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FOCUS | Page 2

LIV Golf returns to Riyadh for 2026 season opener



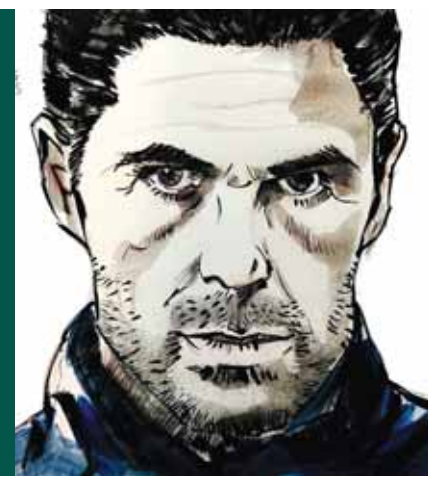
TENNIS | Page 3

Sizzling Osaka to face Tauson in WTA Canadian Open semis



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Safar 13, 1447 AH

GULF TIMES
SPORT



FOOTBALL

Arsenal have 'belief' to end trophy drought, says manager Arteta

Page 4

FOOTBALL

Qatar to play friendlies against Bahrain and Russia before play-offs

By Sports Reporter
Doha

As part of its preparations for the Asian play-off matches for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Qatar's national football team will play two friendly matches in September.

Al Annabi will first face Bahrain on Wednesday, September 3, at Al Thumama Stadium, followed by a clash against Russia on Sunday, September 7, at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, home of Al Sadd Club.

These friendlies serve as crucial tests for head coach Julen Lopetegui and his staff to assess player readiness and finalise the ideal squad ahead of October's decisive qualifiers.

Qatar will host all Group A matches in the continental play-off round, beginning with a match against Oman on October 8, followed by a fixture against the UAE on October 14 — both at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. The UAE and Oman will meet on October 11.

The winner of Group A will secure direct qualification for the 2026 World Cup. The runner-up will face the second-placed team from Group B — which includes hosts Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Indonesia — in a two-legged play-off on November 13 and 18. The victor of that tie will advance to the intercontinental play-off. Australia, Japan, Jordan, South Korea, Iran and Uzbekistan are the Asian sides to have already confirmed their spots at 2026 World Cup.

Having debuted in the 2022 FIFA World Cup as hosts, Qatar are now aiming to qualify on merit for the first time. Their preparations under Lopetegui have intensified, including a recent training camp in Austria.



Qatar players train during their recent camp in Austria.

The camp saw the surprise return of veteran forward Hassan al-Haydos, who came out of international retirement. Another key inclusion in the preliminary squad was Al Sadd midfielder Guilherme Torres, receiving his first-ever call-up for Qatar. Lopetegui, who replaced Luis Garcia earlier this year, had led the team to a win over Iran before a narrow loss to Uzbekistan in the third round.

The upcoming friendlies offer a final opportunity to evaluate the squad and make adjustments ahead of the crucial October qualifiers.

During their recent training camp in Austria, Qatar played two friendly matches — winning 2-0 against Ukrainian side Metalist Kharkiv and losing 0-3 to Italian club Udinese.



ASIA CUP BASKETBALL

Qatar go down fighting to Lebanon in thrilling opener

Despite a valiant comeback in the fourth quarter, Qatar fell short

By Sports Reporter
Jeddah

Qatar faced a tough 80-84 defeat to Lebanon in a closely-contested match in the 31st FIBA Asia Cup at the King Abdullah Sports City Arena in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, yesterday.

Qatar, bronze medallists in 2003 and 2005, entered the game with high aspirations in a competitive Group A, which also includes defending champions Australia and South Korea. The first quarter saw both teams evenly matched, with Lebanon — runners-up in 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2022 — gaining a slight edge through strong defence and quick offensive transitions, ending the period 16-11.

In the second quarter, Qatar showcased their best performance, led by American-born Brandon Goodwin's dynamic drives and precise shooting. Supported by robust defensive play from Abdulrahman Saad and Alen Hadzibegovic under the basket, Qatar took control, winning the quarter 24-19 to tie the score at 35-35 by halftime.

However, Lebanon dominated the third quarter, dictating the tempo and outscoring Qatar 26-16 to build a 10-point lead. Despite a valiant comeback in the fourth quarter, where Qatar outscored Lebanon 29-23, the deficit proved too large, and Lebanon secured the victory with a final score of 84-80. Goodwin led all scorers with an impressive 33 points for Qatar, while Lebanon's Ali Mansour and Diedrick Lawson each contributed 12 points.

Qatar's roster featured 12 players: Brandon Goodwin, Alen Hadzibegovic, Seydou Ndiaye, Zain Eddin Badri, Tyler Harris, Aladji Magassa, Omar Saad, Mustafa Ndao, Mohammed Basheer, Babacar Dieng, Abdulrahman Saad, and Mahmoud Darwish.

