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CRICKET | Page 2

Australia win first Test as Windies batting order collapses



FOOTBALL | Page 4

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GULF TIMES
SPORT



TENNIS

Pegula downs Swiatek to win Bad Homburg grass-court title

Page 3

FOOTBALL

Al-Haydos set for Qatar comeback at Lopetegui's request ahead of crucial World Cup playoffs

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Hassan al-Haydos is set to make a surprise return to international football after the Qatar Football Association (QFA) revealed yesterday that head coach Julen Lopetegui has requested the veteran forward's presence for the upcoming FIFA World Cup 2026 qualification playoffs.

The QFA said in a statement that al-Haydos is "at the forefront of the national team's journey", signalling the 34-year-old's reintegration into the side more than a year after he announced his retirement from international duty.

In a statement QFA said: "Hassan al-Haydos is at the forefront of the national team squad for the 2026 World Cup qualification playoffs, in a positive move responding to coach Julen Lopetegui's request to strengthen the team with experienced players. His presence is expected to bring both technical and emotional value, providing leadership and support in the pursuit of the big dream that will delight Al Annabi's fans — the dream of securing a place at the World Cup."

Al-Haydos, Qatar's most capped player with 183 appearances and 41 goals, retired in March 2024 after leading the team to back-to-back Asian Cup titles. His return is seen as a move to inject experience, leadership, and emotional stability as Qatar face a high-stakes playoff matches in October in their quest to reach the 2026 World Cup.

Lopetegui, who took over the reins in May, began his tenure with a morale-boosting 1–0 win over Iran that sealed Qatar's place in the playoffs. The team, however, finished fourth in Group A and missed out on automatic qualification, making the upcoming matches their final route to the tournament.

Al-Haydos has remained active at club level and recently renewed his contract with Qatar Stars League champions Al Sadd. A product of the club's youth system since the age of eight, he has been a mainstay in the squad for nearly two decades, guiding them to multiple domestic titles and continental success.

Reflecting on the extension, al-Haydos said: "Leadership is a responsibility, and the Al Sadd players are like my brothers. Our goal as a family is one — to always keep Al Sadd at the top."

Should his return to Al Annabi materialise, al-Haydos would rejoin the national side at a crucial moment, as Lopetegui looks to blend youth with experience to steer Qatar back to the global stage.



Hassan al-Haydos, Qatar's most capped player with 183 appearances and 41 goals, retired in March 2024 after leading the team to back-to-back Asian Cup titles.

FORMULA 1

Norris secures Austrian GP pole with stunning last lap

Championship leader Piastri was third, while Verstappen came seventh at Red Bull's home circuit

AFP
Spielberg, Austria

Lando Norris delivered a superb final flying lap in his McLaren yesterday to end Max Verstappen's run of domination in qualifying at the Red Bull Ring by claiming pole position for the Austrian Grand Prix.

The 25-year-old Briton clocked an outstanding lap in one minute and 3.971 seconds to outpace nearest rival Charles Leclerc of Ferrari by 0.521 seconds, with McLaren teammate and championship leader Oscar Piastri third.

Norris, who is 22 points behind Piastri in the drivers' title race, erased any hangover from his collision with Piastri in Canada two weeks ago with a thrilling demonstration of his speed and talent.

"It was a good lap, that's for sure," said Norris. "I guess that just little bit by little bit, I was able to get more time. Q1 was good, but I knew there were a few places I could get more time and I did what I planned to do."

Verstappen had taken pole position at the Red Bull-owned circuit in the Styrian Alps for the last five F1 races before Norris succeeded and seized his first pole in Austria, his third of the season and 12th of his career. Team-mate Piastri was disappointed and frustrated. "I had (Pierre) Gasly spin at the first corner so I didn't even open my second lap. Lando's been very quick all weekend so it would have been a tough challenge, but we had the pace to be on the front row. We can still have a good race from there and we are not here to come home third."

Verstappen's last lap was stymied by a yellow flag waved when Gasly spun in his Alpine, leaving him, like Piastri, unable to clock a flying lap time. He finished seventh. Leclerc said: "I'm very pleased. It's been a long time since we started on the front row and it's been a difficult season overall, but the team has kept pushing. We brought some new parts this weekend which for sure made a difference. We know we have a better car in the race than in qualifying so I hope we can put more pressure on the McLarens."

Leclerc's Ferrari team-mate and seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton was an encouraging fourth ahead of Mercedes' George Russell, Liam Lawson of Racing Bulls, four-time champion Verstappen of Red Bull and Gabriel Bortoleto of Sauber. Italian rookie Kimi Antonelli was ninth in the second Mercedes and Gasly 10th.



McLaren's British driver Lando Norris drives during the Austrian Grand Prix qualifying session at the Red Bull Ring race track in Spielberg, Austria. *(AFP)*



McLaren's Lando Norris (right) and Ferrari's Charles Leclerc are all smiles after the qualifying session at the Red Bull Ring race track in Spielberg, Austria. *(AFP)*

The session began in hot conditions with temperatures of 32 (air) and 48 (track) indicating hard work for tyres. After a frantic finale, in which Russell recovered from the drop zone to 11th, it was Aston Martin's Lance Stroll, Esteban Ocon of Haas, Red Bull's Yuki Tsunoda, Carlos Sainz in the second Williams and Sauber's Nico Hulkenberg who were eliminated.

