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Pogacar retakes Tour de France lead in crushing mountain win



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No ceiling for Yamal as he follows Messi's footsteps

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GOLF

Olesen, Li and Fitzpatrick lead Open, McIlroy rallies after nervy start

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FOOTBALL

Qatar drawn with UAE and Oman in World Cup Playoffs

Winners of each of the three-team groups, which will be played in October, will qualify for World Cup



Qatar players are currently training under Spanish coach Julen Lopetegui at an overseas training camp in Austria, which began on July 11 and runs through July 27, as part of preparations for the playoff matches.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Back-to-back Asian Cup winners Qatar were drawn to face United Arab Emirates and Oman in the fourth phase of Asia's preliminaries for the 2026 World Cup yesterday in Kuala Lumpur, with Saudi Arabia taking on Iraq and Indonesia.

The winners of each of the three-team groups, which will be played in October, will join already-qualified Australia, Japan, South Korea, Uzbekistan, Iran and Jordan at next year's expanded 48-nation finals

in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The nations finishing in second place in each group will advance to a further round of qualifying, which will be held over two legs in November on a home-and-away basis. Asia has been granted eight guaranteed berths at the finals. A possible ninth berth is available to the winner of November's match-up via an intercontinental playoff in March.

Group B hosts Qatar, organisers of the 2022 World Cup but who have never qualified for the finals on merit, will take on Oman in their first game on Oct. 8. UAE will face the Omanis on Oct. 11, with Qatar and the UAE meeting on Oct. 14.

Qatar advanced to the playoffs after finishing fourth in Group A of the third round of the Asian Qualifiers. Qatar players are currently training under Spanish coach Julen Lopetegui at an overseas training camp in Austria, which began on July 11 and runs through July 27, as part of preparations for the playoff matches.

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.

UAE, seeking a second appearance at the Finals following their debut in the 1990 edition, finished third in Group A while Oman – hoping for a debut appearance at

AFC ASIAN QUALIFIERS™ ROAD TO 26			
GROUP A		GROUP B	
	QATAR		SAUDI ARABIA
	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES		IRAQ
	OMAN		INDONESIA
13 NOV 2025		13 NOV 2025	
RUNNER-UP GROUP A		VS	RUNNER-UP GROUP B
18 NOV 2025		18 NOV 2025	
RUNNER-UP GROUP B		VS	RUNNER-UP GROUP A

the global showpiece – finished fourth in Group B.

Saudi Arabia, who are attempting to qualify for a seventh World Cup finals since 1994, will host Group A and open against Indonesia on Oct. 8. Indonesia will then play Graham Arnold's Iraq on Oct. 11 before the Saudis and Iraq face off on Oct. 14, with matches taking place in Jeddah. Saudi Arabia, bidding for a third consecutive appearance at the finals, have to navigate the playoffs after finishing third in Group C of the third round

Iraq, whose only previous appearance at the FIFA World Cup was in 1986, advanced to the playoffs after finishing third in Group B while Indonesia, whose previous appearance at the FIFA World Cup finals was in the 1938 edition, finished fourth in Group C. Coached by former Barcelona star and Dutch great Patrick Kluivert, Indonesia have embarked on a recruitment drive of Dutch-born players and backroom staff to bolster their bid for a first World Cup finals berth since becoming an inde-

pendent nation. Jordi Cruyff, son of Dutch football legend Johan, was in February appointed technical adviser to the Football Association of Indonesia to work alongside Kluivert. Indonesia last qualified for a World Cup while still under Dutch colonial rule and lost 6-0 to Hungary in their only match of that tournament, hosted by France.

They will face a difficult task against Middle East giants Saudi Arabia, who have home advantage and will be heavily favoured to top Group B.

DRAW RESULT
Matches to be played between Oct 8 and 14
Group A: Qatar (H), UAE, Oman
Group B: Saudi Arabia (H), Iraq, Indonesia

KNOCKOUT STAGE
13 Nov: 1st leg: Runners-up Group A v Runners-up Group B
18 Nov: 2nd leg: Runners-up Group B v Runners-up Group A

REVIEW

PSG's season of glory: Records, redemption and rise of new stars

Years from now, when Paris Saint-Germain fans leaf through the pages of their club's storied history, they will pause to fondly remember the incredible chapter of the 2024/25 season. Although their fairy-tale campaign came to a deflating end with a 3-0 defeat against Chelsea in the FIFA Club World Cup 2025 final last Sunday, the magic of their season's story, penned by French football's most decorated club of the century, will long outshine that closing scene.

Luis Enrique's men delivered dazzling performances across all competitions. They won their 13th Ligue 1 title, claimed the Trophée des Champions for the sixth consecutive time and lifted their 16th Coupe de France – and that was just on the domestic scene. On the continental stage, they lit up Europe with their brilliance, ultimately capturing the UEFA Champions League crown on 31 May – a long-coveted trophy that they had made no secret of pursuing since Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) took the reins in 2011.

"I've heard that we've become the yardstick against which other teams measure themselves," the Spanish coach told FIFA.com a few days after conquering Europe. "It's wonderful, but talk is cheap. Now it's up to us to prove that [we deserve this new status]."

