris Saint-Germain arrived in the United States for the Club World Cup and are treating FIFA's lucrative new competition not as a nuisance at the end of an exhausting season but as a serious objective.

"I think it is an incredible competition," PSG coach Luis Enrique said of the Club World Cup in the immediate aftermath of his team's UEFA Champions League triumph in Munich two weeks ago. "Our aim is to be competitive and try to win a fifth trophy of the season."

The Qatar-backed French giants could be forgiven for wanting some time to bask in the glory of their 5-0 victory over Inter Milan in Munich which allowed them to finally win the Champions League for the first time in their history. There had been numerous agonising failures in Europe's elite club competition, as well as billions of euros spent on transfer fees on stars like Neymar and Kylian Mbappe, prior to captain Marquinhos raising the trophy aloft. "We have made history for the club,

for the city and for the whole country," defender Lucas Hernandez said after the PSG squad paraded their trophy down the Champs-Elysees avenue in Paris, attended a reception with President Emmanuel Macron and celebrated with almost 50,000 fans at their Parc des Princes stadium. PSG have played 58 matches since last August and also swept all the available domestic trophies in France this season, as has become the norm in recent years.

But there is simply no time to stop and reflect. Many of their players, including Champions League final hero Desire Doue, spent last week on international duty before returning to their club and departing for Los Angeles, where they will begin their Club World Cup adventure this weekend.

"The tournament itself is a really attractive prospect," Luis Enrique said. "We have to strike the balance between managing the physical and mental fatigue we're experiencing now at the end of a long season and harnessing the motivation that comes with being involved in the competition."

PSG's opening game will be against another European heavyweight as they take on Antoine Griezmann's Atletico Madrid at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, just outside Los Angeles, today.

They will then also face South American champions Botafogo, of Brazil, before moving north to take on Seattle Sounders in their remaining Group B matches.

Expected to qualify for the knockout phase without too many issues, PSG could end up playing a total of seven matches if they make it all the way to the final in New York on July 13 – just a month before their scheduled first game of next season in the UEFA Supercup against Tottenham Hotspur.

The strain of such a long campaign is telling, with Ousmane Dembele – their top scorer this season with 33 goals – struggling with an injury picked up playing for France last week. They did not manage to add any new players to their squad during the brief transfer window that opened at the start of this month ahead of the tournament – reported interest in Bournemouth's Ukrainian defender Illia Zabarnyi did not turn into anything concrete.

But the rewards for success in the Club World Cup are enticing and should be enough to keep Luis Enrique's squad focused on their objective, with up to a stunning \$125mn in prize money on offer for the best performing European team if they manage to go all the way.

CRICKET

Bavuma eyes more Proteas success after WTC victory

‘WE HOPE THIS IS THE START OF SOMETHING. HOPEFULLY THIS IS THE START OF TROPHIES FOR THE TEAM’

AFP
London

South Africa captain Temba Bavuma wants his team's triumph in the World Test Championship final to be the first of many trophies for the country's cricketers.

In 18 previous attempts in the one-day international and T20 World Cups, South Africa had only reached a solitary final.

That was in last year's T20 World Cup in Barbados, when they lost to India despite needing just 30 runs from their last 30 balls, with six wickets left. There was no such heartache at Lord's, with Aiden Markram making 136 and Bavuma 66 as South Africa chased down a target of 282 for a five-wicket win over defending champions Australia before lunch on Saturday's fourth morning.

Bavuma, the first black African specialist batsman to play Test cricket for the Proteas, said his side had been inspired by South Africa's Springboks, who who have won four Rugby World Cups – including the two most recent tournaments.

“This is special for this group, special for myself, for the country,” Bavuma told reporters. “I have watched the rugby guys and the biggest thing I admire about them is the way with their success they have embraced what being South African actually means.

“As South Africans we are unique in a lot of ways. Our present and future is shaped by our past and the way they (the Springboks) have gone about things has really captured the hearts of everyone. It's something we've spoken about and to try do something special.”

But, the 35-year-old said he now wanted more. “We hope this is the start of something. Hopefully this is the start of trophies for the team.”

‘Want to play more Test cricket’
Bavuma said he hoped winning the mace for best Test nation would lift the profile of Test cricket in South Africa, where no Test matches are scheduled for the upcoming 2025/25 home season. “We want to play more Test cricket,” he said. “We want to play against the bigger nations. So I think this will go a long way in making us a lot more attractive, and also the so-called smaller nations.” Bavuma added that his relatively inexperienced team had shown



South Africa's captain Temba Bavuma holds the ICC World Test Championship Mace as he celebrates with teammates after victory on day four of the ICC World Test Championship final over Australia at Lord's cricket ground in London yesterday. (AFP)

plenty of character but still had room for improvement, saying: “Even over the past three-and-a-half days we haven't played perfect cricket but we keep finding a way to get the job done.”