McLaren, led by Norris, set the pace. The entire field was separated by less than a second with the Red Bulls of Verstappen and Tsunoda, sixth and 18th, only 0.25 seconds apart. It was Sainz's third consecutive Q1 exit. The track temperature touched 50 at the start of Q2 with Ferrari leading the way on used softs as Norris established his supremacy again before a trackside grass fire prompted a red flag stoppage, Hamilton having run wide there at turn 10. Verstappen was unhappy with his car's reaction to the heat. "No grip, it's worse than before," he reported. "I don't know what to say!"

After six minutes, the action resumed with only four to go as Norris and Piastri set the pace ahead of Leclerc while two-time champion Fernando Alonso of Aston Martin, Williams' Alex Albon, Racing Bulls rookie Isack Hadjar, Franco Colapinto of Alpine and Oliver Bearman of Haas missed out. All this left Bortoleto celebrating his first top ten qualification in fifth for the improving Sauber outfit while Verstappen complained he was impeded by a Ferrari in a way that was "a bit naughty and super unnecessary".

As Q3 began, Russell almost hit a Ferrari when he was released into their path narrowly avoiding a collision. On the first runs, Norris was fastest again ahead of Leclerc with Piastri third and Hamilton fourth, the Ferraris enjoying the heat as Mercedes wilted before Norris stormed to pole.

STARTING GRID

Front row: Lando Norris (GBR/McLaren), Charles Leclerc (MON/Ferrari)
2nd row: Oscar Piastri (AUS/McLaren), Lewis Hamilton (GBR/Ferrari)
3rd row: George Russell (GBR/Mercedes), Liam Lawson (NZL/RB)
4th row: Max Verstappen (NED/Red Bull), Gabriel Bortoleto (BRA/Sauber)
5th row: Kimi Antonelli (ITA/Mercedes), Pierre Gasly (FRA/Alpine)
6th row: Fernando Alonso (ESP/Aston Martin), Alex Albon (THA/Williams)
7th row: Isack Hadjar (FRA/RB), Franco Colapinto (ARG/Alpine)
8th row: Oliver Bearman (GBR/Haas), Lance Stroll (CAN/Aston Martin)
9th row: Esteban Ocon (FRA/Haas), Yuki Tsunoda (JPN/Red Bull)
10th row: Carlos Sainz (ESP/Williams), Nico Hulkenberg (GER/Sauber)

SPORT

SPOTLIGHT

Jayasuriya shines in Sri Lanka's win over Bangladesh

Reuters
Colombo

Spinner Prabath Jayasuriya led the charge with a five-wicket haul as Bangladesh collapsed for just 133 in their second innings, handing Sri Lanka a win by an innings and 78 runs, with the hosts clinching a 1-0 victory in their two-Test series yesterday .

Bangladesh lost six wickets within 33 runs as their batters were unable to repeat the heroics that secured a draw in the first test in Galle on Colombo's spin-friendly track.

"There was a difference between (the) two matches... that's a good morale booster for us, losing the toss and putting the opposition under pressure," Sri Lanka captain Dhananjaya de Silva said at the post-match presentation ceremony.

After Bangladesh posted 247 in their first innings, opener Pathum Nissanka scored 158 in a player-of-the-match performance, aided by Dinesh Chandimal (93) and Kusal Mendis (84) as Sri Lanka secured a commanding 211-run lead with a total of 458.

Anamul Haque (19) tried to give Bangladesh a fast start in the second innings but fell to Asitha Fernando (1-22), while his opening partner Shadam Islam (12) mistimed a cover drive and got caught just three balls later as Jayasuriya (5-56) took his first wicket of the match.

De Silva (2-13) trapped Bangladesh skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto, who scored twin centuries in the first test, with a leg before wicket dismissal to leave the visitors reeling at 70-4.

"Very disappointing after how we finished the first Test, the way this one went," Shanto said. "We had opportunities but... always took easy options and made mistakes while batting."

Shanto later announced he was stepping down as the Bangladesh test captain.

"I don't want to continue as captain in this format, and I want to give a clear message to everyone, this is not a personal matter. It's entirely for the betterment of the team, and I believe this will help the team," he told reporters.

Mushfiqur Rahim (26), Bangladesh's other centurion in the previous match, was the next to fall as he was bowled by Jayasuriya, kicking off a collapse where Bangladesh lost their last five wickets in less than 11 overs.

Sri Lanka will play three One-Day Internationals and three Twenty20 matches against Bangladesh next month, with the first ODI set for Wednesday.



Sri Lanka's players pose with the trophy after their win on the fourth day of the second Test against Bangladesh at the Sinhalese Sports Club in Colombo yesterday. *(AFP)*

CRICKET

Australia win first Test as West Indies batting collapses

'It was just about hitting right areas time and time again and being patient'

AFP
Bridgetown, Barbados

Australia's vaunted pace attack demolished West Indies' fragile batting, routing the hosts for just 141 off 33.4 overs to complete a comprehensive 159-run victory in the final over of the third day of the first Test at Kensington Oval on Friday.

Josh Hazlewood was the chief destroyer with figures of 5-43 as the tourists dominated the day with both ball and bat.

Half-centuries from Alex Carey, Beau Webster and Travis Head were the fulcrum of a recovery from 65-4 late on day two to a final second innings total of 310 at tea the next day. Shamar Joseph led the West Indies bowling effort with five wickets at the cost of 87 runs for a match haul of 9-133.

Any winning target in excess of 200 was always going to be challenging on this two-paced surface.