With this result, Lebanon earned two points, while Qatar secured one point in the Group A standings. In another Group A match, defending champions Australia asserted their dominance with a commanding 97-61 victory over South Korea, extending their Asia Cup winning streak to 13 games since their debut in 2017.



Qatar's Brandon Goodwin scores against Lebanon in their FIBA Asia Cup opener at the King Abdullah Sports City Arena in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, yesterday.

The tournament features four groups: Group A (Qatar, Lebanon, Australia, South Korea), Group B (Japan, Iran, Syria, Guam), Group C (China, Jordan, India, Saudi Arabia), and Group D (Philippines, New Zealand, Iraq, Chinese Taipei). The top team from each group advances directly to the quarter-finals, while second- and third-placed teams compete in crossover play-off matches to determine the remaining quarter-finalists.

Qatar now prepares for a challenging match-up against Australia tomorrow at 11am, followed by a potentially decisive clash against South Korea on Sunday at 11am, as they aim to secure a spot in the knockout rounds.

Yesterday's match was attended by HE Sheikh Saud bin Ali al-Thani, President of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), alongside Mohammed bin Saad al-Mughaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation, and Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari, General Secretary, National Teams Director, and head of Qatar's delegation.

SPOTLIGHT

Costa Rica have the hunger to go far at U-17 World Cup in Qatar, says Cordero

After a long absence, Costa Rica is back at the FIFA U17 World Cup, and 16-year-old centre-back **Thiago Cordero** is eager to help his team make a deep run at Qatar 2025.

With Los Ticos placed in Group C alongside the United Arab Emirates, Senegal, and Croatia, the expectations are high — and so is the team's confidence. Cordero, widely considered one of Costa Rica's brightest young prospects, could wear the captain's armband in November. Currently playing for Saprissa's U-21 squad and training regularly with the first team, he's been learning directly from veteran defenders like Oscar Duarte and Kendall Waston.

"I've learned a lot about communication and decision-making," he told *FIFA.com*. "Oscar showed me that sometimes it's better to slow down when going forward, to observe and look for the best option."

The World Cup experience will be especially meaningful for Cordero, whose brother Julen represented Costa Rica at India 2017 — the country's last U-17 World Cup appearance. "Ever since then I've been waiting for my chance," he said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I want to make the most of it."

Costa Rica has reached the quarter-finals of the tournament four times. But Cordero believes this group can go further. "Why can't we dream like the big football nations?" he said. "We have that same hunger, and we're working every day to make it happen."

He describes the current squad as united, driven, and fearless. "We want to make history. We're a team with hunger, camaraderie, and intensity," he commented. "What separates us is that we fight until the final whistle — that's in our DNA."

As for the challenge ahead against strong teams like Croatia and Senegal, he remains optimistic. "The warm-up games against Brazil and Peru will prepare us well. We're ready to give 100% in every match."

And personally? "I've never been to the Middle East," he added. "I'm excited to experience Qatar and compete at the highest level. It's everything I've dreamed of."

The FIFA U17 World Cup Qatar 2025 will take place from 3-27 November, featuring a record 48 teams. All matches will be played in and around Doha, primarily within the Aspire Zone complex in Al Rayyan, with the final set for Khalifa International Stadium.



SPOTLIGHT

LIV Golf announces return to Riyadh for 2026 season opener

Riyadh tourney to be held under the lights from February 5-7

Agencies
Riyadh



The night setting at Riyadh Golf Club delivers not only unique playing conditions, but a dynamic spectator experience

LIV Golf, the global golf league energising the sport through team competition and innovative fan experiences will return to Saudi Arabia to launch its 2026 season at LIV Golf Riyadh taking place February 5-7, 2026 at the spectacular Riyadh Golf Club.

Following a dramatic debut under the lights in 2025, the season opener promises another thrilling display of night golf in the heart of the capital, once again bringing a festival of world-class sport and entertainment.

Early bird tickets for LIV Golf Riyadh presented by Roshn Group 2026 are now available at LIVGolf.com including a select number of club 54 hospitality tickets and three-day grounds passes to enjoy a festival of world-class golf, live music, and family-friendly experiences. Roshn Group, Saudi Arabia's leading multi-asset class real estate developer, continues with LIV Golf as global Pillar Partner for the 2026 season. As the two organisations work together to accelerate the sport's growth with new audiences, Roshn Group and LIV Golf will champion youth access to golf and promote golf training and talent development.

Last month, LIV Golf and Roshn Group jointly launched the "Rising Stars" programme, the first of its kind to educate and inspire young people in Saudi through the sport of golf. As part of a larger 6-month golf programme led by Golf Saudi, "Rising Stars" participants will have benefited from the opportunity to receive mentorship at global events from LIV Golf players like Talor Gooch and Jason Kokrak, lessons from coaches, and inspiring talks from LIV Golf executives, among other experiences.

The 2026 season marks the second consecutive year LIV Golf opens its season in Riyadh, a key stop on the league's international calendar and a symbol of the Kingdom's growing commitment to elite sport.