The captain said his players wanted to achieve the consistent success of earlier South African Test teams, in particular the sides that held the Test mace for three years between 2013 and 2015, as a result of topping the rankings before the introduction of a Test final.

“We've said as a team we would like to judge ourselves after three or four years as a group,” said Bavuma. “We would like to emulate what (former captain) Graeme (Smith) and his team did.”

Referring to South Africa's first opponents in the next WTC cycle later this year, Bavuma said: “We need to go to Pakistan and India and get those victories there.”

Markram, meanwhile, said he had not slept well after finishing Friday's play on 102 not out.

“I even took a sleeping pill but it didn't work, he said. The opener added he had been motivated by memories of last year's T20 World Cup final collapse, which happened under his captaincy.

“I thought a lot about the T20 World Cup and how helpless I felt sitting on the side,” he recalled. “I didn't want to expose the next player in (to bat at Lord's) to a pressure situation.”

Markram's match-winning ton earns him place in South African sporting folklore

South Africa's batting hero Aiden Markram has taken longer than expected to deliver on his promise, but a match-winning century against Australia in the World Test Championship final is being hailed as the biggest in the country's cricketing history. The 30-year-old captained South Africa to success at the U-19 World Cup a decade ago but his senior career had only seen occasional glimpses of immense potential. However, his 136 for South Africa in the second innings at Lord's took the country to their first major cricketing triumph after decades of failure and ensured Markram a place in South African sporting folklore. Markram made his test debut at age 22, heartbreakingly run out on 97, and has since scored eight centuries and 13 fifties. But his average of 36.50 has been below expectation. He came into the WTC final without a century in his last 16 test knocks and failed to get on the board in the first innings.

But when Markram returned to the crease on Friday, it was with an air of authority, albeit playing with circumspection and making the use of the sudden change in conditions after two days of dominance by the bowlers.

“I haven't scored more important runs. It's weird how things worked out after a duck in the first innings. You need a bit of luck, spending time in the middle and finding runs. I'm glad things worked out,” he told reporters as South Africa celebrated yesterday.

His plan in the second innings was to absorb the pressure but maximise scoring off loose balls, he added. There was also an early crisis to navigate when captain Temba Bavuma struggled with a hamstring strain as the pair began to put together what turned out to be a match-winning partnership.

But Markram insisted Bavuma stay on despite it slowing down the accumulation of runs. “Aiden is unbelievable, people have questioned his place, but he has character. He played in true Aiden fashion,” said Bavuma, whose 66-run contribution was also a factor.

Markram looked to be in tears after reaching three figures late on Friday. “Lord's is the place every test cricketer wants to play,” he explained. “To play a final here is incredibly special. It's one of the most special days.”



South Africa's Aiden Markram raises his bat to acknowledge the crowd and walks back to the Lord's pavilion after losing his wicket yesterday. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Cummins says WTC final ‘a bridge too far’ for beaten Australia

AFP
London

Australia captain Pat Cummins said his side had been faced with a “bridge too far” after losing the World Test Championship final to South Africa at Lord's yesterday. Cummins' men, the reigning title-holders, were strongly fancied to defeat a South Africa side with few star names.

But they suffered a five-wicket defeat as South Africa, with opener Aiden Markram making a superb 136 and skipper Temba Bavuma 66, chased down a target of 282 before lunch on the fourth day.

Australia led by 74 runs on first innings but could never completely pull clear of the Proteas, with South Africa fast bowler Kagiso Rabada returning fine match figures of 9-110. “Things can change pretty quickly,” said Cummins at the post-match presentation ceremony. “Unfortunately, it was a bridge too far.”

Steve Smith's first-innings 66 was the only score of fifty or more in the match by a specialist Australia batsman. Smith, however, suffered a dislocated finger while dropping a slip catch and is now doubtful for the first Test against the West Indies in Barbados on June 25.

Australia, now at the start of a new WTC cycle, may have to review their batting options more broadly, with Marnus Labuschagne



Australia's captain Pat Cummins appeals unsuccessfully for a LBW decision against South Africa's Tristan Stubbs during the ICC WTC final at Lord's in London yesterday.

who averaged a lowly 25.63 in Tests during the 2024/25 season, out for 17 and 22 at Lord's after being promoted to open the innings. “We've got a couple of weeks before the first Test in the Windies, so we'll sit down and have a bit of a think,” said Cummins.

“To make these finals, it's normally off the back of being really strong at home, but you've got to win some away series too,” he later told reporters at a post-match press conference.

“So, in some ways, it's good we get to dust ourselves off and turn around in a couple of weeks and start looking ahead to the next one.