As it transpired, the West Indies never looked up to the task from the moment former captain Kraigg Brathwaite fell to Mitchell Starc in the first over.

Hazlewood then took centre stage. His metronomic accuracy accounted for John Campbell and debutant Brandon King off successive balls, before adding the wickets of captain Roston Chase and Keacy Carty.

Chase's Australian counterpart, Pat Cummins, removed first innings top-scorer Shai Hope and insult was added to considerable injury when substitute fielder Marnus Labuschagne ran out Alzarri Joseph with a direct hit to the striker's end from mid-off.

Hazlewood returned to the attack to prise out Jomel Warrican but Shamar Joseph entertained with 44 off 22 balls before falling to off-spinner Nathan Lyon, who then dismissed Jayden Seales first ball to complete victory with two days to spare. Justin Greaves was left unbeaten on 38.

"It was just about hitting the right areas time and time again and being patient," said Hazlewood in identifying the tactics to capitalise on the challenging surface. "There are a few cracks there on a good length and just short of a length which kept the batters guessing about going forward or back with a few skidding through as we saw."

Australia's intent was clear at the start of the day as Head and Webster transformed the consolidation of the previous evening to controlled aggression in a partnership of 102 for the fifth wicket.

Head was trapped lbw for 61 by Shamar Joseph 20 minutes before lunch. However, the course of the first session could have been very different had Greaves held on to another straightforward catch at second slip off Alzarri Joseph when the left-hander was on 22.

It was the seventh chance put down by the West Indies slip cordon in the match, a poor display in one of the fundamental aspects of the game which began on day one when four catches were shelled.

With a clear intent on aggression on a pitch becoming increasingly two-paced, the Australians progressed at almost a run-a-minute after lunch despite wickets falling at regular intervals.

Carey, who top-scored with 65, built on the platform laid by Head and Webster (63), who fell caught behind off the persevering Shamar Joseph. The right-armer also accounted for Starc and wrapped up the innings when last man Hazlewood was bowled off the inside edge to give the Guyanese pacer his fourth five-wicket haul and third against Australia.

By then though, the task already looked beyond the West Indies, which was confirmed two balls before stumps.



Josh Hazlewood (left) of Australia celebrates the dismissal of Keacy Carty of West Indies during the 3rd day of the first Test at Kensington Oval, Bridgetown, Barbados. *(AFP)*

BRIEF SCORES: Australia first innings 180 (T Head 59, U Khawaja 47; J Seales 5-60, S Joseph 4-46)
West Indies first innings 190 (S Hope 48, R Chase 44; M Starc 3-65)
Australia second innings 310 (A Carey 65, B Webster 63, T Head 61; S Joseph 5-87)
West Indies second innings 141 (S Joseph 44; J Hazlewood 5-43)
Result: Australia won by 159 runs
Series: Australia lead three-match series 1-0

FOCUS

South Africa teen Pretorius slams century on debut

AFP
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Teenager Lhuan-dre Pretorius hit a dazzling 153 on debut and transformed South Africa's fortunes on the first day of the first Test against Zimbabwe at Queens Sports Club yesterday.

South Africa scored 418 for nine, a total which seemed unlikely when Pretorius arrived at the crease with his team in trouble at 23 for three.

Fast bowling all-rounder Corbin Bosch, batting at number eight, made 100 not out, reaching his century in the last over of the day.

Pretorius, a solidly-built left-hander aged 19 years and 93 days, became the youngest South African to hit a Test century and the seventh from his country to make a hundred on Test debut.

Pretorius hit a six off the fourth ball he faced, from left-arm spinner Wellington Masakadza, then smiled broadly at batting partner Wiaan Mulder.

He hit another six and seven fours in reaching his century off 112 balls. He hit a total of four sixes and 11 fours off 160 deliveries before he was caught at mid-on off a top-edged pull against fast bowler Tanaka Chivanga.

Pretorius gave no chances but the Zimbabwean players seemed convinced that he had edged a ball from Chivanga to wicket-keeper Tafadzwa Tsiga when he was on 30. No decision review system is in place for the series.

Chivanga, who took the first three wickets while conceding only eight runs, took four for 72 despite seeming to struggle with a hamstring strain during the afternoon.

Chivanga and fellow fast bowler Blessing Muzarabani, who took two for 59, generated pace and bounce but they were the only specialist seamers in the team and Zimbabwe's four spin bowlers proved expensive.

Pretorius was one of three new caps in a South African team containing only four of the players who clinched the World Test Championship against Australia at Lord's in London two weeks ago.

The team also had a new captain in veteran left-arm spin bowler Keshav Maharaj.

Pretorius and fellow debutant Dewald Brevis put on 95 off 88 balls for the fifth wicket. Brevis slammed 51 off 41 deliveries, hitting four sixes and three fours. He reached his half-century with the third of three sixes in an over off leg-spinner Vincent Masekesa.

Bosch, who was stranded on 81 not out batting at number nine in his only previous Test, against Pakistan at Centurion in December, helped Pretorius add 108 for the seventh wicket.

He was on 84 when the ninth wicket fell but last man Kwena Maphaka shepherded him to his maiden first-class century.

South Africa's previous youngest centurion was Graeme Pollock, who was aged 19 years and 317 days when he made 120 against Australia in Sydney in 1963/64.