LIV Golf Riyadh builds on the momentum of a groundbreaking 2025 event, which saw Cleeks Golf Club's star Adrian Meronk claim a wire-to-wire individual victory and Legion XIII, captained by Jon Rahm, dominate the team competition in the league's revamped four-score format. The 2026 event is set to kickstart a packed global calendar that includes confirmed events in Adelaide (13-15 February), Singapore (13-15 March), South Africa (20-22 March), Mexico City (17-19 April), and the United Kingdom (24–26 July).

Ross Hallett, LIV Golf Executive Vice President, Head of Events, said, "Together, with Roshn Group's continued partnership, we're excited to bring our global stars once again to Riyadh for our season opener in 2026. Last year's event was the very first LIV Golf event played under lights, and it provided an electrifying start for players and fans alike, delivering a truly unique viewing experience and reinforcing LIV Golf's commitment to innovation. 2026 will be bigger and better with a focus on providing an unforgettable experience including light shows, a food festival, fan experiences, fair rides, golf activities, hospitality, concerts and more! We are grateful for the support of Golf Saudi and Riyadh Golf Club who provide a world class facility for our players and teams to perform."

Cleeks Golf Club's Adrian Meronk, winner of LIV Golf Riyadh 2025, said: "Winning in Riyadh was one of the proudest moments of my 2025 season. Playing under the lights, in front of such an electric crowd, brought out the best in me. LIV Golf Riyadh presented by ROSHN Group will be unlike anything else in the game. It's fast, it's bold, and it sets the tone for the entire season. I can't wait to return and defend my title in 2026."

Fans can expect to see a stellar field including Meronk, the defending individual champion from Cleeks Golf Club, along with defending team champion Legion XIII, featuring Rahm, Tyrrell Hatton, Tom McKibbin and Caleb Surratt. They'll be joined by international stars including 2025 season points leader and LIV Golf Jeddah 2024 champion Joaquin Niemann (Torque GC), Bryson DeChambeau (Crushers GC), LIV Golf Jeddah 2023 champion Brooks Koepka (Smash GC), Sergio Garcia (Fireballs GC), Cam Smith (Ripper GC), and Dustin Johnson (4Aces GC), amongst many others.

The night setting at Riyadh Golf Club delivers not only unique playing conditions, but a dynamic spectator experience combining music, sport, and entertainment.

As the opening event of LIV Golf's 2026 season, LIV Golf Riyadh presented by Roshan Group will set the tone for a year of global team rivalries, world-class golf and unforgettable fan moments.

GOLF

McIlroy absence has Tour considering FedEx Cup rule change

Reuters
London



Rory McIlroy's decision to skip the first round of the FedEx playoffs this week has the PGA Tour considering a rule change when it comes to the three-event season-ending dash to the Tour Championship.

With his spot near the top of the FedEx Cup points standings secure, McIlroy elected to skip this week's St. Jude Championship at Memphis knowing that he has enough points to advance to the BMW Championship at Owings Mills, Maryland, next week. The top 70 players in the points standings earn a spot in the playoffs with 20 eliminated before the BMW.

The top 30 in the standings after the first two weeks of the playoffs advance to the Tour Championship at Atlanta from Aug 21-24.

McIlroy is the only tour player in the top 70 of the points standings who is not at Memphis this week. Peter Malnati, player director on the PGA Tour Policy Board, was asked about McIlroy's absence and expressed concern. "I think there is stuff in the works (about a rule change) and I'll leave it at that," Malnati said to GolfWeek.

It is unknown if a rule change would include a fine for non-participation or an elimination from the remainder of the playoffs all together. McIlroy, a three-time Tour Championship winner in 2016, 2019 and 2022, said as far back as last year that he would likely skip the St. Jude Championship if his place in the points standings was secure.

He referenced a poor finish in the event last year that did not come close to stopping him from moving on the next round.

Scottie Scheffler leads the FedEx Cup standings with 4,806 points, while McIlroy is second with 3,444. Spot No 50 currently is held by Australian Min Woo Lee at 851 points. Spot No 30 belongs to Daniel Berger at 1,167 points.

McIlroy has been mulling over a reduced PGA Tour schedule after also participating in events at Australia, Ireland, India and the United Aram Emirates this year. He also will represent Europe at the upcoming Ryder Cup at Farmingdale, New York, in September.