“That's one of the good things about the World Test Championship, every Test series and every Test match feels like you're playing for something significant.”

South Africa had the best batting conditions of the match in their second innings but they still had a job to do in recording the second-highest successful run chase to win a Test at Lord's, behind the West Indies' 344-1, requiring 342, against England in 1984.

“They (South Africa) were fantastic in that fourth innings,” said fast bowler Cummins. “There wasn't a lot in the wicket but they didn't give us a chance.”

This match was the culmination of the third edition of the WTC with New Zealand the inaugural 2021 champions and Australia triumphant in 2023, with India twice the losing finalists.

But the format of the competition has faced fierce criticism, with countries free to decide how many Tests they want to play in the two-year qualifying cycle.

But a gracious Cummins said of South Africa: “They showed why they're in this final and are deserved champions.” As for the format, he jokingly added: “I preferred it at the Oval last time (when Australia beat India in 2023).”

On a more serious note, Cummins said: “It's something you build towards for two years, it's a huge achievement to make the final, and then a one-game shoot-out, I think it's a fantastic spectacle.”

CYCLING

Pogacar again soars away from stellar field to increase lead

AFP
Valmeinier, France

For the second straight day, Tadej Pogacar rode away from his main rivals on the final ascent as he cemented his grip on the Criterium de Dauphine yellow jersey in yesterday's mountainous ‘Queen Stage’.

“I launched it and maintained a good pace to the top,” he said at the finish. The Slovenian had grabbed the overall lead the day before when he shot clear on the short closing climb.

On Saturday's penultimate stage, a 131.7km run from Grand-Aigueblanche, Pogacar's UAE teammate Pavel Sivakov reduced the leading pack by setting a ferocious tempo at the front at the start of the 20-kilometre final climb to Valmeinier ski resort. With 12km to go, Pogacar upped the tempo, standing on his pedals and rocketing clear.

As on Friday, only his main Tour de France rival Jonas Vingegaard and young German Florian Lipowitz could respond. Vingegaard settled into a dogged pursuit. Pogacar, without rising out of his saddle again, was able to maintain an uncatchable pace.

He increased his lead to as much as 30 seconds before relaxing up toward the end. He cruised across the line 14 seconds ahead of Vingegaard, quivering with effort as he came home. “Today Jonas was really strong I did not



UAE Team Emirates XRG's rider Tadej Pogacar wearing the overall leader's yellow jersey celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the 7th stage of the 77th edition of the Criterium du Dauphine cycling race, 131.6km between Grand-Aigueblanche and Valmeinier, yesterday. (AFP)

want to go too deep myself,” said Pogacar. “It was a super hot and long climb. Luckily, I had enough time to ease up in the last kilometres and recovered.”

“Happy I could defend the jersey like this.”

Lipowitz was again third at 1min 21sec Belgian Remco Evenepoel, who had led the overall classification, until Friday, finished fifth, as he had on Friday, losing 2 minutes and 39 seconds.

With one stage to go, Pogacar increased his lead to 1:01 over Vingegaard, 2:01 over German Florian Lipowitz and 4:11 to Evenepoel in fourth. For much of the stage, Vingegaard's lieuten-

ants on the powerful Visma team launched attack after attack, but they could not shake off Pogacar, or Sivakov, either going up or down the day's biggest climb the Col de la Croix de Fer.

“We wanted to take control on all the climbs, but Visma tried with all the attacks. I was pretty happy with how Pavel and the team rode today. It was sort of defence, to not get attacked by everyone from Visma,” said Pogacar. He complained at the way Visma had tried to drop him on the descent of the Col de Croix de Fer. “They went a little bit dangerous in the first kilometres of the downhill,” he said.

TENNIS

Maria stuns Keys to book Queen’s final with Anisimova

The 23-year-old Anisimova beats top seed Zheng to advance

AFP
London

German qualifier Tatjana Maria produced a stunning 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) win over Australian Open champion Madison Keys yesterday to earn a Queen’s Club final clash with Amanda Anisimova.

Mother of two Maria has enjoyed a memorable run in the first women’s tournament at Queen’s for 52 years.

The 37-year-old reached the Wimbledon semi-finals in 2022, but was forced to qualify for Queen’s after dropping to 86th in the WTA rankings.

Maria shocked former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) in the quarter-finals on Friday and delivered another masterclass with her slice-heavy style against Keys.

The German celebrated with her husband and eldest daughter Charlotte as her other child Cecilia slept on in her pram.

“I cannot believe it. It’s a dream come true. I could not wish for a better tournament to be in the final and I’m so proud,” she said.

“I love to be here with my family. It makes it so special that we live this dream together.”

Maria can complete her fairy-tale week against American world number 15 Anisimova, who clinched a surprise 6-2, 4-6, 6-4 win against Chinese top seed Zheng Qinwen in the second semi-final.