And they certainly proved it. Les Rouge et Bleu enjoyed an exceptional run at the Club World Cup, swatting Atlético de Madrid aside 4-0 in their opening game at the Rose Bowl in Los Angeles before overcoming Inter Miami by the same scoreline in the round of 16 in Atlanta.

Reduced to nine men in the closing stages of their quarter-final clash with Bayern München, PSG showed remarkable resilience to secure a 2-0 victory and book their place in the last four. As for their stratospheric 4-0 win over Real Madrid in the semi-finals, the highlights of that par-



Luis Enrique's PSG delivered dazzling performances across all competitions. They won their 13th Ligue 1 title, claimed the Trophée des Champions for the sixth consecutive time and lifted their 16th Coupe de France and capped it off with maiden UEFA Champions League.

titular masterclass will, without a doubt, still be racking up millions of views in ten years' time.

Although succumbing to Chelsea's dominance in the final showdown in New York New Jersey's MetLife Stadium, the Parisians left the USA with their heads held high, having lived out a dream season. Now, a well-earned break awaits Luis Enrique and his star-studded squad.

TROPHIES LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTRE
Les Parisiens' 2024/25 campaign will forever be remembered as a golden chapter in their history books, especially because Luis Enrique's squad came so tantalisingly close to a clean sweep of silverware. In addition to their three domestic titles, they finally captured the crown jewel of

European football: the UEFA Champions League.

Since QSI took over in 2011, PSG had persistently pursued continental glory, but fell short in a narrow 1-0 loss to Bayern in the 2021 final and suffered painful exits at the hands of Barcelona in 2017, Manchester United in the 2019 edition and Real Madrid in 2022.

In last season's instalment of Europe's elite club competition, PSG narrowly escaped elimination in the league phase before upping their game to see off English representatives Liverpool, Aston Villa and Arsenal. Their ascent reached a thrilling climax in Munich, where the Ligue 1 juggernauts dismantled FC Internazionale Milano 5-0 in the tournament decider, sending millions of fans into raptures.

DEMBELE COMES OF AGE
One of the season's defining stories was Ousmane Dembele coming into his prime. Reimagined as a central striker by Luis Enrique midway through the campaign, the former Barcelona winger joined the ranks of the game's greats.

Operating closer to the opposition's goal and visibly more confident in and around the box, Dembele became a relentless scoring sensation, spurred on by the high-stakes Champions League clashes against Manchester City, Liverpool and Arsenal. "This has been the best season of my career," PSG's top scorer said.

With 35 goals in 53 appearances, Dembele smashed his previous personal best of 14 strikes in 42 matches in 2018/19 during his Barcelona days.

A hamstring injury sidelined the fleet-footed Frenchman throughout the group stage at the global bonanza on USA soil.

But when he entered the fray in the knockout stage, he made up for lost time, netting the second goal in the last-eight showdown against Bayern München – despite his team being down to nine men by that point – before claiming a goal and an assist in the semi-final contest with Real Madrid, in which he initiated PSG's suffocating press as he ran the Los Blancos backline ragged. Antonio Rudiger probably still wakes up in a cold sweat at the thought of his encounter against the devilish Dembele.

DOUE'S EMERGENCE
Les Rouge et Bleu's red-hot attack was on fire last term, notching 168 goals – just shy of their all-time record of 171 recorded in 2017/18. Much of that was thanks to Doue's exploits. The attacking midfielder joined PSG from Rennes without much ado last August and took a few months to find his feet. However, from December onwards he became unstoppable, playing a

key role in PSG's success.

At just 19 years of age, Doue was named player of the match in the Champions League final against Inter, having scored a decisive brace and carving out a place for himself in PSG folklore. At the Club World Cup, the Angers-born forward opened the scoring in the quarter-final against Die Roten with his 16th goal of the season – one he'll never forget.

Since the turn of the year, the formidable French outfit have won 16 matches in which they have racked up at least four goals – a European record in 2025 that simply would not have been possible without the talented Doue.

"We've proven what we're capable of out there," said the fresh-faced goal-getter in the build-up to the Club World Cup final. "We are making our fans proud. That's our goal: to get people to fall in love with PSG because of the football we play."

A MIDFIELD TRIO LIKE NO OTHER
PSG fans seem to be able to put personal differences aside and agree on one thing: the trident made up of Vitinha, Fabian Ruiz and Joao Neves form one of the greatest engine rooms the club has ever had. The three midfield maestros imposed themselves every time they crossed the white line last season as they showcased their on-field chemistry, tactical sharpness, technical quality and boundless energy.

Orchestrator-in-chief Vitinha has become central to Luis Enrique's tactical set-up. He established the tempo for PSG's fluid style of play, blending ball-winning ability, passing prowess and clinical finishing in a campaign that yielded eight goals.

These qualities also perfectly describe PSG's other two Iberian midfielders, who thrilled the Parc des Princes faithful with their steel, brilliant assists and ability to drive into the final third before finishing with aplomb.

CYCLING

Pogacar retakes Tour de France lead after stage 12

‘I was thinking of him in the final kilometre. This sport can be so hard’



UAE Team Emirates - XRG team's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar cycles in the ascent of Hautacam during the 12th stage of the 112th edition of the Tour de France cycling race, 180.6km between Auch and Hautacam, in the Pyrenees mountains of southwestern France, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Hautacam, France

Tadej Pogacar reclaimed the leader's yellow jersey at the Tour de France with an imperious stage 12 triumph on the Hautacam mountain in the Pyrenees yesterday.