Colapinto reported OK after crashing in F1 tyre test

Argentine racer Franco Colapinto crashed in Formula One tyre testing at the Hungarian Grand Prix circuit yesterday and was reported unhurt after being taken to the medical centre, his Alpine team said.
Renault-owned Alpine, Ferrari, McLaren and Racing Bulls are taking part in the two-day Pirelli test at the Hungaroring that followed on from last weekend's grand prix, the last before the sport's August break. Alpine said in a statement that Colapinto, who took over from reserve driver Paul Aron for the final day, had "an incident" at turn 11, a right-handed curve that can be taken at 220kph.
"Franco was assessed on site at the medical centre and is OK," they added. The team gave no details about how the crash happened or damage to the car. Colapinto, 22, replaced Australian Jack Doohan at Alpine after the first six races but has yet to finish higher than 13th for the team in seven starts. He did not start in Britain, after crashing in qualifying and then suffering a gearbox issue, and there has been speculation he could also be replaced before the end of the season.
Teammate Pierre Gasly has scored all of last-placed Alpine's 20 points, with three scoring finishes in his last six races.
Colapinto told reporters last week that he was lacking confidence in the car and struggling to turn into the corners in the way he would like. "I didn't have this issue last year (in nine races for Williams), I could go straight in and be quick straight away. Now I'm struggling a bit more with that," he said.
"Generally the car is a bit tricky on entries and that's what we are working on, on my side."

CRICKET

Injured NZ skipper Latham to miss second Test against Zimbabwe

Reuters
Bulawayo



New Zealand captain **Tom Latham** has been ruled out of the second Test against Zimbabwe after failing to recover from a shoulder injury, New Zealand Cricket said yesterday.

Latham missed the opening Test last week, with Mitch Santner stepping in to lead the side to a nine-wicket victory. Santner will continue to skipper the team after Latham failed a fitness test ahead of the second match of the two-Test series starting today in Bulawayo. "It's hugely disappointing to lose Tom again," coach Rob Walter said in a statement.

"He's been working hard and had been tracking well towards the second test but unfortunately today he couldn't pass his fitness tests. He's extremely gutted he won't be able to take the park and we're really feeling for him."

New Zealand have called up middle-order batter Bevon Jacobs for cover. Black Caps paceman Will O'Rourke has also been ruled out of the second Test by a back injury and will return to New Zealand for treatment, the team said yesterday.

O'Rourke pulled up injured after taking 3-28 in the second innings of last week's first Test in Bulawayo to help the tourists to a victory by nine wickets.

German great Mueller signs with MLS Whitecaps

Bayern Munich and Germany forward Thomas Mueller has signed with Major League Soccer's Vancouver Whitecaps, the Canadian club announced yesterday.
The 35-year-old has signed through the end of the 2025 MLS season with an option for 2026, Vancouver said.
Mueller announced earlier this year that he would be departing from Bayern Munich - his home for 25 years. His tenure included 13 Bundesliga titles and two Champions League triumphs.
"I'm looking forward to coming to Vancouver to help this team win a championship," Mueller said in a statement. "I've heard great things about the city, but first and foremost I'm coming to win.
"I've had great conversations with Axel Schuster and Jesper Sorensen, and now I can't wait to play in front of the supporters and to see all of the fans come out to BC Place as we head towards the playoffs."
Mueller arrives at a Whitecaps team currently second in the Western Conference, one point behind leaders San Diego but with one match in hand. "He not only brings a winning pedigree and exceptional football intelligence, but also a tireless work ethic that will elevate the entire team," Whitecaps chief executive Schuster said in a statement.
"Thomas is a natural leader whose passion for the game is infectious. This is a statement signing by our club and our ownership - a transformative moment for our club and our city. We are proud to welcome Thomas to Vancouver."
Restricted mainly to a substitute's role in the 2024-25 campaign, Mueller made 49 appearances in all competitions, scoring eight goals. He retired from international duty in 2024, having won the World Cup with Germany in 2014. He finished his international career with 131 caps, scoring 45 goals.

FOCUS

Qatar, South Korea strengthen basketball collaboration



By Sports Reporter
Doha

In a significant step toward enhancing international sports co-operation, Abdulrahman al-Mana, a member of the Qatar Basketball Federation (QBF) Board of Directors, welcomed a delegation from the Korean Basketball Association (KBA) on the second day of their official visit to Doha.

The visit aims to foster stronger ties, explore future partnership opportunities, and advance basketball development between the two nations. The Korean delegation, led by KBA President and prominent businessman Kwon Hyuk-won, included Secretary-General Jung Jae-young and several senior KBA officials. Discussions focused on technical and administrative collaboration, including coach development programs, national talent training, team exchanges, and the potential for joint training camps and friendly matches between clubs and national teams of both countries.

Al-Mana emphasised the importance of the visit, stating, "We warmly welcome constructive Asian partnerships. This visit opens new avenues for collaboration between the QBF and KBA, particularly given the remarkable progress of basketball in both nations. We believe in the power of shared expertise to elevate the sport, from youth levels to national teams."

He added: "Our discussions with the Korean delegation explored initiatives such as coach and player exchange programmes, talent identification, and co-hosting tournaments and events to strengthen Asian basketball's global presence."

The Korean delegation also toured the QBF headquarters, where they reviewed the federation's state-of-the-art training facilities, support services, and advanced technologies. Additionally, they visited the iconic Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakra, a world-class venue that hosted matches during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, and were briefed on Qatar's cutting-edge sports facility management and technologies.

The KBA delegation expressed gratitude for the warm hospitality and enthusiasm of the QBF, voicing their eagerness for continued collaboration to advance basketball across Asia.