Maria has never been past the second round of any Grand Slam except Wimbledon, but once again she is proving a formidable force on grass.

“You always have to keep go-



Germany’s Tatjana Maria celebrates after winning her Queen’s Club Championships semi-final against Madison Keys of the US in London yesterday. (Reuters)

ing. You never can stop, it doesn’t matter how it goes,” she said.

“I’ve had my ups and downs but I always keep going. I love to play

tennis, I love the sport and we live for these special moments. That’s why it’s amazing.”

Keys’ exit was a blow to her

preparations for Wimbledon, which gets underway across London at the All England Club on June 30.

The 30-year-old American reached the quarter-finals of the recent French Open after securing her maiden Grand Slam crown in Melbourne in January.

Anisimova joined Maria in the final with a gritty display against world number five Zheng.

The 23-year-old has struggled to live up to her early success after reaching the French Open semi-finals aged 17 in 2019.

She took an eight-month break from tennis after suffering with depression bought on by the scrutiny and expectations that came with being a teen prodigy.

“I was just struggling with the lifestyle and just dealing with a lot of stress from it, and it was affecting me a lot on the court,” she told the *Guardian* in May.

“I felt like it was just unfair for me to keep pushing and pushing as if I’m not a human being.

“I think that I refreshed my mind and I took the time that I needed.”

Immediately after returning to action last year, Anisimova dropped outside the top 400.

“I’ve never gotten the win over her, every time we’ve played we’ve had some really tough battles and I think I was just really relieved at the end there,” Anisimova said.

“The conditions were very tricky so I’m sure we struggled a little bit from that, but we still managed to play some really good tennis. So I’m really happy.”

She won the Qatar Open this February and is one victory away from her second WTA title as she prepares to face Maria.

FOCUS

Zverev beats Shelton to set up Stuttgart final with Fritz

Reuters
Stuttgart

German top seed Alexander Zverev took out American third seed Ben Shelton with a 7-6(8) 7-6(1) victory in the semi-finals of the Stuttgart Open yesterday to set up a showdown with Taylor Fritz.

Zverev and Shelton tested each other in a high-quality encounter before the world number three played a near flawless tie-break to clinch the match in little over two hours and stretch his career win-loss record over the American to 3-0.

The 28-year-old banged down 15 aces, 35 winners and did not face a break point in front of his home crowd to reach his first grasscourt final in eight years.

“I’m super happy to be in the final, it’s my first grasscourt final since 2017,” Zverev said.

“It’s been eight years. I actually really like playing on the surface. I’m happy to be in the final in Germany again, I’m looking forward to it.”

Despite the defeat, Shelton

will take plenty of positives from the ATP 250 event, with the 22-year-old set to make his top 10 debut in the ATP rankings on Monday.

In the first semi-final, Fritz, ranked seventh in the world, sent down 10 aces and 23 winners, winning 86% of his first-serve points to knock out Canadian fourth seed Felix Auger Aliassime 6-4 7-6(5).

“The claycourt season wasn’t the best for me, so I came here more motivated to start the grass season off well,” said Fritz after reaching his first tour-level final since November.

“I’m super happy that I’ve been able to start it off with a final.

“I’m locked in and ready to go. Once I start winning a couple of matches on grass and start feeling good, all the other things start clicking for me.”

The second seed is eyeing a fourth grasscourt title, as he looks to continue to build momentum towards Wimbledon, where the 27-year-old is a twice quarter-finalist.

Fritz holds a 7-5 head-to-head win-loss record against Zverev heading into today’s final.

SPOTLIGHT

Battling Mertens saves 11 match points to reach Den Bosch final

Reuters
s-Hertogenbosc, Netherlands

Belgian third seed Elise Mertens dug deep to save 11 match points and overcame twice winner Ekaterina Alexandrova 2-6 7-6(7) 6-4 to reach the Libema Open final in Den Bosch yesterday, where she will face qualifier Elena-Gabriela Ruse.

Mertens found herself 5-3 down in the second set after losing the first but battled back to force a tiebreak before seeing off the Russian second seed who was aiming to win her third title having triumphed in 2022 and 2023.

“I didn’t even know it was 11, after one or two I lost count,” Mertens said.

“It was a difficult match, I think she started really well, and it was 6-2, 5-3 for her. I just stayed with my head in the game and gave everything I had.”

Alexandrova won their only previous meeting in Den Bosch, in 2019, and has reached at least the quarter-finals of the last five editions, but Mertens now has the chance to win a second title this year, after her Singapore triumph in February.

Standing in Mertens’ way will be Romanian Ruse who recovered from losing the first set to

defeat Italian Elisabetta Cocciaretto 2-6 6-4 6-3. Mertens has won all three previous meetings with Ruse.