Pogacar skipped away on an 11km solo ascent of the fabled climb to finish 2min 10sec ahead of key rival Jonas Vingegaard while overnight leader Ben Healy wilted to a 13min deficit on the day.

French President Emmanuel Macron was on hand at the mountaintop finish to congratulate the Slovenian Team UAE rider.

Olympic champion Remco

Evenepoel dug deep after being dropped on the first of three climbs to claw back level, before eventually losing 3min 35sec on the day's 180.6km ride from Auch, finishing seventh.

In the overall standings Pogacar now leads the Tour de France by 3min 31sec over Denmark's Vingegaard while Evenepoel is third at a daunting 4min 45sec.

Pogacar said after the race his team had been secretly targeting this stage for some time.

"The plan was to win this stage," he said.

"I'm super happy to take time and win on this particular climb," said the 26-year-old who fell heavily on stage 11.

"You don't know how your body reacts after a crash. It wasn't so bad. The team did a super job," he said.

The champion had kind words for Irishman Healy, who had a bruising day himself.

"Healy tried, he showed big spirit. It was hard for everybody today," said Pogacar.

He also dedicated this win to Italian junior cyclist Samuele Privitera who died aged 19 following a fall at this week's Tour of the Aoste Valley-Mont Blanc.

"I was thinking of him in the final kilometre. This sport can be so hard. It's so sad," Pogacar said.

Today's stage 13 could shake up the standings again as it is an unforgiving individual time trial, mainly uphill, that the Slovenian has been looking forward to.

"The race isn't over, just look at the next few stages and then there's next week too," said Pogacar.

Pogacar also took over the pol-

ka dot king of the mountain jersey while Jonathan Milan has the green sprint jersey and Evenepoel the best under-25's white jersey.

Overnight leader Healy took a beating on his second day defending the yellow jersey. The EF rider slipped off the pace on the first climb while doggedly trying to limit his losses.

Having described his time in yellow as a "whirlwind", Healy is now eleventh, over 13 minutes behind Pogacar.

There were three mountains on the menu yesterday as the peloton entered the Pyrenees with the first the Col de Soulor climb with 11.8km at 7.3 percent.

A shorter Col de Bordes 3km ascent at 7.7 percent preceded Pogacar's awesome attack on the fabled Hautacam, 13.6km at 7.8 percent.

ITALIAN CYCLIST PRIVITERA DIES AGED 19 AFTER FALL

Rome: Italian junior cyclist Samuele Privitera has died aged 19 following a fall at this week's Tour of the Aoste Valley-Mont Blanc, the Italian Cycling Federation (FCI) announced yesterday.

Privitera, who was a member of the Hagens Berman Jayco team, lost his life on Wednesday after an incident on the first stage of the race, near the French and Swiss border in north-western Italy.

"The circumstances of the accident in which he was involved on a downhill stretch of road

in Pontey, 32 kilometres from the finish line, which ended in the centre of Aosta, are still unclear," the FCI said.

"Privitera apparently hit a speed bump and lost control of his bike," it added.

The second stage of the race yesterday was cancelled after the death of Privitera, who was in his second season with the US-based team. "Promptly assisted by the medical services following the race, the young man was taken to the Parini Hospital in Aosta, where he sadly passed away," race organisers

Societa Ciclistica Valdostana said in FCI's statement. The race will resume with the third stage that has been moved to today, from Pre Saint Didier to Col du Gran San Bernardo. "This will be preceded by a moment of remembrance, and the initial section of the stage will be neutralised in memory of Samuele," the organisers added.

Last July, 25-year-old Norwegian Andre Drege died during the Tour of Austria and in 2023 Swiss rider Gino Mader lost his life on the Tour of Switzerland aged 26.

BOXING

Pacquiao set to spring surprise as he targets Barrios' belt in comeback fight

Reuters
Manila

Former world champion Manny Pacquiao is embracing his underdog status as he gets ready to turn back the clock when he steps out of retirement to face WBC welterweight champion Mario Barrios in their Saturday showdown at the MGM Grand.

The 46-year-old Filipino feels rejuvenated after four years away from the ring and said he was returning for another opportunity to make history.

"I'm enjoying training camp as much as I did when I was 26 or 29 years old. The motivation to train hard and the discipline are the same," Pacquiao said at yesterday's press conference.

"I mean, it's because I've been away from boxing why I'm still interested and passionate about fighting."

The veteran fighter retired from boxing in 2021. He had a stint in the Philippine Senate from 2016 to 2022 and an unsuccessful 2022 presidential bid.

His remarkable record includes



Manny Pacquiao (left) speaks as WBC welterweight champion Mario Barrios looks on during their news conference at MGM Grand Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. (AFP)

championships in eight weight divisions, a first in boxing history, and he was the oldest welterweight world champion at age 40 in 2019.

"I cannot imagine that I am still fighting here in the Grand Arena after 24 years. It's a blessing, a favour from God, and I'm so thankful to be here, still fighting and putting on a good show for the fans," he said.