FOCUS

Fritz, Shelton set up all-American semi-final

AFP
Toronto

US second seed Taylor Fritz overcame a late niggle while serving for the match on Tuesday to beat Andrey Rublev 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) and reach the ATP Toronto Masters semi-finals.

The American claimed his place in a fifth semi-final of the season after losing serve while trying to close out what had been looking like a quick win, finally coming through into the last four at this level for the first time after 83 minutes.

The Californian will play for a spot in the Thursday final when he takes on fourth seed Ben Shelton, who won a Masters quarter-final on his fourth attempt, defeating Australian Alex de Minaur 6-3, 6-4. Shelton laid down 11 aces in his 91-minute victory and dominated on rallies longer than nine shots. The result ended a seven-match win streak for last week's Washington champion de Minaur.

"I'm really happy with that performance. It showed mental toughness from start to finish," Shelton said. "This win gives me a lot of confidence, I'm excited about the semi-final."

"People often just see me as a server, not much of a grinder, but when I go into lockdown mode and put a lot of balls onto the court, it surprises guys sometimes.

"Winning longer rallies is all part of my evolution."

Shelton set up three match points with his final ace and needed only one chance to emerge the winner. Fritz admitted he was struck by brain freeze as he served for victory leading a set and 5-4. After saving three break points he put a return into the net for 5-all as Rublev held on.

"That game was so shaky for me, we had both been holding serve easily, everything felt calm and chill," he said. "It came out of nowhere, the pressure of that game. It was tight and my brain just turned off.

"The only thing to do is to come back and try to win the set. That's what is able to make it all feel not as bad."

Fritz did just that, closing out the win 15 minutes later in the second-set tiebreaker with a serve winner. Fritz struck a personal-best 20 aces (for three-set matches) among his 29 winners. He now stands 6-4 over Rublev.

The American has now won 19 of his last 22 matches including reaching the Wimbledon semi-finals.


Taylor Fritz of United States returns a shot to Andrey Rublev during the Toronto Masters quarter-final. *(AFP)*

TENNIS

Sizzling Osaka to face Tauson in Montreal semis

'I'M JUST HAVING A LOT OF FUN PLAYING. I'M GLAD TO BE HERE'

AFP
Montreal

Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka advanced to the semi-finals of the WTA Canadian Open on Tuesday with a comprehensive 6-2, 6-2 triumph over 10th seed Elina Svitolina.

Osaka, chasing her first WTA Tour-level title since the 2021 Australian Open, needed only 68 minutes to dispatch the Ukraine star and book a semi-final with Danish 16th seed Clara Tauson, who stunned reigning Australian Open champion Madison Keys 6-1, 6-4. "I'm just having a lot of fun playing. I'm glad to be here," Osaka said.

"I think I'll be seeded in the US Open because I won my match. That was a really good goal for me. I'm just really excited."

Tauson dedicated her victory to her late grandfather, who died on Sunday as the Dane was dispatching Polish second seed Iga Swiatek, who won her sixth Grand Slam title last month at Wimbledon.

"Two days ago, my grandfather unfortunately passed away so I really wanted to win for him today," a tearful Tauson said after beating US sixth seed Keys.

"I was told the day after I beat Iga so I really wanted to come out and show my best tennis for him. Hopefully he's watching."

The US Open hardcourt tuneup in Montreal is the first event where Tauson has beaten two top-10 foes, with Swiatek and Keys exiting at her hand.

Tauson dominated the opening set and took full advantage of Keys giving up a break on a double fault to open the second. The Dane won 12 of 19 points on her second serves and kept Keys at bay most of the night.

Keys joined a scrap heap of Montreal seeds, with the top five seeds and seven of the top 10 seeds ousted before the quarter-finals.

Tauson, 22, seeks her fourth career WTA title after the 2021 Lyon and Luxenbourg Opens and this year's Auckland Open, where Osaka retired after winning the first set of the final in their only WTA meeting.

"She's really tough," Osaka said of Tauson.

"I played her in Auckland this year. I had to stop halfway because I was injured. So I'm really excited that I'm healthy."

Osaka seeks her eighth WTA-level title, and her first since a maternity leave comeback last year. She last won a WTA-level title below the Grand Slams at the 2019 China Open.

Osaka broke for a 3-1 edge in the opening set and exchanged breaks in the last three games to capture the set after 38 minutes, then cruised through the second set, taking the triumph when Svitolina hit a forehand wide.

