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FOOTBALL

Qatar to learn playoff rivals as draw takes place today

Draw will divide teams into two groups of three teams, with only the winners sealing World Cup spot

By Sports Reporter
Kuala Lumpur

The six teams – including Qatar – still in the running for FIFA World Cup 2026 qualification will discover their remaining battle paths at the AFC Asian Qualifiers draw at 3pm today at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Six of the eight direct berths on offer to Asia have already been claimed following the conclusion of the third qualifying round last month, which featured three groups of six teams. The third and fourth-placed sides from each of those groups – Qatar, Indonesia, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – will get another shot via the playoffs, which is scheduled for October 8-14.

The draw will divide the cast into two groups of three teams, with only the winners sealing progress to next year's global showpiece. Each group will be played in a single round-robin format in a centralised venue – the Qatar Football Association and Saudi Arabian Football Federation were confirmed as the hosts last month.

Oman, under the leadership of freshly appointed head coach Carlos Queiroz, is the only side hunting a historic maiden FIFA World Cup appearance, with Indonesia, Iraq and UAE aiming to qualify for a second time each, while Qatar and Saudi Arabia will hope to make it back-to-back participations.

The seeding for the draw will be based on the FIFA world tanking for AFC Member Associations that was specially announced by FIFA on June 13, 2025, to be utilised for the draw. The teams will be placed into three pots as below; Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as host associations, will be drawn into different groups during the ceremony.

Pot 1: Qatar (FIFA Rank: 53) and Saudi Arabia (58); Pot 2: Iraq (59), United Arab Emirates (66); Pot 3: Oman (79), Indonesia (118)

Upon the conclusion of the playoffs group stage, the runners-up of each group will square off in a two-legged showdown across November 13 and 18. This knockout stage will determine the Continent's representative at the FIFA Play-Off Tournament, which offers one final qualifying opportunity. A draw to decide the host team of each leg in the knockout stage will be conducted following the Playoffs group stage draw.

QATAR CONTINUE TRAINING CAMP IN AUSTRIA

Meanwhile, Qatar squad is continuing their overseas training camp in Austria, which began on July 11 and runs through July 27, as part of preparations for the play-off matches. Coach Julen Lopetegui is using the camp to fine-tune the squad's tactical and physical readiness in hopes of guiding Qatar to a second consecutive FIFA World Cup appearance – and their first earned through qualification, following their automatic berth as 2022 hosts.

Lopetegui announced a 30-man roster featuring several notable changes. Al Sadd midfielder Guilherme Torres earned his first national team call-up, while former captain Hassan al-Haydos returned to the fold. Veteran goalkeeper Saad al-Sheeb was left out, with Marwan Sharif and Shehab al-Laithi brought in.

The list also includes two fresh defensive additions: Youssef Ayman (Al Duhail) and Abdullah al-Yazidi (Al Sadd). The four goalkeepers selected are Meshaal Barsham, Salah Zakaria, Marwan Sharif, and al-Laithi. Other key players include Akram Afif, Almoez Ali, Boualem Khoukhi, Karim Boudiaf, and Pedro Miguel.



Qatar squad is continuing their overseas training camp in Austria, which began on July 11 and runs through July 27.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Gharafa sign Holgate, renew Brahimi and Sassi contracts ahead of new season

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Gharafa Sports Club have strengthened their squad ahead of the 2025-26 season by signing Jamaican international **Mason Holgate** on a two-year deal, the club announced yesterday.

The 28-year-old defender, who completed his medical in Doha, had ended his decade-long stay at Everton and joins Gharafa as a free agent. He was on a season-long loan at West Ham United last season. Holgate, who began his career at Barnsley in 2014, featured 150 times for Everton but endured a plethora of loan spells in recent years.

Once an England Under-21 international, the defender's career was derailed by injuries at Goodison Park as he made just eight appearances in his final full season at the club in 2022/23. In 2024, Holgate switched allegiances and opted to play for the Jamaican national team, for whom he has earned seven senior caps.

Last season, he was on loan at West Brom - his second stint at the West Midlands club, having also played there during the 2018/19 season. Holgate spent the first half of the 2023/24 campaign at Southampton, before seeing out the remainder at Sheffield United.

He began his career at Barnsley, progressing through the club's academy and debuting for them in 2014. His impressive performances - which saw him win the club's Young Player of the Year award in 2014/15 - drew attention from multiple Premier League sides. Among the interested suitors was Manchester United, who offered Holgate a trial in July 2015.

However, a month later, he opted to join Everton, departing Barnsley for a reported fee of £2mn. Holgate joins an Gharafa side that finished third in the league last season, earning a spot in the AFC Champions League. Among



the notable names Holgate will play with at Al Gharafa are former Newcastle and Real Madrid striker Joselu, as well as ex-Paris Saint-Germain and Sevilla goalkeeper Sergio Rico. Holgate's surprising switch to the Gulf nation comes just three months after he opened up on his desire to play in the English top flight.

On Tuesday, Gharafa renewed contracts for two key midfielders – Algeria's Yacine Brahimi and Tunisia's Ferjani Sassi. Both players extended their stay until the summer of 2026.