Pretorius became the 10th youngest Test centurion of all time in a list headed by Mohammad Ashraful of Bangladesh, who was 17 years and 61 days old when he made a hundred against Sri Lanka in 2001.

It continued a meteoric rise to prominence for Pretorius, who made a century on first-class debut last December when he was 18 and has now hit four centuries in eight matches.

BRIEF SCORES: South Africa 418-9 in 90 overs (L Pretorius 153, C Bosch 100 not out, D Brevis 51; T Chivanga 4-83, B Muzarabani 2-59).


South Africa's Lhuan-dre Pretorius (left) celebrates his century with team-mate Corbin Bosch against Zimbabwe on the first day of the first Test at Queens Sports Club in Bulawayo yesterday.

JAMAICA'S FRASER-PRYCE QUALIFIES FOR 9TH WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

Kingston, Jamaica: Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce punched her ticket to a ninth World Championships with a third-placed finish in the 100m at the Jamaican national athletics trials on Friday.

Fraser-Pryce, a three-time Olympic gold medallist and 10-time world champion, clocked 10.91sec to finish third in the women's 100m final and secure a berth for the World Championships in Tokyo in September. Tina Clayton won her first national title in a personal best of 10.81 with reigning 200m world champion Shericka Jackson second in 10.88. Tia Clayton, twin sister of Tina, was fastest in the semi-finals but pulled up with an apparent injury in the final. Fraser-Pryce won her first world championships medal at Osaka in 2007 - a silver in the 4x100m relay - before going on to win 10 world titles, five of them in the 100m. In front of a large turnout that included treble world record holder Usain Bolt, she delivered when it mattered most. "It's been a long journey," Fraser-Pryce said after the final. "But it was not about making the team, it was about celebrating the journey and I am grateful for those who have been part of the journey. It takes strength and resilience to have made it so far, but it was always a joy and privilege to represent Jamaica and I hope I will leave a legacy of inspiration to every girl who has a dream for achieving more." In the men's 100m final, Paris Olympics silver medallist Kishane Thompson delivered a blistering 9.75sec (wind .8m/sec), his personal best making him the sixth-fastest performer in history. Only Justin Gatlin (9.74), Asafa Powell (9.72), Yohan Blake (9.69) Tyson Gay (9.69) and world record-holder Bolt (9.58) have gone faster. The 23-year-old, who was beaten by just 0.005sec by Noah Lyles in the 100m final at the Paris Games, sliced two hundredths off his previous career best of 9.77 set in June of 2024. Oblique Seville shrugged off concern over a tight hamstring to finish second in 9.83 and Ackeem Blake was third in a personal best of 9.88.



TENNIS

Pegula downs Swiatek to win Bad Homburg title

AFP
Bad Homburg, Germany

World number three Jessica Pegula beat Poland's Iga Swiatek in straight sets to win her third title of the season at Bad Homburg yesterday, two days before Wimbledon starts.

The 31-year-old won 6-4, 7-5 in one hour and 46 minutes in the northern suburbs of Frankfurt for her second title on grass, after Berlin last year. The US Open finalist now trails Swiatek 6-5 in their meetings, but has won four of her last six contests with the former world number one, who was appearing in her first final on grass.

The American played solidly on serve, conceding only one break point in the first set, which she avoided with a clever serve-and-drop combination. Pegula then converted her third break point at three-games all to take a decisive lead and clinch the set.

In the second set, Swiatek piled up unforced errors. Pegula took the Polish player's serve at 5-5 with a superb forehand crosscourt shot from the baseline.

Top seed Pegula did not falter on her serve to hand Swiatek a fifth defeat in 27 finals on the tour.

Pegula added to her trophies in Austin (hard court) and Charleston (clay) this season.

She now boasts nine career titles - five in the last 12 months.

"This tournament shows there's hope for me on grass," joked Swiatek after wiping away a few tears of disappointment. The five-time Grand Slam winner was playing her first final on a grass court, two years after reaching the semi-finals in Bad Homburg, her best previous result on the surface.

Swiatek was playing in her first final in a year since she lifted her fourth French Open trophy at Roland Garros in 2024, and looking for her 23rd career title.

The former US Open champion will face Russian Polina Kudermetova, ranked 63, at Wimbledon.

Pegula, whose best result at Wimbledon was a quarter-final appearance in 2023, will open her campaign on Tuesday against 122nd-ranked Italian Elisabetta Cocciaretto.


USA's Jessica Pegula poses with the trophy after winning the Bad Homburg Open yesterday. *(AFP)*

MOTOGP

Marquez on cloud nine with 9th sprint win of the season

Alex finishes second, Bezzecchi third, pole sitter Quartararo crashes

Reuters
Assen, Netherlands

Ducati's Marc Marquez brushed aside two practice crashes to storm to his ninth sprint victory of the season at the Dutch Grand Prix yesterday to extend his MotoGP championship lead despite starting fourth on the grid at Assen.

Marquez finished ahead of his brother Alex of Gresini Racing and Aprilia's Marco Bezzecchi claimed third place for his first sprint podium since 2023 while pole sitter Fabio Quartararo of Yamaha crashed with four laps to go.

Marc extends his lead in the championship to 43 points over Alex going into Sunday's race while Ducati's Francesco Bagnaia, third in the championship, could only manage fifth place behind VR46 Racing's Fabio Di Giannantonio. The victory will give Marc a significant psychological boost after he crashed twice in Friday's practice, as he seeks a first race win at 'The Cathedral of Speed' since 2018.