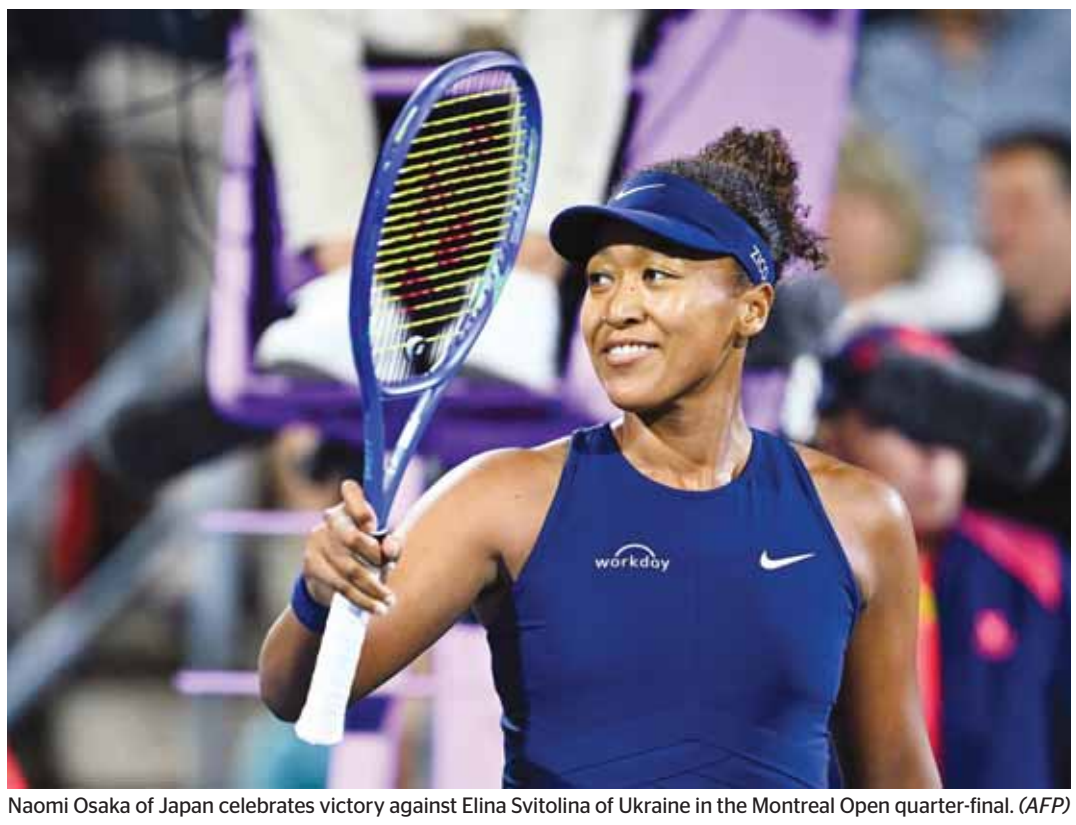
Tauson is one win away from her second WTA 1000 final, having lost the first in February at Dubai to Mirra Andreeva.

The Dane dominated Keys in the first set, breaking in the fourth and sixth games, and Keys double faulted away another break to begin the second set.

Tauson held from there to win, never facing a break point in the second set before holding at love in the last game to end matters after 70 minutes.

Elena Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon champion, and 18-year-old Canadian sensation Victoria Mboko will meet in Wednesday's other semi-final.

Rybakina won their only prior meeting 6-3, 7-5 last month in the second round at Washington.


Naomi Osaka of Japan celebrates victory against Elina Svitolina of Ukraine in the Montreal Open quarter-final. *(AFP)*

US Open announces record $90mn prize money

The US Open announced $90mn in prize money will be on offer at this year's final major, marking the largest purse in tennis history, up 20% from 2024. Top players in the ATP and WTA called for more equitable distribution of revenue at the four Grand Slams this year, as those at the top of the game are able to benefit from increased prize money while players at the lower levels often struggle.
The U.S. Open prize pool is up from $75mn in 2024, the previous highest-ever purse. Men's and women's singles winners will earn $5 million each, up from $3.6mn last year.
The tournament will also see double-digit percentage increases across all rounds in all events, after "years of a strategic focus on redistribution to the early rounds and qualifying tournament," organisers said. Singles action at the US Open has been expanded to 15 days, amid booming attendance, and will take place from August 24-September 7. A new format in the mixed doubles is being introduced this year, with the event featuring many big-name singles players as it will be taking place over two days in the week before the main competition kicks off at Flushing Meadows. US Open attendance topped one million fans for the first time in 2024.

SPOTLIGHT

Vonn appoints Svindal as coach ahead of 2026 Olympics

AFP
Paris

Comeback queen Lindsey Vonn has appointed former Norwegian ski star **Aksel Lund Svindal** as coach to help her prepare for the 2026 Winter Olympics.

The former Olympic and serial world champion stunned the sports world when she returned to the US ski team last year aged 40, five years after retirement.

She has her sights set on adding to the downhill gold she won at the 2010 Vancouver Games at Milan/Cortina next year with her close friend Svindal now on her coaching team.

"Bringing Aksel onto my team for this season feels like a natural and incredibly exciting step," Vonn said yesterday.

"We've shared so much history on the mountain, from training to winning World Cup titles, and there's a deep level of trust and respect that's developed over the years.

"To have him officially on my team as we push for the Cortina Games is a huge boost."