The Filipino is also enjoying being the underdog: "In so many of my fights I was the underdog, and I surprised them... Manny always brings surprises," he added.

Standing in his path is Barrios, a Mexican-American with 29 wins (18 by knockout) and two defeats in 32 bouts, who remains confident despite facing a boxing great.

"You know, Manny is a very like-

able person. I can't think of anything bad to say about him other than, you know, he's facing me for my title," Barrios said.

"At the end of the day, he's just another man in there.

"He's another opponent trying to take my title, regardless of everything he's accomplished and given to the sport," the 30-year-old added.

CRICKET

‘Proud’ Litton lauds Bangladesh’s T20 triumph in Sri Lanka



Bangladesh's captain Litton Das walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal during the third and final Twenty20 international against Sri Lanka at the R Premadasa International Cricket Stadium in Colombo on Wednesday. (AFP)

AFP
Colombo

Bangladesh skipper Litton Das says his team's first ever T20 series win in Sri Lanka has been "huge" for his leadership and made the cricket-crazy fans back home happy.

Bangladesh hammered Sri Lanka by eight wickets on Wednesday in Colombo to clinch the three-match series 2-1 and cap off their tour of the island nation on a high.

Chasing a modest 133 for victory, Bangladesh rode on opener Tanzid Hasan's unbeaten 73 to achieve their target with 21 balls to spare at the R Premadasa Stadium.

Spinner Mahedi Hasan set up victory with figures of 4-11 to restrict Sri Lanka to 132-7 after the hosts elected to bat first.

"It is a proud moment for me as a captain," Litton said.

"I am happy that the fans are also happy seeing us win a T20 series in Sri Lanka."

Litton, who was named Bangladesh T20 skipper until next year's World Cup in India, led the T20 team in the absence of Najmul Hossain Shanto last year in a 3-0 series sweep in the West Indies.

"Both series wins are huge for me," said Litton, who was named player of the series for his 114 runs

in the three matches. "Beating the West Indies in their back yard is massive. They are a strong team in their conditions. It is the same in Sri Lanka. They are a balanced team too."

Sri Lanka, led by Charith Asalanka, won the ODI series 2-1 followed by victory in the opening T20 before they lost two straight matches by big margins.

"We are bitterly disappointed," said Asalanka.

"We probably made a blunder at the toss. When I came on to bowl, I realised that the wicket had improved.

"We need to take responsibility for the way we batted. It can happen in one game but this happening in back-to-back games is a huge concern."

"The World Cup is just seven months away and we can't let these things happen. Credit to Bangladesh.

"They outperformed us. They fielded better than us and their bowlers were more effective than ours. Their batsmen also had clear plans."

BRIEF SCORES
Bangladesh 133 for 2 (Tanzid 73*, Litton 32, Mendis 1-21) **beat Sri Lanka 132 for 7** (Nissanka 46, Shanaka 35*, Mahedi 4-11) **by eight wickets**

French ski resort threatens to withdraw from 2030 Winter Olympics

Lyon: French ski resort Meribel threatened yesterday to withdraw from being a host venue of the 2030 Winter Olympics.

The village in the French Alps was initially slated to host Paralympic skiing and women's alpine skiing.

Thierry Monin, the mayor of Allues which governs Meribel, yesterday said the Games' organising committee president Edgar Grosperon visited earlier in the day and presented "three options", one of which was the hosting of the women's Olympic event around 75 kilometres away in Val d'Isere.

"If Meribel doesn't have both events, which doesn't adhere to the Olympic charter, we will withdraw our candidacy," Monin told AFP.



"Since 1992 the two events (men's and women's alpine skiing) have been at the same venue," he added.

Last year, the International Olympic Committee and France presented a project of hosting the women's alpine skiing events in Meribel and the men's competitions in the neighbouring Courchevel ski resort.

GOLF

Olesen, Li, Fitzpatrick lead the Open, McIlroy rallies

SCHEFFLER IS ONE SHOT BACK IN SECOND BUT WIND AND RAIN MAKE CONDITIONS HARD



Denmark's Jacob Skov Olesen lines up a putt on the 18th green during the first round of the 153rd Open Championship at Royal Portrush Golf Club, Portrush, Northern Ireland, yesterday. **Right:** Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy plays from the rough on the 11th hole. (Reuters/AFP)

Reuters
Portrush, Northern Ireland

World number 354 Jacob Skov Olesen of Denmark, China's Li Haotong and England's Matthew Fitzpatrick shot four-under-par 67s to share the British Open first-round lead in tough conditions at Royal Portrush yesterday.

World number one Scottie Scheffler was one stroke adrift after a 68, and Rory McIlroy made a

solid start to his bid for a second Claret Jug after recovering from a nervous bogey five at the first hole.

That was three shots better than he managed in the 2019 Open at Portrush, but not what his legion of fans had hoped for after the world number two became the sixth player to complete the Grand Slam by winning this year's Masters.

The Northern Irishman regained his composure to birdie the second and fifth holes and get to one under par.

After early sunshine on the Dun-

luce Links, heavy rain made life difficult for the players.