"Today we breathe a lot... because my body cannot accept another big crash like yesterday. Today I was just calm, trying to control the situations," Marc said.

"It's true that I didn't expect the victory but I started fast and then I defended (my position). I tried not to make any big mistakes, didn't exaggerate.

"The points are super important. Let's see tomorrow if we can manage that T3 (turn 3) and turn 11-12 - that is my weak point here in the circuit."


Ducati's Marc Marquez celebrates after winning the Dutch Grand Prix sprint at Assen, Netherlands, yesterday.

Quartararo had claimed his fourth pole position of the season in qualifying earlier on Saturday and the Frenchman led the pack into turn one when the lights went out. However, he had to elbow Marc out of the way into turn one after the Spaniard had a blistering start off the line, with the Ducati rider leaning so close to him that his right shoulder briefly touched Quartararo's boot.

Although he led for most of lap one, Quartararo could not match the pace of the Ducati bikes as Marc eventually took the lead in the final chicane, before Alex and Bezzecchi also overtook the Frenchman. Bagnaia, meanwhile, had qualified second-fastest but he found himself going backwards when fellow Italian Di Giannantonio overtook him and moved up to fifth at the halfway mark of the sprint.

Marc nearly surrendered first place when he made a rare mistake and went wide, giving Alex an opportunity to pass him, but the elder Marquez brother quickly slammed the door shut to retain the lead. Quartararo was on the limit as he pushed hard to stay with the lead group and the Yamaha rider's sprint came to an end with four laps to go when he lost his balance at turn 10 and crashed.

But up front, Marc was in complete control as he took the chequered flag ahead of Alex, who finished second behind his brother once again.

"I'm a little bit frustrated but anyway I think we did a really good race, especially when he (Marc) was struggling in sector three," Alex said.

"I was faster there, but to find space there is always difficult."

WIMBLEDON

Djokovic: 'best chance' to make Grand Slam history

AFP
London

Novak Djokovic admits Wimbledon offers him the "best chance" to make history as he chases a record-breaking 25th Grand Slam title in the twilight of his glittering career.

Djokovic is dreaming of putting an exclamation point on his incredible career by becoming the most successful singles player in tennis history. The 38-year-old has been tied with Margaret Court on 24 Grand Slam titles since winning his most recent major prize at the 2023 US Open.

With Wimbledon champion Carlos Alcaraz and world number one Jannik Sinner emerging as the sport's dominant forces by winning the last six Grand Slams between them, Djokovic believes his most realistic hope of a historic 25th title lies on the lush lawns of south-west London.

"I would probably agree that Wimbledon could be the best chance because of the results I had, because of how I feel, how I play in Wimbledon, just getting that extra push mentally and motivation to perform the best tennis at the highest level," Djokovic told



reporters at the All England Club on Saturday.

Djokovic lost to Alcaraz in the 2023 and 2024 Wimbledon finals and has failed to make the title match in any of his last three Grand Slams.

After losing to Sinner in the recent French Open semi-finals, Djokovic arrives at Wimbledon in the unusual position of no longer being regarded as the All England Club title favourite.

The Serb would draw level on a record eight men's Wimbledon singles titles with Roger Federer if he wins the grass-court tournament for the first time since 2022.

But Djokovic, who won his 100th tour-level title in May in Geneva, has been dogged by questions about when he will retire since fulfilling his long-held desire for Olympic singles gold in Paris last year.

He hinted after the French Open in June that he might not return to Roland Garros and was coy about a potential Wimbledon farewell.

"Whether it could be my last dance, I'm not sure, as I'm not sure about Roland Garros or any other Slam that I play next," he said. "My wish is to play for several more years. I would love to be healthy physically and also mentally motivated to keep on playing at the highest level. That's the goal, but you never know at this stage."

After battling for years with Federer, Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray, Djokovic is the last of that star quartet still playing.

The former world number one has been usurped by Alcaraz and Sinner over the last two years and he is happy to admit his only remaining goal is to make Grand Slam history.

"In a sense you're always hunting because you're always going for the titles - in my also privileged position - the records and more history," he said.

"I would say it's slightly different for me now in terms of I don't chase the rankings anymore in that regard. I'm trying to play the best tennis in Grand Slams and trying to win Grand Slams."

Djokovic, competing at his lowest Wimbledon seeding (sixth) since 2018, will begin his campaign against Alexandre Muller of France next week.

The Serb, who has been in every Wimbledon final since 2018, is seeded for a quarter-final meeting with British fourth seed Jack Draper and a semi-final against Sinner before a potential final showdown with Alcaraz.

Looking ahead to that daunting schedule, Djokovic conceded his performances haven't been consistent enough of late.

"My level of tennis has been going quite up and down and fluctuating much more than it was the case for the most part of my career, if you see the last year and a half, too, I've been kind of volatile with my results," he said.

"This year I played two semi-finals. Unfortunately in Australia I had to retire. In Roland Garros I was outplayed by Sinner. I think I still played a decent level of tennis that showed me that I can still play on a very high level at the later stages."

FOCUS

Joint wins title to end Eala's history bid

AFP
Eastbourne, United Kingdom

Australian teenager Maya Joint saved four match points to clinch the WTA title at Eastbourne with a dramatic victory over Alexandra Eala that ended the Filipina's history bid yesterday.

Joint survived a tense clash lasting two hours and 26 minutes, emerging with a 6-4, 1-6, 7-6 (12/10) win to seal her second WTA Tour title.