Ugo Humbert, the only seed left in the men’s draw, crashed out to Gabriel Diallo, with the Canadian defeating the French second seed 6-3 7-6(4) to advance to the final where he will meet Belgium’s Zizou Bergs.

Diallo broke to love to lead 5-3 and held serve to take the opening set.

Humbert saved two break points with the second set delicately poised at 5-5, but Diallo came out on top in the tiebreak as he bids to win his first ATP Tour title.

Bergs is also on the hunt for his maiden ATP win, and had little trouble overcoming lucky loser Reilly Opelka 6-1 6-4, with the American perhaps still feeling the effects of his battling win over top seed Daniil Medvedev on Friday.

The Belgian stormed to the first set, winning five consecutive games, and while Opelka regained his composure in a more even second set, Bergs made the decisive break to lead 5-4 and served out for the match.

Bergs and Diallo met for the first time at this year’s Madrid Open, where Diallo eased to a straight-sets win in the first round.

Federer waves the flag as Porsche takes lead at Le Mans

Swiss tennis great Roger Federer waved the French flag to get the 93rd edition of the 24 Hours of Le Mans underway yesterday, with Porsche immediately seizing the lead from Cadillac. Cadillac had swept the front row in Thursday’s qualifying but any advantage was short-lived as Porsche Penske’s Julien Andlauer slipstreamed into the lead from third on the grid before the first chicane on the opening lap.

The race at the Sarthe circuit in north-west France features 62 cars shared by 186 drivers from 34 countries and is the fourth round of the World Endurance Championship, with 21 hypercars in the battle for overall victory. Organisers have put the total weekend attendance at more than 300,000 spectators.

Ferrari have won the last two editions and will be able to keep the trophy at their Maranello factory if they complete a hat-trick. After a French air force flypast, retired 20-time grand slam winner Federer waved the flag to release the field in a rolling start for a race through the night and into Sunday afternoon.

(Reuters)



Former tennis player Roger Federer and President of “Automobile Club de l’Ouest” (ACO) Pierre Fillon sit in the lead car prior to the start of the 24 Hours of Le Mans 2025, at the Le Mans circuit, in north-western France yesterday. (AFP)

SWIMMING

Australia’s Pallister joins Ledecy in cracking 1500m freestyle barrier

AFP
Adelaide

Lani Pallister became only the third woman to swim under 15mins 40secs in the 1500m freestyle yesterday, joining American great Katie Ledecy and Dane Lottie Friis.

Pallister hit the wall at the Australian world championship trials in Adelaide in 15:39.14, a new Commonwealth record.

“I was chasing number two all the time. I was looking at the rankings, and Lottie Friis is one that stood for a long time, obviously, only behind Katie,” said Pallister. “I fell apart with like 500 to go. I felt so sick. But I’m just really stoked with the week that I put together.”

Friis’ 15:38.88 was set in 2013. Ledecy owns all 23 fastest times ahead of that, including the world record of 15:20.48.

Pallister’s time capped a breakthrough meet for the 23-year-old, who shattered Ariarne Titmus’ 800m national record and went under four minutes for the first time in the 400m.

Ella Ramsay, 20, was another

standout swimmer, booking a fourth event at next month’s world championships in Singapore by winning the 400m medley in 4:36.12 ahead of Jenna Forrester (4:36.19).

She also won the 200m medley and 200m breaststroke and came second in the 100m breaststroke.

“Last day is always hard and even harder having the 400m medley,” said Ramsay, with the trials in their sixth and final day.

Pallister’s time capped a breakthrough meet for the 23-year-old, who shattered Ariarne Titmus’ 800m national record and went under four minutes for the first time in the 400m

“I had to keep it composed and I’m really happy with that time.”

Ramsay was at the Paris Olympics and part of Australia’s silver-medal winning 4x100m medley relay team.

She came fifth in the 400m medley but a bout of Covid derailed her 200m medley campaign.

She joins Mollie O’Callaghan (50-100m backstroke and 100-200m freestyle) as the only swim-

mers to qualify for four individual events.

O’Callaghan missed out on making a fifth when she finished fourth in the 50m freestyle, won by Olympic silver medallist Meg Harris in 24.17.

Olivia Wunsch and Alex Perkins tied for second in 24.70, with a decision yet to be made on which one will take the second available slot. Harris is a serious gold medal prospect with Swedish world record holder Sarah Sjostrom, who beat her to the Paris Olympic title, pregnant and not racing this year.

“That’s what I was training for,” Harris said. “I found a new way to motivate myself this year, and I found a new appreciation for the sport.”

Olympic 400m medley bronze medallist Brendon Smith punched his ticket with a 4:12.81 swim ahead of Will Petric (4:13.23), who also qualified.