Brahimi, who joined the club from Al Rayyan in 2022, has been instrumental in the team's recent success, scoring 45 goals in 84 appearances and helping the club win the Emir's Cup in May. Sassi arrived from Al Duhail in 2023 and has since scored 17 goals in 63 matches.

The reigning Amir's Cup champions will begin their pre-season preparations with a training camp in Slovakia from July 18 to August 4. The team is scheduled to play four friendly matches during the camp before facing Umm Salal in the opening round of the Qatar Stars League on August 15.

SHEIKH SAUD ELECTED WAKRAH PRESIDENT BY ACCLAMATION

The General Assembly of Al Wakrah Club elected HE Sheikh Saud bin Abdulrahman bin Hassan al-Thani as club president by acclamation, with HE Sheikh Mohammed bin Fahad al-Thani as vice-president. The two will lead the club until the next elections scheduled for August 14.

The General Assembly meeting was held at the club's headquarters on Tuesday after meeting the legal quorum. Founding and active members, along with officials from the Ministry of Sports and Youth, were present.

The meeting included discussions on key administrative and sporting matters, including amending Articles 24 and 32 of the club's by-laws. The assembly also formally accepted the resignation of former club president HE Sheikh Khalifa bin Hassan al-Thani and vice-president Salman Abdul Ghani. Members expressed optimism about the club's future and their desire to see Al Wakrah return to the top flight in the upcoming Qatar Stars League season.

OPINION

U-17 World Cup Qatar will be a spectacular tournament: al-Kass

Egyptian football legend and U-17 head coach, **Ahmed al-Kass** looks forward to seeing a new generation of players shining on the big stage during the upcoming FIFA U17 World Cup 2025. Set to take place in Qatar from November 3-27, this will be the first FIFA World Cup to feature 48 teams.

This year's edition marks the first of five consecutive tournaments that Qatar is hosting through to 2029. For al-Kass, a former Egyptian national team player who represented his country's senior side at the 1990 FIFA World Cup, the growing legacy of mega-sporting events in Qatar is a true testament to its place as a leading sports capital for the region.

"The world has already witnessed how Qatar delivered a phenomenal World Cup in 2022. The U-17 World Cup will be another spectacular tournament hosted by Qatar," said al-Kass. "As Arabs, we are proud that Qatar will play hosts for yet another exciting tournament. We share this pride with Qatar and are happy for the opportunity to play here."

Egypt has been drawn into Group E alongside England, Venezuela and Haiti. Their first match will see them take on Haiti on November 4 at Aspire Zone. Egypt made its last appearance



at a FIFA U-17 World Cup in 1997, when it hosted the competition, and reached the quarter-finals. Now 28 years later, a new generation of young Pharaohs will be eager to make history and go even further.

"All the teams in our group have great calibre. Every team will be working hard to produce the best results. I hope our players will be able to showcase their strengths on the pitch. We want to see Egypt's flag raised in victory at the World Cup. We want to win it," said al-Kass.

Egypt is one of six Arab teams that have qualified to the tournament. They are joined by hosts Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Tunisia and Morocco. The best achievement historically by any Arab country in the competition was in 1991, when Saudi Arabia lifted the trophy. Bahrain, Qatar and Oman have all claimed fourth spot in 1989, 1991 and 1995 respectively.

COMMENT

Stokes put body on line for England: Root

AFP
London

England captain **Ben Stokes** put his body on the line to inspire his side's dramatic victory over India at Lord's, according to teammate Joe Root.

Stokes took five wickets, scored 77 runs and delivered a crucial run-out of Rishabh Pant in two innings of relentless effort from the all-rounder.

Driven on by Stokes, England won the third Test by 22 runs on a pulsating final day to take a 2-1 lead in the five-match series.

Most remarkable of all was the workload that the injury-prone Stokes put his body through as he bowled 44 overs in total, including gruelling spells of 9.2 and 10 overs on the decisive final day.

It was the most the 34-year-old has bowled in over six years and came after two severe hamstring injuries in the past 12 months.

Root watched on in awe, remembering his own attempts to stop Stokes pushing himself past the limit during his own captaincy.

"You can try, but it doesn't make any difference. I tried for five years," Root

said. "I mentioned it but he doesn't always listen to me. He didn't listen to me when I was captain!"

"That's his call now. It was an incredible effort to be able to do that, but that's just how he's built, I guess. He's just desperate to be the man and make things happen."

"It's a great sign for us moving forward, it really is, because that's back to his best. He's got that mentality and that desire to win games and we're lucky to have him as our leader."

At one stage in the first innings, England head coach Brendon McCullum sent a message via bowling consultant Tim Southee instructing his skipper to take a breather.

Root admits he was also concerned that Stokes might hit breaking point but now accepts that there is only one man who truly knows how far he can go.

"I was just panicking that he wasn't going to make it through the game after a couple of bad injuries but he clearly trusts his body now," he said.

"He knows what he's doing and he's got a good handle on where he's at physically."