In the youngest Eastbourne final since 1981, world number 51 Joint staved off the four championship points in a gripping final-set tie-break. She finally wrapped up the title by drilling a backhand winner before collapsing to the turf in delight.

Having also defeated former Wimbledon runner-up Ons Jabeur and 2021 US Open champion Emma Raducanu at Eastbourne over the last week, Joint has underlined her status as one of the rising stars of the women's tour.

After winning on clay in Rabat in May, the 19-year-old has proved she can thrive on grass as well ahead of the start of Wimbledon on Monday.

Joint is also scheduled to partner Hsieh Su-wei in the Eastbourne doubles final against Marie Bouzkova and Anna Danilina later on Saturday.

It was a painful defeat for Eala, who was so close to becoming the first player from the Philippines to win a WTA Tour title.

The 20-year-old wiped away tears of frustration during the on-court trophy presentation.

Eala had become the first Filipina to reach a WTA final after beating Varvara Gracheva in the last four at Eastbourne on Friday.

Eala's run to the final has made the world number 74 one to watch in the coming months.

After progressing through qualifying to make the main draw, Eala beat Lucia Bronzetti, former French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko, Nottingham Open finalist Dayana Yastremska and France's Gracheva.

She had burst onto the scene with three shock victories over Grand Slam winners Ostapenko, Madison Keys and Iga Swiatek to reach the Miami Open semi-finals in March.

Eala is due to face reigning champion Barbora Krejcikova in the Wimbledon first round on Centre Court on Tuesday.

But Krejcikova is struggling with a thigh injury that forced her to pull out of the Eastbourne quarter-finals on Thursday, putting the Czech's title defence in doubt.


Australia's Maya Joint poses with the trophy after beating Philippines' Alexandra Eala in the Eastbourne International final yesterday. *(AFP)*

Raducanu 'just friends' with future doubles partner Alcaraz

British number one Emma Raducanu refused to be drawn on rumours of a relationship with French Open champion Carlos Alcaraz as the duo gear up for a doubles partnership at the US Open.
Raducanu and Alcaraz practised together at Wimbledon on Friday as part of a sponsors commitment and will play alongside each other at Flushing Meadows in September in the mixed doubles.
Five-time Grand Slam champion Alcaraz revealed last week he had made the request to play with Raducanu, who shot to fame when she won the US Open in 2021.
"We're just good friends," said a smiling Raducanu when asked about speculation that the two are dating. "It was fun yesterday. We were both on court with Evian. We were just getting some volley practising ahead of New York. "I'm really happy obviously to be playing with him. Yeah, we had a good time yesterday." In contrast to Alcaraz's meteoric rise since making his major breakthrough at the US Open three years ago, Raducanu has struggled to shine under the spotlight since becoming a household name.

CLUB WORLD CUP

Palmeiras edge Botafogo to reach quarter-finals

Substitute Paulinho scored the winner 10 minutes into extra time



Palmeiras' Paulinho (centre) scores in the 100th minute against Botafogo during the FIFA Club World Cup last 16 match in Philadelphia. *(Reuters)*

AFP
Philadelphia

Substitute Paulinho scored an extra-time winner to settle a Brazilian battle of attrition as Palmeiras edged Botafogo 1-0 to win through to the Club World Cup quarter-finals.

The winger came on at the same time in the second half as Palmeiras coach Abel Ferreira withdrew teenage sensation Estevao Willian, a move that appeared baffling at the time but ultimately proved inspired.

The tie had reached the 100th minute when Paulinho collected a pass by Richard Rios on the right flank and was afforded the time and space to come inside into the box before slotting a low shot into the far corner.

That sparked wild celebrations among the Palmeiras fans who made up the vast majority of the 33,657 crowd inside Lincoln Financial Field, and the side from Sao Paulo held on to win the last-16 showdown despite having captain Gustavo Gomez sent off late on. Winners of the Copa Libertadores in 2020 and 2021, Palmeiras will now stay in Philadelphia for a last-eight tie next Friday against either Benfica or Chelsea.

They had been the more dangerous side throughout in this meeting of the top two in last year's Brazilian league, with almost all of the chances falling the way of the men in green. Rio de Janeiro side Botafogo pipped Palmeiras to the domestic title and also won the Copa Libertadores for the first time in their history in 2024.

They then lost their coach and several key players, but still managed to beat European champions Paris Saint-Germain during the group stage of the Club World Cup as they qualified for the knockout phase ahead of Atletico Madrid. Nevertheless Palmeiras were the more lively of the two teams in a game played in warm midday conditions in Philadelphia.

All eyes were on Estevao, the 18-year-old winger who will join Chelsea once the tournament is over and is seen as Brazil's next big thing. He found it hard to make an impact in what was for long spells a disappointing game pockmarked by moments of quality. Colombian midfielder Rios came close to scoring in first-half stoppage time with a thunderous shot from the edge of the box that was deflected onto the roof of the net.

Estevao then came to life after the restart, forcing a good save from Botafogo goalkeeper John Victor and then putting the ball in the net only to be denied by an offside flag. There was surprise around the stadium when the starlet was taken off just after the hour mark alongside striker Vitor Roque, with Luighi and Paulinho sent into the attack.