A rejuvenated Kyle Chalmers will take on three events in Singapore after touching first in 22.89 in the 50m butterfly. Olympic 50m freestyle champion Cameron McEvoy was disqualified after coming second.

BASKETBALL

Thunder rally to beat Indiana Pacers, level NBA Finals at 2-2

AFP
Los Angeles, United States

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 15 of his 35 points in the fourth quarter as the Oklahoma City Thunder rallied for a gritty 111-104 victory over the Indiana Pacers that leveled the NBA Finals at two games apiece on Friday.

Frustrated for much of the game by Indiana’s relentless defense, NBA Most Valuable Player Gilgeous-Alexander found a way to fight through.

He followed a three-pointer with a pull-up jumper to give the Thunder their first lead since the first half with 2:23 remaining.

They wouldn’t trail again, Gilgeous-Alexander adding six free-throws in the final 44 seconds. Jalen Williams added 27 points, Chet Holmgren added 14 points and 15 rebounds and Alex Caruso chipped in 20 points off the bench for the Thunder.

Pascal Siakam scored 20 points to lead Indiana, adding eight, rebounds, five assists and five steals.

Tyrese Haliburton scored 18



Tyrese Haliburton of the Indiana Pacers is defended by Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (right) of the Oklahoma City Thunder during the NBA Finals at Gainbridge Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, Indiana. (AFP)

points and Obi Toppin added 17 off the bench and the Pacers led by 10 late in the third quarter.

But Oklahoma City – who have yet to drop back-to-back games in the playoffs – clamped down defensively in the fourth, determined not to fall in a 3-1 hole.

Gilgeous-Alexander said the Thunder must “maintain the same desperation” when they host game five on Monday.

Indiana struck first in another

fast-paced first quarter in front of their energised fans, making four of their first five shots and building a nine-point lead midway through the opening period.

Oklahoma hit back, putting together a 9-0 run to tie it, but the Pacers – with a strong defensive effort on Gilgeous-Alexander and four steals from Pascal Siakam – emerged from the first period with a 35-34 lead.

SPOTLIGHT

Sir David Beckham: Global icon achieves ultimate goal

AFP
London

David Beckham's knighthood is the culmination of years of tireless efforts to transcend football and turn himself into a global icon at the "intersection of sport, fashion and business."

He had long dreamed of becoming a sir and King Charles III made it a reality when he announced his birthday's honours list on Friday, marking the end of a decades-long journey travelled with his Spice Girl wife Victoria, creator of the eponymous fashion brand. The honour, one of the highest bestowed by the UK state, "is a powerful symbolic marker", Marie Agnes Parmentier, professor of marketing at the University of Montreal and author of several papers on "Posh and Becks", explained. It "reinforces his image as a respectable, committed, and, first and foremost, British man," she added.

The knighthood could present new opportunities for the 50-year-old former Manchester United and Real Madrid player, "particularly in diplomatic, charitable or political spheres", said Parmentier. The former free-kick ace, from a modest East London background, diversified his career after retiring from football in 2013, but success was the result of planning long before he hung up his boots.

"I knew my career was going to end at some point and I wanted to have a career



David Beckham had long dreamed of becoming a sir and King Charles III made it a reality when he announced his birthday's honours list on Friday. (AFP)

after football," he said in the documentary series Beckham, which aired on Netflix in 2023.

At the height of his football career, Beckham was signing deals with top clothing and beauty brands, building an audience that cut across gender, age and nationality – becoming the first England player to crack the US market. The successful brand

was built on his always immaculate appearance and nearly-always exemplary off-field behaviour, coupled with an unwavering drive to become a pioneer.

This required a certain amount of courage, given that English football in the 1990s was generally the preserve of no-nonsense lads more interested in the pub than the catwalk. His appearance in a sarong during

the 1998 World Cup, revelations that he used make-up, and his eccentric hairstyles were all feverishly gobbled up by the UK's tabloid press.

Beckham is still capitalising on the fascination, almost 30 years later. He unveiled his first collection for Hugo Boss in April, is the founder of the Inter Miami football club and the "Studio 99" production company, and has been a Unicef ambassador for 20 years.

He is now best known not for football, "but for being Beckham, the brand", said sociologist Ellis Cashmore. It is a brand worth £500mn (\$676 million), according to The Times newspaper's 2025 ranking.

The Netflix show exposed the couple to an emerging younger audience, cementing their fame for the foreseeable future. Beckham "embodies a celebrity at the intersection of sport, fashion, entertainment and business," explained Parmentier. The couple's enduring visibility "is based on a sophisticated media strategy and an ability to embody universal values such as work, family and style," she added.