After the match, Stokes admitted his tiredness, telling reporters that he

could not wait to "just lie on my bed for four days and then be raring to go for (next week's fourth Test at) Manchester". The Old Trafford Test starts on July 23.

England fined, docked two WTC points for slow over rate at Lord's

England were docked two World Test Championship (WTC) points and fined 10% match fees yesterday for their slow over rate in the third Test against India at Lord's.

The hosts were 2-1 up in the five-test series with a thrilling 22-run victory but were found two overs short of target in a match where the Dukes ball went out of shape several times and had to be replaced.

"England captain Ben Stokes pled guilty to the offence and accepted the proposed sanction, so there was no need for a formal hearing," the International Cricket Council said in a statement.

Players lose 5% of their match fees for every over their team fail to bowl in the allotted time. It also costs the team one WTC point.

England slipped from second to third in the WTC standings behind Sri Lanka following the points deduction.



SPOTLIGHT

Robinson, Jacobs set up T20 win over South Africa

An unbeaten century partnership between the two lifts New Zealand

AFP
Harare

An unbeaten century partnership between Tim Robinson and new cap Bevon Jacobs set up a 21-run win for New Zealand in their tri-series match against South Africa in Harare yesterday.

Robinson hit a career-best 75 not out and Jacobs was unbeaten on 44 as they took the Black Caps from a precarious 70-5 to 173-5 after they were sent in to bat.

South Africa, who won the tournament opener against Zimbabwe on Monday, were bowled out for 152.

New Zealand fast bowlers Matt Henry and Jacob Duffy took three wickets each on a pitch on which the pacemen of both teams induced false shots with short-pitched deliveries.

Mitchell Santner, the winning captain, said: "It was a great team performance. That partnership was outstanding. The Proteas put us under pressure in the powerplay but to get to 170 was good. We learnt that taking wickets throughout would help in the second innings. (To get 170+) We were thinking maybe 150-160 was the score we'd get."

Robinson, the Player of the Match for his unbeaten 75, said: "Feel great to contribute to a win. We had a rough start but to keep going with Bevon was fun. Credit to the Proteas bowlers when new batters came in. Bevon and



Tim Robinson of New Zealand celebrates his half-century against Zimbabwe during a T20I in Harare yesterday. (@BLACKCAPS)

I wanted to take it as deep as we could. It was a good wicket and the ball does fly. I thought it was a good surface but South Africans used the big side really well. They had their length well, so it was difficult to start. After that you start to trust the wicket."

But Santner hailed an "outstanding" partnership between Robinson and Jacobs, who came together midway through the 10th over. Robinson hit six fours and three sixes in a 57-ball innings, while the strongly-built Jacobs showed why he was signed by Indian Premier League team Mumbai Indians before making his international debut. He hit a four and three sixes off 30 balls.

Santner said Robinson and Jacobs had shown that it was a good pitch for batting. "We knew we had to bowl well," he said. His bowlers responded as South Africa also lost early wickets and slumped to 62-5.

Dewald Brevis slammed 35 off 18 balls, including two sixes off three balls against Henry. But Brevis holed out to a slower ball from Henry in the same over.

"It was a really good pitch," said South African captain Rassie van der Dussen. "The bowlers did their part but it was not a good batting performance."

BRIEF SCORES
New Zealand 173 for 5 (Robinson 75*, Jacobs 44*, Maphaka 2-38)
beat South Africa 152 (Brevis 35, Linde 30, Duffy 3-20, Henry 3-34) **by 21 runs**

FOCUS

England's Archer keen to play remaining India Tests and Ashes series



Reuters
London

After missing four years of Test duty due to injury, England speedster **Jofra Archer** is keen to make up for lost time and says he wants to play the final two Tests against India and prove he deserves a place in the squad for the Ashes series in Australia.

Archer made his Test comeback at Lord's in the third test, bowling at full tilt to claim five wickets, including three in the second innings as England clinched a 22-run victory to go 2-1 up in the five-match series.

England management, men's managing director Rob Key in particular, have been careful about Archer's workload since his recovery from elbow and back injuries but the bowler is raring to go.

"I can play the other two (against India) if they let me," Archer told Sky Sports.

"I don't want to lose this series. I told 'Keysey' I wanted to play the

Test summer and I wanted to play the Ashes.

"I think one tick is already there and I will do everything possible in my power to be on the plane in November."

It was Archer's first Test since coach Brendon 'Baz' McCullum and captain Ben Stokes took the helm in 2022 and implemented an exciting result-oriented approach.

Archer was happy how his reintegration into the Test squad had been handled.

"Obviously it would have been the format which would have taken the most time to come back to. So I played 50-over and T20 for the last year and a half, two years," he said.

"The guys have played some really exciting cricket since Baz took over.

"I think the mentality of the team under Baz suits the way I like to play my cricket.

"I just couldn't wait to get back and actually do it without having to be prompted to do it."

The fourth Test against India begins on July 23 in Manchester.

ANNOUNCEMENT

West Indies all-rounder Russell to retire

Reuters
Kingston, Jamaica

Two-time Twenty20 World Cup winner **Andre Russell** will retire from international cricket at age 37 after the second T20 match against Australia on July 22 in his hometown of Kingston, Jamaica, Cricket West Indies (CWI) said yesterday.