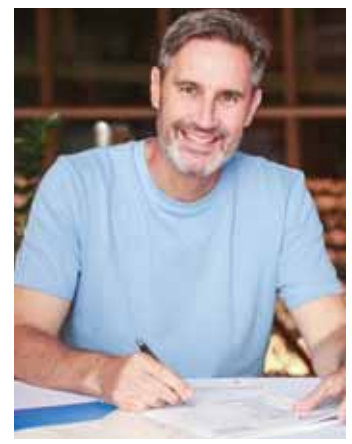
A Mauricio header from a Joaquin Piquerez cross was tipped over and Paulinho then blazed high from a good position as normal time ended goalless. Into the extra half-hour they went, and a Rios piledriver was parried behind before the goal finally arrived thanks to the once-capped Brazil winger who played in the Atletico Mineiro side beaten by Botafogo in last year's Libertadores final.

The substitute was then promptly substituted, his job done for the day.

Botafogo pushed for an equaliser that would have led to a penalty shoot-out, but could not find it even after Paraguayan centre-back Gomez walked for a second booking in the 116th minute for grappling off the ball with Alexander Barboza.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Wakrah appoint Moreno as head coach



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Wakrah yesterday announced the appointment of Spain's Vicente Moreno as the club's new head coach on a two-year deal running until 2027.

In a statement, the club confirmed that Moreno will replace Poya Asbaghi, whose contract expired at the end of last season.

Moreno, 49, brings with him extensive experience from both Spain and the Gulf region. His most recent role was with Saudi Arabia's Al Shabab, which he joined in July 2022. His managerial journey began with Valencia's youth setup in 1995 and has included stints at Guadix, Xerez, Gimnastic, and Real Mallorca.

His longest tenure came at Gimnastic, overseeing 147 matches between 2013 and 2016. He later managed Mallorca for 133 matches (2017–2020), Espanyol in 85 matches (2020–2022), and Xerez in 26 matches (2011–2012).

Wakrah finished eighth in the Qatari Stars League last season.

AL SADD SIGN URUGUAYAN MIDFIELDER SORIA

Meanwhile, league champions Al Sadd SC have bolstered their squad by signing Uruguayan midfielder Agustin Soria on a long-term contract until 2030.

The 20-year-old joins from Defensor Sporting of Portugal and is known for his versatility in midfield, with the ability to also operate at right-back. Al Sadd described him as "an important addition" ahead of a season that includes domestic and continental campaigns.

Soria's arrival is part of Al Sadd's broader efforts to ensure technical stability, with the club recently renewing contracts for several key players, including captain Hassan al-Haydos, Akram Afif, Guilherme Torres, Pedro Miguel, and Ahmed Suhail.

The team will begin its pre-season preparations with a training camp in Spain from July 16 to August 4. Al Sadd clinched the 2024–2025 Qatari league title with 52 points, narrowly edging Al Duhail by two points. The team also reached the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League Elite, exiting after a 2–3 defeat to Japan's Kawasaki Frontale.

UMM SALAL SIGN BAIDOO FROM PLYMOUTH ARGYLE

Umm Salal announced the signing of Ghanaian international Michael Baidoo from English Championship side Plymouth Argyle on a three-year deal that runs until 2028. In a statement, the club confirmed that Baidoo will officially join the squad ahead of the new season as part of efforts to bolster the team's midfield options.

The 24-year-old featured in 11 matches for Plymouth Argyle last season but did not register any goals. Despite limited playing time, the midfielder is expected to bring energy and versatility to Umm Salal's lineup.

Baidoo's signing marks Umm Salal's first acquisition of the summer transfer window. The move follows the club's announcement of the departures of Dutch forward Kenji Gorre, Moroccan defender Marouane Louadni, and French head coach Patrice Beaumelle.

Having successfully retained their place in the Qatar Stars League after a 2-1 playoff victory over Al Markhiya, Umm Salal are actively working to reinforce their squad ahead of the 2025–2026 season.

Qatar lose to India in Asian Championships snooker quarter-finals

Colombo: Qatar's national snooker team ended its journey at the quarter-final stage of the 2025 Asian Championships team snooker and 6-red snooker in Sri Lanka. The team consisting of Ali al-Obaidly, Muhanna al-Obaidly and Bashar Hussein exited the championships after a 0-3 loss to India, one of the strongest teams in the competition. The Indian team, made up of Brijesh Damani and Aditya Mehta went on to win the title by defeating Malaysia in the final with a score of 3-1.

Qatar delivered an average performance in the team competition, where they played three matches: winning their first match against Sri Lanka 3-1, but losing the next two: 1-3 to Pakistan and 2-3 to Cambodia.

This placed them second in the group behind undefeated Pakistan. In the individual competition, Ali al-Obaidli won bronze in the 6-red snooker singles event after reaching the semifinals, where he lost to India's Paras Gupta with a score of 1-5. *(QNA)*

Final third ability keeping Europe ahead as gap narrows: Wenger

Miami: Former Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, says the Club World Cup has shown that the ability of teams in the final third remains the biggest gap between European clubs and those from the rest of the world.

Wenger, speaking alongside members of FIFA's Technical Study Group, who have been analysing games at the 32-club tournament, said however the distance between UEFA's top clubs and those from South America and elsewhere has been proven to be narrower than many imagined. "Overall, what was a surprise to me, we as Europeans we come here and think, maybe we are a bit too strong for the rest of the world and it was a little bit an experience of humility," he told reporters.