But it has been a long and bumpy road, Cashmore pointed out. In 1998, Beckham was called the most hated man in England after he petulantly kicked out at Argentina's Diego Simeone during their World Cup round of 16 game. Beckham was harshly sent off and England lost to their bitter rivals in a penalty shoot-out. Those who had bitten their tongue about his off-field flamboyance gave full vent to their feelings.

National headlines the next day included "10 Heroic Lions, One Stupid Boy" (Daily Mirror) and "You're Just A Joke Becks" (Daily Mail). Months of "hell" followed, with death threats, spitting and boos accompanying Beckham wherever he went. "Wherever I went I got abused, every single day," he said. "I find it hard to talk through what I went through because it was so extreme. The whole country hated me."

But the ordeal only sharpened Beckham's focus. A year later, he finished second in the Ballon d'Or as he helped Manchester United claim an unprecedented treble, winning the Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup. It was often said that Beckham's career seemed to be scripted by a movie writer, never more so than when the fallen idol took his revenge by scoring the winning goal against perennial rivals Argentina in the 2002 World Cup, redeeming his national hero status.

The royal family were quick to embrace him, inviting Beckham to the weddings of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011 and Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018. Previous rumours of an impending knighthood came to nothing, but his star once again rose in 2022 after the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

While other celebrities came under fire for skipping the queue to view her coffin, Beckham lined up with members of the public for almost 12 hours to pay his respects.

Since then, it has seemed that "Sir David" was only a matter of time in coming.

FOOTBALL

Club World Cup a test of Chelsea's elite credentials

Blues have been handed a favourable opening raft of fixtures

AFP
London

After securing their return to the Champions League on the final day of the season, Chelsea have an early chance to show they belong back among the elite this summer at the Club World Cup. Enzo Maresca's side beat Nottingham Forest in their last Premier League match to clinch fourth place after an inconsistent campaign, ending a two-season absence from Europe's top competition.

The Blues, who reached FIFA's revamped and expanded event by landing a second Champions League triumph in 2021, have been handed a favourable opening raft of fixtures in the United States. Chelsea begin their Club World Cup campaign in Group D against Los Angeles FC, who battled through a play-off round against Club America to replace the disqualified Club Leon. After that opening fixture in Atlanta on Monday, Chelsea head north to face Brazilian team Flamengo and Tunisia's Esperance, both in Philadelphia.

Los Angeles boast former Chelsea striker Olivier Giroud, although the 38-year-old is not a regular starter. Flamengo, who qualified by lifting the Copa Libertadores in 2022, are coached by well-regarded former Chelsea and Atletico Madrid defender Filipe Luis.

Esperance have won eight of the last nine Tunisian league titles but are considered the weakest team in the group. In the knock-out rounds tantalising potential clashes against Bayern Munich and Champions League holders Paris Saint-Germain may lie ahead. Chelsea won the competition in its previous format in 2022, beating Brazil's Palmeiras in the final.

There will be special interest in how new Chelsea signing Liam Delap fares after his recent move from relegated Ipswich. The Blues beat Manchester United among other clubs in the race for the 22-year-old striker who netted 12 times in 37 top-flight matches and moved for £30mn (\$41mn). Chelsea lacked firepower up front this season with Nicolas Jackson inconsistent and Christopher Nkunku struggling badly for form.



Chelsea players disembark the plane as they arrive in Philadelphia for FIFA Club World Cup. (AFP)

gling badly for form.

Delap, the son of former Stoke midfielder Rory Delap, came through the Manchester City youth academy like Chelsea's star player, Cole Palmer. The England international's revival towards the end of the season is a positive sign, with Palmer dazzling in the Conference League final win over Real Betis.

The 23-year-old missed Chelsea's pre-season tour of the US last summer and Maresca said it was a chance for the playmaker to take the country by storm. "Palmer is up there with the very best top players who can produce something at any moment, create something out of nothing," said the coach. "He wasn't with me on the USA tour last summer, so it will also be a chance for him to experience the environment there and to introduce himself to North America."

Beating Betis in Poland earned Maresca his first trophy as Chelsea manager and a deep run in the United States would be another sign that the Blues are heading in the right direction. On

an upwards trajectory and with a young squad, Chelsea have plenty of potential to improve in the years to come. "(Critics) were saying that we were not able to win... because we're too young, because we're not experienced," said Maresca after sealing fourth place in the Premier League. "Unfortunately for them, they have all been wrong."

Summer success is also important to the club's co-owners, US businessman Todd Boehly and private equity firm Clearlake Capital, with nearly £100mn on the line for the winners. While not among the set of top favourites, including English rivals Manchester City, 15-time European champions Real Madrid and PSG, Chelsea are still expected to reach the last eight.