All-rounder Russell, who won the T20 World Cup in 2012 and 2016, has earned 84 international caps in the format, scoring three fifties and taking 61 wickets.

The white-ball specialist, who played only one Test match, also appeared in 56 One-Day Internationals (ODI), taking 70 wickets. He last played in the 50-over format in 2019.

"Words cannot explain what it meant. To represent the West Indies has been one of the proudest achievements in my life," Russell said in a statement.

"When I was a kid, I did not expect to get to this level, but the



more you start to play and get to love the sport, you realise what you can achieve. This inspired me to become better because I wanted to leave a mark in the maroon colours and become an inspiration to others."

Russell, who travels around the world competing in T20 leagues and most recently appeared in Major League Cricket in the US this month, said he wanted to finish his international career on a high.

West Indies host Australia in the first T20 of the five-match series on Sunday in Kingston.

New No. 1 Test batter crowned following Lord's finish

Dubai: England's **Joe Root** has reclaimed the top spot on the ICC Men's Test Batting rankings after his stellar efforts helped the hosts to a 22-run victory over India at Lord's.

Root (888 rating points) took back the number the No.1 spot off compatriot Harry Brook (862) thanks to scores of 104 and 40, as the hosts took a 2-1 lead in the five-match series.

It's Root's eighth stint in the top spot and at 34 he is the oldest batter at No.1 since a 37-year-old Kumar Sangakkara held the position in December 2014.

Australian Steve Smith (816) also enjoyed a one-spot bump in the top 10, thanks to a gritty effort in a low-scoring affair in Jamaica against the West Indies.

Smith made 48 in the tourists' victory, with teammate Cameron Green making a 16-spot jump to 29th (619) thanks to scores of 46 and 42.

On a tricky Day 1 at Lord's, Steve Smith buckled down with a gritty half century.

Bowlers thrived under lights with the pink ball in the Caribbean, with Scott Boland's six-wicket effort in the Test (and a hat-trick) leapfrogging him to a career-best sixth spot.

His 62 Test wickets have come at just 16.53 apiece, with only George Lohmann and Sydney Barnes, who played over 110 years ago, having taken more Test wickets at a better average.

Mitchell Starc's incredible effort meanwhile didn't lead to a rankings move (remaining in 10th), though the left-armer did make ground on the nine bowlers above him, moving to 766 rating points and just one shy of Marco Jansen in ninth.

It means Australia have five bowlers in the top 10 with Pat Cummins (third) and Josh Hazlewood (fourth) remaining in their positions following the dismantling of

West Indies, and with Nathan Lyon moving down a spot to eighth after making way for Boland for the match.

It gives Australia a domination in the rankings not seen since England had six bowlers in the top 12 in 1958.

West Indies quicks also relished at Sabina Park, with Shamar Joseph (up 15 spots to 14th), Justin Greaves (up 15 spots to 65th) and Alzarri Joseph (up two spots to 29th) also making moves.

At Lord's, Washington Sundar (up 12 spots to 46th) was the most notable mover in India's meeting with England. Bowlers were also the movers in the latest T20I Player Rankings, with players across Sri Lanka and Bangladesh making noteworthy moves.

Sri Lanka's Nuwan Thushara and Bangladesh's Rishad Hossain now sit in 16th and 17th thanks to nine and 12-spot jumps respectively.

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GOLF

McIlroy returns to Portrush as Schauffele eyes Claret Jug

McIlroy will be heralded by an expected crowd of 200,000 across the four days at the 7,381-yard course

AFP
Portrush, United Kingdom

A raucous reception will greet Rory McIlroy as the British Open returns to Royal Portrush and Northern Ireland today for the first time since Shane Lowry's 2019 triumph.

McIlroy will be heralded by an expected crowd of 200,000 across the four days after ending his 11-year wait to complete the career Grand Slam at the Masters in April.

But a long list of contenders, including world number one Scottie Scheffler and reigning champion Xander Schauffele, stand between the hometown hero and a second Claret Jug.

"When I was looking at the calendar for 2025, this was the tournament that was probably circled even more so than the Masters for different reasons," he told reporters after a practice round yesterday.

"It's lovely to be coming in here already with a major and everything else that's happened this year. I'm excited with where my game is."

McIlroy will be desperate to at least put on a better show than in 2019 when he opened his tournament with a ruinous quadruple bogey on his way to a first-round 79, missing the cut despite a second-round charge.

"The golf on Thursday feels like



Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy signs autographs for fans during a practice round ahead of the 153rd Open Championship at Royal Portrush Golf Club, Portrush, Northern Ireland, yesterday. **Right:** Xander Schauffele of the US in action on the 1st hole during a practice round. (AFP)



a bit of a blur. I try to forget that part of it," said the 36-year-old, who famously shot a 61 at Portrush 20 years ago.

"But I remember the run on Friday. I remember I was making a charge and making a run to try to make the cut, and I hit a 6-iron into the 14th, second shot, and I remember the roar from the crowd..."