Wenger said South American teams had shown how competitive they can be and that South African club Mamelodi Sundowns, whose only defeat was a 4-3 loss to Borussia Dortmund, had also shown an impressive level of play. "They put us in our real place here, especially the Brazilian teams and I must say also teams like Mamelodi Sundowns, when you look at the game against Dortmund, the numbers, you look at the team... even Al Ahly, they are out of the tournament like the Sundowns but the competition is much tighter than expected," said the Frenchman.

But Wenger said that the data and analysis conducted by his group showed that a quality gap remained when it comes to the attacking third. "Definitely it is the final third," said Wenger. "The timing of the pass, the quality of the pass, the quality of the run, the quality of the execution (of finishing), it all lies there."

Former Germany and USA coach Juergen Klinsmann, another member of the study group, said that the experience of high-level competition could help increase that quality level. "Part of that quality comes from experience. When is Pachuca or Monterrey playing in a tournament like this? That is why when I was coach of the USA I said 'get me into Copa America, get me friendlies in Europe and not here in this region'," said the former World Cup winning striker.

"It has a lot do with the level of competition they usually get in their club environment, because in the box it is in your head, in your mind, because they can play, obviously they are good players," he said.

The last 16, which got underway yesterday, features four Brazilian clubs, Saudi club Al Hilal, Mexico's Monterrey and Inter Miami from the United States, along with nine European clubs. European clubs Porto, Atletico Madrid and Salzburg failed to make it out of the group stage.

Wenger said the tournament should motivate clubs around the world to up their standards even more.

ROUND-UP

Pogba signs for Monaco, hoping to revive career

Paul Pogba has signed a two-year deal with Ligue 1 side Monaco to return to football after a near two-year absence, the club announced yesterday. The 2018 World Cup winner has made only 12 appearances across the last three seasons due to injuries, an 18-month doping ban and an extortion case in which he was the victim.

Pogba failed a drugs test in August 2023 after a match for Juventus and has been free to return to football since March, although his contract at the Italian giants had been terminated last year. The midfielder will now play club football in Ligue 1 for the first time in his professional career.

"I am determined to get back on the pitch, mentally ready, physically ready, it's just a matter of time," the 32-year-old told French television last weekend. Pogba played in the Le Havre youth team before signing for Manchester United in 2009.

He made only a handful of first-team appearances for the three-time European champions before signing for Juventus in 2012. Pogba won four consecutive Serie A titles in Turin before rejoining United for a then-world record 105mn. He moved back to Juventus three years ago but struggled with a series of injuries.

In 2024, his brother Mathias was sentenced to three years in prison, with two years suspended, for his role in a plot to extort 13 million euros from Pogba in 2022. Pogba has scored 11 goals in 91 appearances for the France national team, playing a starring role and scoring in their World Cup final victory over Croatia seven years ago.

His new club Monaco will play in the Champions League next season after finishing third in Ligue 1 last term.

EXPANDED CLUB WORLD CUP IS FOOTBALL'S WORST IDEA, SAYS KLOPP

Former Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp has criticised the introduction of the expanded Club World Cup format, calling it the worst idea ever implemented in football. In an interview with German newspaper *Die Welt*, Klopp said the tournament would put more strain on an already packed calendar for the players.



The expanded format features a 32-team event held every four years during the pre-season, in the summers between major international tournaments. "It's a pointless competition. Whoever wins it will be the worst winner of all time because they'll have played all summer and then gone straight back into the league," Klopp said. "There are people who have never been involved in the day-to-day business of football and are now coming up with ideas."

Klopp pointed out that today's players are getting less and less time to rest, warning that adding another tournament was potentially dangerous for their health. "It's too many games. I fear that next season we will see injuries like never before. If not then, they'll come during or after the Club World Cup," the German said. "There's no real recovery for those involved, neither physically nor mentally."

Klopp, who ended his highly successful nine-year stint with Liverpool in 2024, is now head of global football for Red Bull, owners of several clubs including RB Leipzig and New York Red Bulls. Klopp was also asked if he would like to coach again.

"I don't want that anymore. I have a job now that fulfils me and is also intense. I don't sleep in the morning and I don't go to bed later at night, but I can organise my work much better," he said.

HILAL'S AL-DAWSARI OUT OF CLUB WORLD CUP WITH HAMSTRING INJURY

Al Hilal captain Salem al-Dawsari will miss the remainder of the Club World Cup with a hamstring injury, the Saudi club said. "Medical tests have confirmed that Salem Al-Dawsari has suffered from a hamstring injury. He will be undergoing a treatment and rehabilitation program that will last between four to six weeks," Al Hilal said in a statement via X.

This means al-Dawsari will miss tomorrow's round of 16 clash against Manchester City. Al-Dawsari played a pivotal role in Hilal's campaign in the club world cup, after scoring the opening goal in the team's 2-0 victory over Pachuca on Friday in the third round of the group stage. The win against Pachuca secured the four-times Asian champions qualification for the last 16 after they finished second in Group H behind Real Madrid.

DIRK KUYT GETS NEW COACHING JOB IN THE NETHERLANDS

Former Liverpool striker Dirk Kuyt was appointed coach of Dutch second-division club FC Dordrecht, signing a one-season deal, the club said. The former Dutch international striker, who also played at Feyenoord and Fenerbahce, was fired last week by Beerschot of Belgium after they finished bottom of the standings and were relegated.

Kuyt had won the second-division title and promotion with them the previous season. His task will now be to turn Dordrecht into promotion candidates. They have had a single season in the top flight of Dutch football over the last 30 years.