Svindal, a two-time former overall World Cup champion and double Olympic gold medallist, and Vonn will begin preparations for Milan-Cortina with a training camp in Chile "later this summer".

Vonn, who has 82 World Cup wins to her name, was forced into retirement following a serious knee injury.

But after undergoing a titanium reconstruction of her knee, she returned to competition last season, picking up the first podium of her return at Sun Valley in March.

Reflecting on her return she said: "This comeback is about pushing boundaries and proving what's possible, and I believe Aksel will help give me the extra edge I will need on this ambitious journey."



Svitolina says online abusers after Canadian Open defeat were angry gamblers

Former world number three Elina Svitolina said she was flooded with online abuse, including death threats, after her Canadian Open defeat on Tuesday and blamed the "shameful" behaviour on disgruntled bettors.
The 10th seed from Ukraine crashed to a 6-2 6-2 quarter-final loss against four-times Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka at the Montreal WTA tournament and later highlighted the abuse directed at her and her family.
Tennis players, like many athletes, often have to deal with the wrath of gamblers online despite the efforts of authorities to tackle the issue with measures that include the blocking of social media accounts.
"To all the bettors: I'm a mom before I'm an athlete," Svitolina, 30, wrote in an Instagram story in which she attached screenshots of the messages that included death threats. "The way you talk to women - to mothers - is SHAMEFUL. If your moms saw your messages, they'd be disgusted."
Some of the abusive messages Svitolina shared referenced the ongoing war in her country following Russia's invasion.
A study undertaken by some of the various governing bodies of tennis said that angry gamblers were responsible for nearly half of all the abuse that was directed at players on social media last year.
Frenchwoman Caroline Garcia said after her loss at last year's US Open that "unhealthy betting" was one of the top reasons players were targeted and took aim at social media platforms for not doing enough to filter the abuse.
She had said that it hurt players, especially after tough losses when they were "emotionally destroyed" and she worried about how younger players would be affected.
Reuters has contacted the WTA for comment and details of their latest efforts to combat the issue.
Svitolina's husband and fellow professional Gael Monfils had humorously hit back at gamblers after an early loss in Stuttgart this year, with the 38-year-old saying he was surprised people still put money on him to win against much younger opponents.


Elina Svitolina of Ukraine reacts after giving up a point against Naomi Osaka of Japan during their Montreal Open quarter-final. *(AFP)*

UCI SUSPENDS BULGARIAN FEDERATION CHIEFS OVER ETHICS BREACHES

The International Cycling Union (UCI) has handed two-year bans to Evgeniy Gerganov and Danail Angelov, president and vice-president of the Bulgarian Cycling Federation (BCF), for breaches of its ethics code, the global governing body said.
An independent ethics commission found that Angelov had manipulated cycling events and verbally assaulted and intimidated members of the cycling community, the UCI said in a statement.
Gerganov, a former professional rider, had tried to consolidate control over the BCF along with Angelov, abusing their authority to modify internal structures and retaliate against opponents, the UCI added. Angelov was found to be involved in "irregular modifications of start lists and facilitating timing anomalies in official competitions, granting undue advantages to certain athletes and undermining sporting fairness".
Gerganov did not try to stop or report incidents of verbal assault and intimidation, which involved members of the federation including Angelov, the UCI added. The suspensions, which can be appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), prevent Gerganov and Angelov from holding any position within a cycling body or being involved in the organisation of any cycling event.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal have 'belief' to end trophy drought: Arteta

ARTETA'S MEN HAVE FINISHED SECOND IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS

AFP
London

Arsenal manager **Mikel Arteta** said the Gunners believe this season will be different as they aim to get over a series of near misses at winning silverware. Arteta has not won a trophy since lifting the FA Cup in his debut season in charge in 2019/20.

However, he has transformed Arsenal back into serial contenders for major trophies. Arteta's men have finished second in the Premier League for the past three years and reached the Champions League semi-finals for the first time since 2009 last season. The pressure is now on the Spaniard to get over the line after another major investment in new players in the transfer window.

Nearly £200mn ($266mn) has been spent on new striker Viktor Gyokeres, midfielders Martin Zubimendi and Christian Norgaard, centre-back Cristhian Mosquera as well as winger Noni Madueke and goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga.

"We know what our targets are and what we want to achieve this season - there is a big belief in our ability to achieve that," Arteta said in his programme notes before pre-season friendly against Villarreal, which the Gunners lost 2-3 yesterday.

"We have been very, very close the last few seasons and the whole team is going to determine whether we achieve that or not. But at the same time, we have to make sure that we don't lose sight of what we have to do on a daily basis to get to the levels that we want. We have to set the demands that we want within this goal, because that's the most important thing - the internal demands have to always exceed any external demand. That is what we are trying to achieve every single day."

Arteta added he wants his players to feel "invincible" at home thanks to a special connection with the club's fans. "We want our people to start connecting with our players straight away, to start to build momentum and to start to feel that at home we are invincible," he said.

"That we play here with such passion, energy and connection with our people, that we are going to win the game."