"It was really special."

McIlroy will play the first two rounds alongside world number four Justin Thomas and England's Tommy Fleetwood, teeing off at 3:10pm local time (1410 GMT) today.

Schauffele was undoubtedly one of the two most in-form players in the world alongside Scheffler when he romped to his second major title of 2024 at Troon exactly 12 months ago.

The American has not posted a top-five finish this year, though, and has admitted he is struggling for rhythm.

A tied-eighth effort at the Scottish Open in North Berwick last weekend provided a glimmer of hope that being back on links courses could help him rediscover his form.

"I think I had a better understanding of what I was doing,

which was helpful when I was hitting bad shots," he said of his efforts in Scotland.

The last 11 Opens have produced first-time champions, with the last previous winner to lift the trophy Ernie Els in 2012.

'Hoping that trend continues' Scheffler is one of the players hoping that trend continues.

The 29-year-old is the title favourite after bouncing back from an uncharacteristically slow start to the season.

The three-time major champion has finished in the top 10 on each of his past 10 starts, winning three

times including the PGA Championship.

"I could not care any less about being the favourite or not being the favourite," said Scheffler. "We all start even par and the tournament starts on Thursday. That's pretty much all that matters."

Lowry sparked jubilant scenes with his sensational six-shot triumph six years ago when the island of Ireland hosted the competition for the first time in 68 years.

The Irishman is still waiting for a second major title despite a series of near misses since.

"I am a better golfer than I was in 2019," he said.

"But it doesn't mean I'm going to go out and win by seven this year instead of six."

"It's just golf; that's the way it is. I think, as a golfer, you always have to look at it as the glass is always half full. You can't look at it any other way."

The 7,381-yard, par 71 lay-out will provide a tough test, with rainy and breezy conditions forecast for all four days.

Two-time champion Padraig Harrington of Ireland will hit the opening tee shot at 6:35am local time, playing with Northern Irish youngster Tom McKibbin and Denmark's Nicolai Hojgaard.

CYCLING / TOUR DE FRANCE

Pogacar suffers crash as protester disrupts stage

Reuters
Toulouse, France

Defending champion Tadej Pogacar suffered a crash on the 11th stage of the Tour de France yesterday, moments before a protester disrupted the sprint finish where Norway's Jonas Abrahamson claimed his first Tour stage victory.

Slovenian Pogacar went down about five kilometres from the line after touching wheels with another rider but quickly remounted and the peloton eased off to allow the overall race favourite to rejoin. Pogacar thanked the group after crossing the finish line apparently unhurt and without losing time.

"I'm quite okay, a bit beaten up, but we've been through worse days, so it's been a hectic day actually from start to finish," the UAE Team Emirates-XRG leader told reporters.

"In the end, I had a little bit of a crash, and thanks to the peloton in front, they actually waited, obviously the race was more or less over back there, but still, they could have taken time. Really big respect to everybody in front. Thanks for your support, guys."

Ireland's Ben Healy, who retained the overall leader's yellow jersey, explained that he had a brief chat with two-time Tour champion Jonas Vingegaard, seen as Pogacar's main rival for the title, and both agreed they should wait for the Slovenian.

As the stage reached its dramatic conclusion, a protester wearing a T-shirt reading "Israel out of the Tour" and waving a Pal-



A Tour de France staff member attempts to intercept an individual wearing a T-shirt which reads "Israel out of the Tour" running at the finish line area as Uno-X Mobility team's Norwegian rider Jonas Abrahamson (centre) cycles ahead of Team Jayco AlUla team's Swiss rider Mauro Schmid (right) to win the 11th stage of the 112th edition of the Tour de France cycling race, 156.8km starting and finishing in Toulouse, southwestern France, yesterday. (AFP)

estinian keffiyeh scarf ran onto the final straight, just 50 metres from the line. He was swiftly tackled by a security officer as Abrahamson edged out Swiss national champion Mauro Schmid in a two-man sprint for the win.

"I broke my collarbone four weeks ago. I cried at the hospital because I thought I wouldn't make it to the Tour de France," Abrahamson said. "I hoped, and every day I did everything I could to come back. To stand here in the Tour de France and have won a stage is amazing."

Tour organisers declined to comment on the incident while the Israel-Premier Tech team -

which has no Israeli riders in this year's race - told Reuters they would issue a statement later.

The protest came amid rising tensions over Israel's military operations in Gaza, where more than 58,000 Palestinians have been killed since October 2023, according to Gaza health authorities.

Almost 1,650 Israelis and foreign nationals have been killed as a result of the conflict, including 1,200 killed in the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack, by Israeli tallies.

Sources with a direct knowledge of the matter have told Reuters that other protests are planned on the Tour route.

The day began at a blistering

pace, with a five-man breakaway quickly forming ahead of a second group featuring classics specialists Mathieu van der Poel and Wout van Aert. The peloton eventually backed off, allowing the front of the race to shape the outcome. On the punishing final climb - an 800-metre ascent averaging 12.4% - Abrahamson and Schmid emerged at the front. Van der Poel launched a fierce pursuit but fell short.