With fans not fully sold on Maresca's brand of possession football, and even Palmer saying he was "sick" of the ball going from side to side in the Conference League final, another trophy could help soothe any building tension in south-west London.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Qatar to host 2026 F1 Grand Prix at Lusail International Circuit



The 2026 season will mark a revolutionary chapter in Formula 1 history with the introduction of all-new technical regulations.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The 2026 Formula 1 calendar has been officially revealed, confirming the return of the Qatar Grand Prix to the Lusail International Circuit from November 27-29. Marking the penultimate round of the championship, the race promises high-stakes wheel-to-wheel action as Formula 1 enters a new era.

Spain will host two Grand Prix in 2026, with the new race in Madrid joining Barcelona.

The 2026 season will also mark a revolutionary chapter in F1 history with the introduction of all-new technical regulations.

The next-generation cars will be lighter (768kg vs 800kg), shorter, and narrower, designed to be more agile. Key innovations include active aerodynamics with movable front and rear wings, increased electrical power output (almost triple the current MGU-K power), and 100% sustainable fuels. Additionally, the grid will welcome Audi as a new constructor, taking over the current Sauber team – bringing their expertise to the pinnacle of motorsport.

Since its F1 debut in 2021, Qatar has established itself as a premier destination on the championship calendar. The 5.38km circuit, with its 16 flowing corners and multiple overtaking opportunities, provides an ideal venue for closely contested racing.

The circuit's spectacular floodlighting system creates one of F1's most visually striking night races, set against the backdrop of Lusail's sky.

LIC stands as one of only two venues worldwide to host F1, MotoGP, and the World Endurance Championship. The facility features an unprecedented 50 pit boxes – more than any other F1 circuit – housed within a 402.1-metre pitlane building that holds the Guinness World Record as the longest motorsport pit lane building at a racetrack.

Looking ahead to 2026, Qatar Grand Prix will continue to be a crucial fixture as teams adapt to the new regulations and Audi makes its debut, promising to deliver high-stakes racing under the lights at one of F1's most iconic venues.

For 2025, F1 returns to Qatar from November 28-30. The tickets are already on sale at www.lcsc.qa

Things to look out for as Club World Cup kicks off in United States

Atlanta: Despite concerns over ticket sales and player fatigue, FIFA's new expanded Club World Cup will throw up several intriguing storylines this summer in the United States. AFP picks five things to look out for on the pitch as teams compete to conquer the world and claim their share of \$1bn in prize money.

MESSI BACK IN THE SPOTLIGHT
Former Barcelona great Lionel Messi has spent the last two seasons at MLS side Inter Miami but the Club World Cup pits him against European opposition once again. The 37-year-old superstar still possesses supreme quality but there are question marks over whether he and former top

level stars Luis Suarez, Jordi Alba and Sergio Busquets can seriously compete against the cream of the crop.

Inter Miami face Porto in their second group match in Atlanta, a team Messi has faced once before, beating them with Barca in the UEFA Super Cup back in 2011. If he nets at the tournament, Messi would become the oldest ever Club World Cup goalscorer, while both he and Suarez trail the competition's all-time top scorer, Cristiano Ronaldo, by two goals.

REVAMPED CITY
Pep Guardiola's Manchester City endured a poor season by their lofty standards and immediately took action in the special

transfer window to bolster their squad for the Club World Cup. The Abu Dhabi-owned club have already splashed more than £100 million (\$136 million) on Tijjani Reijnders, Rayan Ait-Nouri and Rayan Cherki.

With holding midfielder Rodri also returning to fitness after injury, City are hoping they can step up their game significantly. French 21-year-old attacking midfielder Cherki is an exciting talent looking to show his quality at the top level.

SOUTH AMERICAN THREAT
While Europe's elite are at the end of a long, hard season, South American clubs are midway through their campaigns and will be energised. They have long revered the

competition to a far greater degree than European sides, as it represents the chance to face the very best teams in the world. Fans who do not regularly follow South American football can look forward to discovering some of the most exciting emerging talents in the world. River Plate's Franco Mastantuono will join Real Madrid after the tournament, while Chelsea-bound striker Estevao Willian is hoping to end his time at Brazilian side Palmeiras with a bang.

ATLETICO HUNGER
Atletico Madrid ended the season trophyless despite looking like potential contenders in Spain and Europe. Diego Simeone's side are proud of having reached the tour-

namment ahead of La Liga rivals Barcelona and the coach has not hidden his desire to succeed this summer. "I hope we can advance in the Club World Cup and lead Atletico Madrid to a privileged position," said Simeone. Atletico have not won a single trophy since lifting La Liga in 2021 and their last success outside of Spanish football came in 2018 with Europa League and UEFA Super Cup wins.

Their elimination by Real Madrid in the Champions League after Julian Alvarez's controversial 'double-touch' penalty was disallowed sent them into a spiral, which they only managed to shake off in the final weeks of the season, after their chances of success had vanished.