Qualifier Olesen sank a 40-foot birdie putt on the tough opening hole and eagled the 12th before making his second bogey at the last.

"Obviously, annoyed to finish off with a bogey and not getting it up in two from there. But it happens, and whether it happens on hole seven or hole 18, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter," Olesen said.

"I always feel like if I play my game that I can do well, especially

around links courses," Olesen added.

BRUTAL COURSE

Li made four birdies in a flawless round. The world number 111 finished third in the 2017 Open at Birkdale after shooting a closing 63.

"I think I had 18 highlights today. I tried to avoid a bogey and did it, which is great," Li said. "It's very tough, brutal."

Fitzpatrick, the 2022 US Open champion, eagled the second hole and notched up three birdies.

"I just felt like I did everything well," he said. "Drove it well, approach play was good, and chipped and putted well. It was just an all around good day."

American Scheffler picked up five birdies and was happy with his game despite bogeys at the ninth and 11th holes as he seeks his first British Open title.

"Felt like I hit the ball nice off the tee, and really only had one swing I wasn't too happy with on maybe the second hole, so definitely a good bit of confidence for the next couple rounds," Scheffler said.

England's Matthew Jordan joined the American on 68.

Former world number one Lee Westwood, 52, and Dane Nicolai Hojgaard also began well with two-under 69s. Veteran American Phil Mickelson, the 2013 Open champion, rolled back the years with a 70, including a spectacular par-save when he holed out from a greenside bunker.

"That bunker shot that buried in the lip, and then to make it, it was obviously a lot of luck. It was crazy. I was just trying to save bogey, and I got lucky," the 55-year-old said.



TENNIS

World No.1 Sabalenka pulls out of WTA Montreal event with fatigue

AFP
Montreal

World number one **Aryna Sabalenka** has withdrawn from the WTA Canadian Open tournament in Montreal due to fatigue, Tennis Canada announced yesterday.

The 27-year-old from Belarus, runner-up at the Australian and French Opens, comes off semi-final runs at Wimbledon and Berlin and titles at Madrid and Miami.

"I'm looking forward to kicking off the North American hard-court swing, but to give myself the best chance for success this season, I've decided it's in my best interest to skip Montreal," Sabalenka said.

Missing the July 27-August 7 event leaves the reigning US Open champion only one major tuneup, at Cincinnati in August, before she tries to defend her crown on the Flushing Meadows hardcourts.

"I'll miss my amazing Canadian fans, but I'm already looking forward to seeing you all next year," Sabalenka said.

"Thanks for your understanding



and support - it means the world to me."

Sabalenka was upset in the Wimbledon semi-finals by American Amanda Anisimova.

"We're obviously disappointed that Aryna won't be with us this year," tournament director Valerie Tetreault said.

World number 10 Paula Badosa of Spain withdrew from the event due to injury. The two departures opened spots in the main draw for American Caty McNally and Japan's Moyuka Uchijima.

Canada's Eugenie Bouchard an-

nounced on Wednesday that she will retire from professional tennis after the WTA event in Montreal, her hometown.

Bouchard, 31, rose as high as fifth in the world rankings and enjoyed her best career season in 2014 when she reached her only Grand Slam singles final at Wimbledon.

She also made semi-final runs that year at the Australian and French Opens and reached the fourth round at the US Open, her best career showings in each of the Grand Slam tournaments.

JABEUR ANNOUNCES BREAK FROM TENNIS 'TO REDISCOVER JOY OF LIVING'

Paris: Former world number two **Ons Jabeur** announced yesterday she was going to "take a step back and finally put myself first", after two difficult years on the circuit.

"For the last two years, I've been pushing myself so hard, fighting through injuries and facing many other challenges. But deep down, I haven't felt really happy on the court for some time now," the 30-year-old three-time Grand Slam finalist explained on social media.

"Tennis is such a beautiful sport. But right now, I feel it's time to step back and finally put myself first: to breathe, to heal, and to rediscover the joy of simply living," added the Tunisian world number 71.

In June, Jabeur was forced to retire from the first round at Wimbledon, having already lost her opener a few weeks earlier at the French Open.

"I wasn't expecting not to feel good. I have been practising pretty well the last few days," said Jabeur, who did not specify the reason for her withdrawal.

"These things happen. I'm pretty sad. It doesn't really help me with my confidence."

After losing in Paris, Jabeur spoke of the strain the sport can exert on players.

"Pushing through injury I've been doing, like, my whole life," she said.

"We have a lot of guilt inside us saying we're not doing enough or it's not enough, the pressure from sponsors, the pressure from the ranking, the pressure of providing... some players provide for their families as well. It is a very tough sport."

A highly popular player on the circuit with both fans and fellow players alike, Jabeur was runner-up at Wimbledon in 2022 and 2023, as well as the



US Open in 2022. Since reaching her career peak - historic for a woman from an Arab nation - Jabeur has struggled with a myriad of physical problems. Last year, the fan favourite shut down her season in September due to a shoulder problem. A calf injury first flared up in 2023, and returned at the Miami Open in March - where she was forced to retire when leading Jasmine Paolini.

Her last match ended abruptly in retirement, too - when trailing Viktoriya Tomova in the first round of Wimbledon, a tournament she reached the final at twice.