The focus now shifts to today's stage 12, which brings the Tour's first high-mountain showdown with a summit finish on the legendary Hautacam and all eyes will be on Pogacar the day after his crash

SPOTLIGHT

Stage set for Qatar Rail Open Chess Championship 2025



QNA
Doha

The Qatar Chess Association (QCA) is ready to host the Qatar Rail Open Chess Championship 2025, it was announced yesterday.

The tournament will coincide with World Chess Day that falls on July 20th and this year's tournament promises to be a thrilling showcase of strategic prowess and a powerful vehicle for promoting the game in Qatar.

The opening gambit kicks off today, with the preliminary rounds at the Qatar Chess Training Center.

A formidable field of 100 players will vie for supremacy in a high-octane, nine-round blitz format. The lightning-fast exchanges will determine which elite few will advance to the high-stakes final stage. The championship's grand finale will unfold on Sunday, shifting to the unique and fitting backdrop of Al Bidda Station on the Doha Metro.

Here, twenty qualified masters will engage in a gruelling nine-round Swiss system, battling for the coveted title. The Federation has left no piece unturned, meticulously arranging all logistical details and assembling a seasoned panel of officials to ensure fair play and smooth execution.

Mohammed al-Mudahka, President of QCA, lauded the tournament's enduring success, now in its third consecutive year. He emphasised the invaluable collaboration with Qatar Rail, highlighting their shared vision of "spreading the culture of chess in society."

Al-Mudahka expressed his optimism for an even deeper alliance, one that will propel QCA towards its ambitious goals of developing the game and forging a robust foundation for future generations.

In a statement to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), al-Mudahka underscored the strategic decision to host the finals at Al Bidda Metro Station. This innovative move, he believes, will not only elevate the profile of the tournament but also "contribute to the promotion of chess culture, both through participation and public viewing."

The President also pointed to the significant participation of national team players, a testament to the tournament's critical role in "building a generation that will support the national teams and lead the game in international competitions."

He reaffirmed that the championship is a cornerstone of the QCAs long-term strategy to "bring about a qualitative shift in the game and attract talent," serving as a crucial platform to "discover more promising and intelligent talents for inclusion in the coming period," thereby broadening the pool of elite players ready to represent Qatar on the global stage.

Echoing this sentiment, Abdulla Ali al-Mawlawi, Communication & Public Relations Director at Qatar Rail, expressed immense satisfaction in partnering with QCA.

He acknowledged the resounding success of the previous two editions, stating: "Our sponsorship of the championship falls within our commitment to promoting community and sporting activities, spreading the culture of chess, and encouraging local talent in this sport."

Al-Mawlawi added: "We look forward to hosting the finals of this championship at the Al Bidda Station of the Doha Metro, which in turn supports our strategy to enhance the position of the Doha Metro network and the Lusail Tram, transforming them into preferred destinations for hosting various community events throughout the year."

Decathlon world record holder Mayer sits out 2025 season

Paris: World decathlon record holder Kevin Mayer said yesterday he would sit out the entire 2025 season due to the long-term hamstring injury which dashed his Paris Olympics hopes.

The 33-year-old double world champion said that until two weeks ago he had still hoped to return for the world athletics championships in Tokyo - to be held in September - but the "serious" injury had affected him "mentally and physically".

"It's my first blank season, the first year that I won't be wearing the French team colours," Mayer told reporters in an online briefing.

"I've had some really bad injuries in my career but this is the most serious so it's going to take more time. And I have no doubt that it will heal."

Mayer, who also won Olympic silver medals at the 2016 and 2020 Games, said he was "playing his last hand" in choosing to halt his training for the 10-event decathlon to concentrate on specific strengthening exercises. The Frenchman, who set the world record of 9,126 points in 2018, has been dogged by injuries in the past two years.

He was forced to drop out of the 2023 world championships in Budapest after feeling pain

in his Achilles tendon after the 100m. Then his hopes of performing in front of a home crowd at the 2024 Paris Olympics were crushed when he injured his hamstring in a 110m hurdles race at the Paris Diamond League meeting just weeks before the Games.

Mayer said he was still hopeful of competing at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

"We all have our cross to bear. Mine is my physical state. I know very well that if I sort out the problem, I can go on for a very, very long time," he said.

FOOTBALL

Yamal takes iconic Barca number 10 shirt

The 18-year-old, often compared to Messi, helped Barca win a treble last season

AFP
Barcelona

Young Barcelona star Lamine Yamal inherited the club's number 10 shirt, previously worn by all-time great Lionel Messi, yesterday. "Messi made his path and I will make mine," Yamal told reporters at an event at the club shop at the Spotify Camp Nou stadium.

"I will work as hard as I can, give everything and try to make those Barca fans who are there happy and those who are at home," he added.

The 18-year-old winger, often compared to the Argentine superstar who also came through the club's La Masia youth academy, helped the Catalan giants win a domestic treble last season.

He signed a new contract with Barcelona until 2031 in May, becoming one of the best paid players at the club. "I hope to enjoy myself more than last year and make my dreams come true," continued Yamal, who said he wanted to win the Champions League with the Catalan giants, and also the World Cup with Spain.

Yamal has scored 25 goals for the club in over 100 appearances, making his debut in 2023 at the age of 15 wearing the number 41 shirt. "Barca is my life, I've been here since I was seven, for all kids from La Masia their dream is to make it to the first team and I'm doing it and I have to keep working," said Yamal. "When I was little I dreamed of being at Barca and having this number."

After a season wearing the 27, last summer Yamal followed in Messi's footsteps by taking the number 19, which the Argentine wore at the club between 2005 and 2008. Messi claimed 34 trophies with Barcelona and departed as the club's all-time leading scorer with 672 goals, although he left after the 2020-21 season due to the club's financial troubles.

Ansu Fati inherited Messi's number 10 shirt in 2021, when now Inter Miami player left Barca for Paris Saint-Germain. Bese by a series of injuries Fati was unable to fulfil his potential at Barca and signed on loan for Monaco earlier in July. Other star names



Barcelona's Spanish forward Lamine Yamal poses with his new number 10 jersey at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. (AFP)

including Diego Maradona, Ronaldinho and Rivaldo have worn the Barcelona number 10 shirt in the past. "(Messi, Maradona, Ronaldinho) are three legends of football, three legends of this club," said Yamal. "I am grateful for what they gave the club and I will try to continue this legacy."

Yamal was asked what his manager has said about his shirt number change and had

a pretty entertaining response. "What did Flick tell me? He told me to go to bed early, that there's a double session tomorrow," he said with a smile.

"The dressing room congratulated me, and I'm grateful to them because without them I wouldn't be here."

Yamal made headlines after celebrating his 18th birthday last weekend with a pri-

vate event involving hired entertainers with dwarfism. Spain's Ministry of Social Rights asked the public prosecutor to investigate the party after a complaint from the Association for People with Achondroplasia and Other Skeletal Dysplasias (ADEE). "In the end I work for Barca, I play for Barca, but when I'm away from (the club) I enjoy my life, and that's all," he added.

Bellingham set to miss 12 weeks after shoulder surgery

Madrid: Real Madrid midfielder Jude Bellingham is expected to miss up to 12 weeks recovering from a shoulder operation after the Spanish giants said he had successfully undergone surgery.

While Madrid did not specify the expected length of his recovery time, Spanish media have reported it will take around 12 weeks for him to return to action. Bellingham has been struggling with shoulder discomfort after dislocating it in a La Liga match in November 2023, and playing with a brace under his shirt since then.

The England midfielder held off on the operation until after Madrid's participation in the Club World Cup this summer, with Xabi Alonso's side reaching the semi-finals. Bellingham is set to miss the La Liga visit to face rivals Atletico Madrid in late September, as well as the club's first two Champions League matches. The 22-year-old midfielder should be back in action by the time Madrid host Barcelona in the first Clasico of the season in late October. The midfielder will also miss World Cup qualifiers with England against Andorra and Serbia on September 6 and 9, respectively.

POLAND NAME URBAN AS NEW MANAGER

Urban has been appointed as Poland national manager, the country's football association (PZPN) said, with the 63-year-old replacing Michal Probiez who resigned in June following a row over his decision to replace Robert Lewandowski as captain.

Urban becomes Poland's fifth coach since 2021, with Probiez lasting the longest having taken charge of 21 games before the fall-out from his captaincy choice which led to Lewandowski refusing to play for his country while Probiez was in charge. Probiez's last game was a 2-1 defeat to Finland, which leaves Poland third in their World Cup qualifying group, and Urban faces a tough start to his spell in charge with an away game against the Netherlands on September 4.

Urban, who represented Poland 57 times as a player, began his coaching career in Spain at Osasuna, where he spent the majority of his playing career, as a youth team manager and reserve team coach. His first senior managerial role came at Legia Warsaw in 2007, and during that time he also served as assistant manager with Poland at Euro 2008. Urban won the Polish league title in 2013 in his second spell with Legia. Urban's last role was at Gornik Zabrze, where he was sacked in April.

LIVERPOOL EYE BLOCKBUSTER BID FOR NEWCASTLE'S ISAK: REPORTS

Liverpool are considering a blockbuster £120bn bid for Newcastle striker Alexander Isak despite the Magpies' desire to hold onto the Sweden star, according to reports. The Premier League champions are yet to make a formal offer for Isak but he is believed to be high on their wanted list as boss Arne Slot looks for a new forward in the wake of Diogo Jota's death.

Isak joined Newcastle from Real Sociedad for £63mn in 2022, emerging as a key player for Eddie Howe's team. He scored 23 Premier League goals last season to fire the club into the Champions League for the second time in three years. Isak also scored in Newcastle's League Cup final victory over Liverpool at Wembley, which ended the Magpies' 70-year wait for a major domestic trophy.

WORLD AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Wellbrock wins 10km swim after water quality delay

AFP
Singapore

Germany's Florian Wellbrock won the men's open water 10km at the World Aquatics Championships in Singapore yesterday, after the race had been postponed for several hours because of poor water quality.