"I'm really sad. It doesn't really help me with my confidence and what I keep pushing myself to do, even though it was a very tough season for me. So I hope I'm going to feel better and we'll see what's going to happen," Jabeur said after her SW19 effort ended this year.

Currently ranked No. 71, the 30-year-old's most recent title came in Ningbo, China in September 2023.

ATHLETICS

Chepngetich suspended over banned substance

Reuters
London

Women's marathon record-holder Ruth Chepngetich has been provisionally suspended by the Athletics Integrity Unit for the presence and use of the prohibited substance hydrochlorothiazide (HCTZ).

The substance, a diuretic, was detected in a sample collected from the Kenyan athlete on March 14, the AIU said in a statement yesterday.

"Chepngetich was not provisionally suspended by the AIU at the time of notification, however, on 19 April, she opted for a voluntary provisional suspension while the AIU's investigation was ongoing," said AIU Head Brett Clothier.

"In the intervening months, the AIU continued its investiga-

tion and today issued a Notice of Charge and imposed its own provisional suspension."

The AIU said HCTZ is used clinically to treat fluid retention and hypertension, adding that diuretics may be abused to mask the presence in urine of other prohibited substances.

Chepngetich smashed the women's marathon record in Chicago last October, running two hours, nine minutes and 56 seconds to become the first woman to break 2:10.

Chepngetich has won the Chicago Marathon three times (2021, 2022, and 2024).

In April, Chepngetich withdrew from the London Marathon, saying at the time she was "not in the right place mentally or physically" to race her best. Overall her career has been marked by a consistently high level of performance in major marathons and half marathons.

RUGBY

Lions wrestle with favourites tag as Wallabies struggle with low confidence ahead of clash

Reuters
Brisbane

The British & Irish Lions have rarely been as heavily favoured to win a test as they will be for their opening clash with Australia tomorrow, even if you might not guess it listening to coach Andy Farrell.

The former rugby league player is too canny a man to hand the opposition any hubristic quotes they can snip out of the newspaper and hang on the dressing room wall for motivation, let alone give his squad any cause for complacency.

"There's no overconfidence at all," Farrell told a news conference as he faced repeated questions about the favourable odds after naming his team yesterday.

"There's a realisation of what it is, and what it means and how privileged we are etc. But that doesn't get in the way of how we prepare to make sure that we allow ourselves to be the best version of ourselves."

Many of the thousands of travelling Li-

ons fans already starting to fill the streets in downtown Brisbane yesterday were not as wary of projecting their confidence, even if some of the Welsh contingent were more than a little disgruntled.

For the first time in nearly 130 years tomorrow, there will be no Welsh representative on the pitch in a Lions test after Farrell made the decision to play Tom Curry and leave out in-form Wales skipper Jac Morgan.

His Wallabies counterpart and former mentor Joe Schmidt would probably have welcomed such a selection dilemma when choosing Australia's back row, particularly with his best ball-runner Rob Valetini unavailable with a calf strain.

Having also lost his starting playmaker Noah Lolesio to injury after a warm-up test against Fiji, Schmidt selected flyhalf Tom Lynagh for his first test start and flanker Nick Champion de Crespigny for his international debut.

Lynagh has promise and pedigree as the son of Wallabies great Michael, but tomorrow will be pitting his wits against 87-cap Scotland flyhalf Finn Russell, 10 years his senior and

a three-times Lions tourist. Schmidt spoke glowingly of Lynagh's "quiet confidence" and pointed hopefully to the fact that the 22-year-old would at least be playing on his home ground.

"Probably not ideal to be starting your first test match for the Wallabies against the British & Irish Lions," he conceded.

"But you've got to start somewhere, and if not now, when? I am confident that he'll cope and I'm very confident that he'll learn from the occasion."

"I'd like to think that we can still go out, probably sharing Tom Lynagh's quiet confidence that we can put a game together that at least can keep the British & Irish Lions pretty honest on the day."

Local hopes of success otherwise appear to rely on Schmidt's coaching skills, their relatively decent test record in Brisbane, and the lore that the Wallabies "always turn up"

Farrell has warned his players constantly of the latter point and, for all the wins and razzle dazzle in the tour matches, said he would not know the true mettle of the 2025 Lions until Saturday night.

FOOTBALL

No ceiling for Yamal as he follows Messi’s footsteps

Teen has made over 100 appearances for the club, scoring 25 goals, and winning two La Liga titles



Barcelona's Spanish forward Lamine Yamal attends a training session at the Joan Gamper training ground in Sant Joan Despi, near Barcelona, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Barcelona

Three days after turning 18, Lamine Yamal received the most special gift of all – Barcelona’s iconic number 10 shirt.

Although the gifted teenage winger has eschewed comparisons to all-time Barca great Lionel Messi, he has followed in the Argentine’s footsteps by taking the number 10, also worn by Diego Maradona and Ronaldinho among other historic Barca stars. “I will try to continue this legacy,” said Yamal on Wednesday, undaunted by the shirt’s history.

Despite his age, Yamal has made over 100 appearances for the club, scoring 25 goals, and winning two La Liga titles since his debut at 15 in 2023. The Spain international, who won Euro 2024 with his country the day after his 17th birthday, is both the sport’s most exciting prospect and an already devastating threat on Barca’s right wing.