Wellbrock, the gold medalist at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, won his third open water world title in a time of 1hr 59min 55.0sec at the Sentosa Island course when the race eventually began at 1pm. Italy's Gregorio Paltrinieri took silver 3.70sec adrift, followed by Australia's Kyle Lee in bronze.

"It was really tough today. I think it was the warmest waters that we've had to race in," said Wellbrock of the sea temperature, which was around 30 degrees Celsius. "I had one year to prepare for this. We did a lot of heat training and I think that was the key today to me taking the gold."

Governing body World Aquatics delayed the race because water quality was "exceeding acceptable thresholds". The women's 10km race had already been postponed on Tuesday and moved to Wednesday.

When it did finally get under way at 4pm, Moesha Johnson added world championship gold to the silver medal she won at the Paris Olympics last year. The Australian came home first in 2hr 7min 51.30sec,

finishing ahead again of Paris Olympics bronze medallist Ginevra Taddeucci of Italy (2:07:59.70).

Lisa Pou of Monaco (2:07:57.50), who was 18th in the Paris Olympics last summer, came in third for a surprise bronze medal. World Aquatics said early Wednesday morning that the new afternoon time slots for the races were "subject to acceptable test results".

But soon after, they confirmed both races would proceed in the afternoon as further analysis had found "significant improvement" in bacterial content and water temperature. "Regular water quality monitoring and testing continues throughout the competition period to ensure athlete safety," World Aquatics said in a statement. "The health and safety of all participants continues to guide all competition-related decisions."

The governing body said levels of E. coli bacteria had dropped to between the ranges of "good" and "excellent", according to World Aquatics and World Health Organisation regulations. Water quality was a big problem for events held in the River Seine at last year's Paris Olympics.

Of the 11 days of events and training scheduled in its murky waters, only five got the green light. The river remained dogged by pollution problems despite a 1.4bn euros (\$1.5bn) upgrade to improve the Paris sewerage and water treatment system.



Germany's Florian Wellbrock reacts after winning gold in the Open Water 10km swimming at the World Aquatics Championships in Sentosa Island, Singapore. (Reuters)

MOTOGP

Bastianini to return for Czech GP, injured Morbidelli and Vinales out

Reuters
Barcelona

KTM Tech3's Enea Bastianini will return at this weekend's Czech Grand Prix after recovering from appendicitis but his teammate Maverick Vinales and VR46 Racing's Franco Morbidelli will sit out with injuries, their MotoGP teams said.

Bastianini, who joined Tech3 from Ducati last year, missed the entire German Grand Prix weekend after being hospitalised but is expected to return to the track on Friday. "It was really tough for me to remain in bed for so long and unable to join the team at the German Grand Prix, but I gave myself the time to recover properly in order to arrive in Brno in good shape," Bastianini said in a statement.

Morbidelli crashed heavily on lap four of the German Grand Prix sprint where the Italian rider was thrown off his bike



and sent tumbling across the gravel. He was diagnosed with a severe contusion to the left collarbone and VR46 Racing said he would miss the Czech Grand Prix, with no replacement announced. "Following two days of medical checks, physiothera-

py sessions and rest, we decided together with the team to miss this GP at Brno," said Morbidelli, who is fifth in the championship, 205 points behind leader Marc Marquez.

"It's always difficult to take decisions

like this, but after a heavy crash like the one I had in Sachsenring - and in this moment of the championship before the summer break - it doesn't make any sense to take risks, because the pain is still persistent."

Spaniard Vinales underwent surgery on Sunday for a fractured left shoulder after he suffered a highside crash in qualifying, paving the way for compatriot Pol Espargaro to make his return with Tech3, a team he debuted with in MotoGP back in 2014. "It's been a long time since our last visit to Brno, which is a fantastic track," said Espargaro, who has not raced in MotoGP for nearly a year after featuring as a wildcard for KTM last season. "The last time we raced here I felt super-good in my best period with KTM so let's see how it is with the new surface."

The Czech Grand Prix will also mark the return of Aprilia's Jorge Martin after the reigning MotoGP champion recovered from injuries he suffered in a crash at the Qatar Grand Prix in April.

GERMAN GRAND PRIX TO STAY ON MOTOGP CALENDAR UNTIL 2031

The German Grand Prix will remain on the MotoGP calendar until 2031 after a new five-year contract was signed to continue holding races at the iconic Sachsenring, rights holder Dorna Sports said.

The new deal will see MotoGP celebrate the Sachsenring's 100th anniversary in 2027 as motorcycle racing's premier class capitalises on the growing interest in the sport, which had over 250,000 fans attend the Grand Prix over the weekend.

"Saxony is motor racing country... The new record attendance at the weekend showed once again how much we love motor racing in Saxony," Michael Kretschmer, Prime Minister of Saxony, said in a statement. Ducati's Marc Marquez won the German Grand Prix on Sunday to extend his world championship lead to 83 points, proving once again why he is known as the 'King of Sachsenring' after claiming his ninth MotoGP victory at the circuit.