Yamal is among the contenders for the Ballon d’Or after helping the Catalan giants win a domestic treble of La Liga, the Copa del Rey and Spanish Super Cup. Despite two sensational displays against Inter Milan in the Champions League semi-final, Yamal and his club fell just short, leaving a clear target ahead for the new season.

“We won’t stop until we leave this club where it deserves, at the highest rung,” pledged Yamal in the aftermath of Barca’s elimination. After emerging from Barca’s

feted La Masia academy like Messi, Yamal smashed a series of records, including becoming the youngest La Liga goalscorer and the youngest Champions League starter.

Yamal is also the youngest scorer in a Clasico and the youngest to win a major international trophy among many other feats. Immensely skilful, a superb dribbler, quick and creative, Yamal is one of the most exciting players to watch in world football.

The winger has worked on his finishing and with six goals in his last nine games for club and country, is starting to become more consistent in front of goal. The last time Barca won the Champions League was in 2015, with Messi as their key player.

“I don’t compare myself to him because I don’t compare myself to anyone – and much less with Messi,” said Yamal in April, reiterating that on Wednesday at an event to mark his new number. “Messi made his path and I will make mine,” said the teenager.

However it is hard for everyone else to resist the comparison, with Yamal also playing on the right flank and cutting in on his favoured left foot, as Messi did for a long period of his career. The Argentine’s greatness was marked by his consistency, with a record eight Ballon d’Or wins showing he did not let his standards drop.

Only time will tell whether Yamal will be able to reproduce his longevity, but thus far he has risen to meet every challenge he has faced. With his penchant for trickery, and playing with great

joy, Yamal has also been compared to former Barca winger Neymar, whom he spent some time with this summer in Brazil and has described as his “idol”.

Yamal’s huge 18th birthday celebration last weekend, with a celebrity-filled guest list, was a more akin to the Brazilian’s style than that of the more introverted Messi.

The party-loving Neymar occasionally raised hackles at his clubs and Yamal’s event on Saturday has caused a stir, with the Spanish government asking for an investigation into whether hiring entertainers with dwarfism broke any laws.

Once that storm settles, the focus will be on whether Messi’s number 10 weighs heavy on Yamal, but with the forward showing no nerves, no matter the situation, most would back him to continue shining.

“I left fear behind in the park in Mataro a while ago,” said Yamal, referring to his hometown, which he still acknowledges during his goal celebrations by signing a 304 for the postcode of his old neighbourhood Rocafonda.

The winger signed a new deal until 2031 in May, making him one of the best-paid players at the club. With a new contract, a new shirt and no longer a minor, Yamal’s future begins now and there is no limit to what he could achieve. “We have to keep enjoying it above all, because when we’re enjoying ourselves we’re much happier and we can win,” said Yamal on Wednesday, keen for the fun to continue.

ROUND-UP

Poland’s Urban targets Lewandowski return as World Cup qualifiers loom

Poland’s new manager **Jan Urban** said his immediate priority was persuading striker Robert Lewandowski to return to the national team. Urban was named on Wednesday to replace Michal Probiez, who resigned in June following a row over his decision to replace Lewandowski as captain.

Poland sit third in their World Cup qualifying group behind Finland and the Netherlands and the Barcelona forward is widely seen as vital to their hopes of reaching next year’s tournament. “I’ll do everything... so that Robert comes back, because we know what situation Polish football is in,” Urban told reporters.

Lewandowski, 36, is Poland’s all-time top scorer with 85 goals in 158 appearances. “As of today, we can’t afford not to have Robert in this team,” the new manager added.

Urban acknowledged the challenges faced by Poland, following a 2-1 loss to Finland in June and amid uncertainty surrounding Lewandowski’s role. “Above all, we’re talking about this difficult moment not because of the defeat to Finland. We have several problems to solve, including the matter of Robert Lewandowski’s resignation,” Urban said.

“All of this needs to be properly sorted out to build a good atmosphere for this team to function. We’re aiming for a situation where every player wants to come to the national team and feels good being part of it.” Poland’s next World Cup qualifier is against the Netherlands away on September 4 before they host Finland three days later.

AUBAMEYANG LEAVES SAUDI SIDE AL QADSIAH AFTER ONE SEASON

Gabon striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has left Saudi Pro League side Al Qadsiah after one season, the club said. The former Arsenal player joined Al Qadsiah last year, after they were promoted to the top-tier league. During his one-season spell, the 36-year-old scored 21 goals and made three assists in 36 matches in all competitions, helping the team finish fourth in the league and reach the King’s Cup final, where they lost to Al Ittihad.

NAPOLI SIGN DUTCH INTERNATIONAL FORWARD LANG

Serie A champions Napoli announced the signing of Netherlands attacker Noa Lang from PSV Eindhoven. “SSC Napoli announces that it has definitively acquired the registration of the player Noa Noell Lang from PSV Eindhoven,” the Serie A outfit wrote in a short statement on their website.

According to Italian media, Napoli have paid 25mn for the 26-year-old who is the second high-profile player to leave PSV within the last week following Malik Tillman’s move to Bayer Leverkusen. Lang came through the ranks at Ajax, before joining Belgian side Club Brugge in October 2020 on loan, later making the move permanent the following summer.

In 2023, Lang signed for PSV where he would go on to make 63 appearances in all competitions, scoring 19 goals and creating 14 more.



During his time with PSV he won two Eredivisie titles, in addition to the brace of Belgian league titles he collected at Brugge. Noa boasts 14 caps for the Netherlands, scoring three goals and laying on two assists for the Oranje.

The addition of the diminutive winger follows on from Napoli’s acquisition of Kevin De Bruyne from Manchester City – Italy’s biggest transfer of the summer. Napoli are also in advanced negotiations with Udinese to sign another attacker in Italy international Lorenzo Lucca (35mn euros) and are targeting Bologna’s Dutch defender Sam Beukema (30mn euros).

Napoli, crowned Italian champions for the fourth time in their history last season, hope to finance these arrivals with the permanent transfer of Nigerian striker Victor Osimhen to Galatasaray for a fee of 75mn euros.

ARSENAL SMASH RECORD TO MAKE SMITH FIRST WOMEN’S MILLION-POUND SIGNING European champions Arsenal shattered the women’s transfer record by signing Canadian forward Olivia Smith from Liverpool, for a fee of one million pounds (\$1.34mn) according to media reports, making the 20-year-old the first female player to break the seven-figure barrier.

Arsenal’s blockbuster move eclipses the previous record set by American defender Naomi Girma’s 900,000-pound transfer from San Diego Wave to Chelsea in January, although the 25-year-old had already broken the one million dollar mark. The first player in men’s football to command a million-pound price tag was former England forward Trevor Francis when he moved from Birmingham City to Nottingham Forest in 1979.

“It’s my dream to compete for the biggest titles here in England and in Europe and I’m

excited to get started and contribute to doing that here with Arsenal,” Smith said in a statement. The versatile Smith, who can operate as a striker or play on the wing, enjoyed a stellar debut season at Liverpool despite the club’s struggles.

Smith finished as Liverpool’s leading scorer across all competitions with nine goals to claim their player of the season award, even as Liverpool slumped to seventh in the Women’s Super League after a fourth-placed finish the previous campaign.

Arsenal are building on their Champions League triumph with ambitious recruitment having already bolstered their squad by re-signing Chloe Kelly from Manchester City as a free agent. They also snapped up left back Taylor Hinds from Liverpool after her contract expired. But securing Smith represents a statement of intent from Renee Slegers’s side, who finished as runners-up to Chelsea in the league.

ARGENTINE CLUBS WELCOME BACK AWAY FANS AFTER 12 YEARS

Argentine football clubs can now welcome away supporters after a 12-year ban, the Argentine Football Association said on Thursday.

The ban, imposed in 2013 following violent incidents, including the death of a spectator, has now been lifted as part of a staged reintroduction ahead of the next round of fixtures in the current league campaign.

“This is a historic day because it marks the beginning of the return of visiting fans, enabling clubs that wish to host them to do so,” AFA president Claudio Tapia said.

He added that the move was partly motivated by the excitement surrounding Angel Di Maria’s return to Argentina’s top flight.

MOTOGP

‘Back in love’: champion Martin stays with Aprilia



AFP
Brno, Czech Republic

Reigning MotoGP world champion **Jorge Martin** said yesterday he would stay with the Aprilia team for the 2026 season, dispelling doubts about his future.

“In life we have to take some decisions and now the decision is to stay here in Aprilia for one more season,” Martin said at a press conference ahead of the Grand Prix of Czechia. The 27-year-old Spaniard has been at odds with Italian manufacturer Aprilia after initially saying he intended to activate a release clause in his contract at the end of the season.

Martin is returning to competition after being sidelined for nearly four months by injuries. After missing the first three races of the season following two pre-season crashes, he started in Qatar in April but crashed on lap 14, suffering injuries including 11 broken ribs.

He said he started to have doubts about his plan to quit while recovering in hospital and not knowing if he would race again. “From that point I had to fight for what I thought was the best for me... I’m not an idiot and I see that we together have a lot of potential. We can do really a lot and hopefully I am really prepared for what’s coming,” Martin added.

He said he could understand that Aprilia were fighting “for their rights” and appreciated how the team “helped me to be in a safe place”.

“I think in relationships it’s like a roller coaster. You can get in love, then you have some fights, but finally if you like the other person at the end of the day you will work hard to stay together and to fight for your targets,” he said. “For sure we had a big fight with Aprilia, but now is the time to start to build together, because... we want to win in the future. So this is the important thing and I think it’s possible to get back in love, let’s say,” Martin added.

Martin admitted he would rather be in the paddock than telling journalists about the move, but he said he wanted to sort the affair out before he hits the track. He declined to speculate on his form ahead of the Czech GP in Brno as he has managed to compete in just a single race in nine months.

“I have missed 6,000 kilometres so I have to take my patience. I need to take time... I’m happy to be here, I’m happy that I’m strong to get back to the bike,” Martin added. He said there was nothing to apologise for to Aprilia, but admitted he was grateful to the team. “Maybe in the future, if we win together, I will say thanks to (Aprilia sports director) Massimo (Rivola) for all they did to keep me here.”