Meanwhile, Arsenal were edged out by La Liga side Villarreal in first home fixture of pre-season, in a game where all six of North London club's summer signings had a run out.

Despite dominating the first-half, Arsenal found ourselves 2-0 down on the half hour. Nicolas Pepe – on his return to Emirates Stadium – scored the opener before Karl Etta Eyong doubled the advantage from close range.

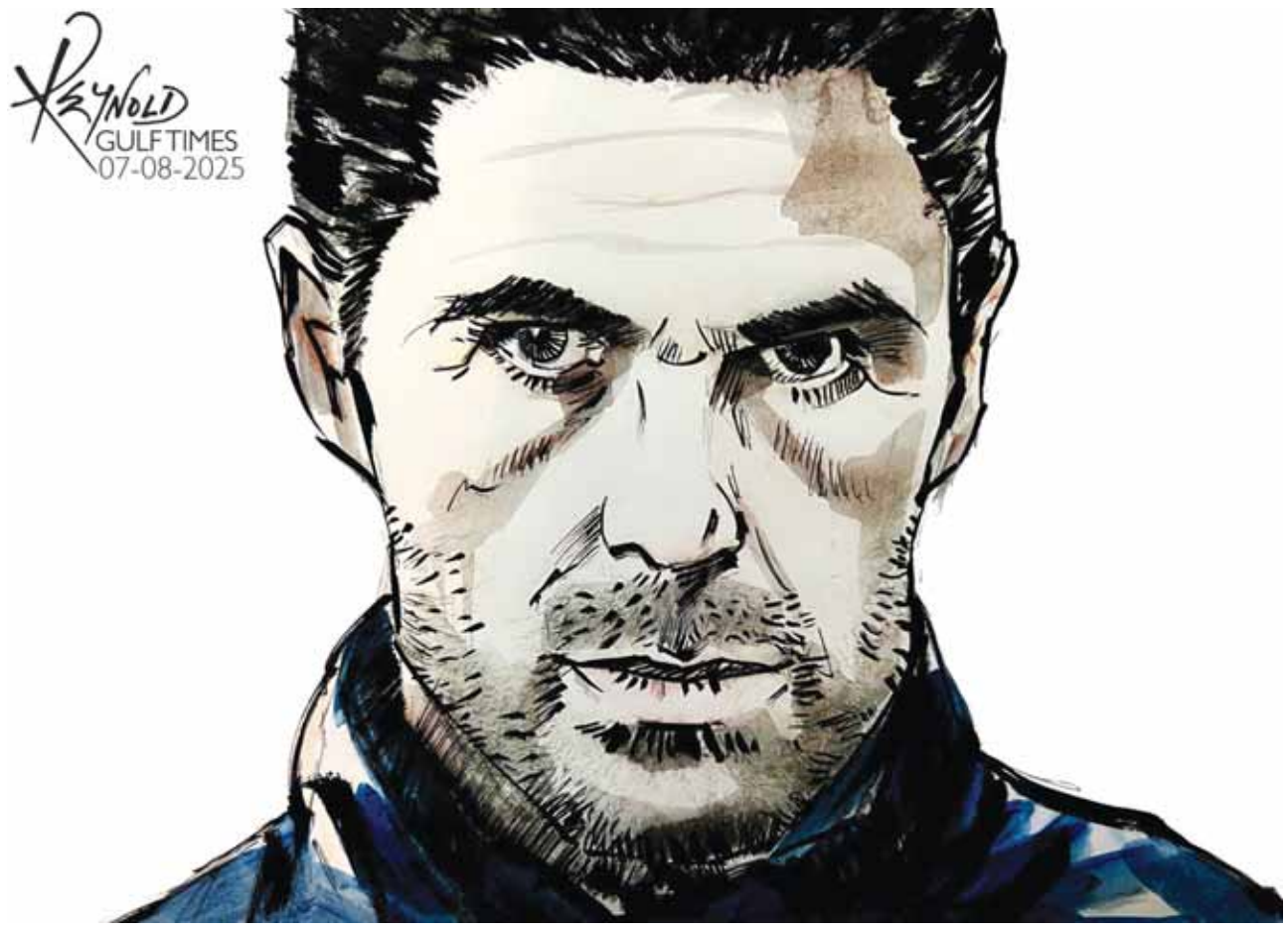
Arsenal struck back instantly thanks to Christian Norgaard's first goal since joining in the summer, but Arnaut Danjuma broke clear after the interval to restore the visitors' two-goal lead. Martin Odegaard netted a penalty with 15 minutes remaining, but Arsenal couldn't force the equaliser, falling to defeat in their penultimate game before the Premier League campaign kicks off on Sunday week.

Arsenal looked to dominate from the first whistle, and with Viktor Gyokeres in the starting XI for the first time, Arsenal were playing to get the ball forward quickly. The Swedish striker had his first couple of touches in the box within the opening minute, the second a pullback that just eluded Bukayo Saka. Ethan Nwaneri was in the mood early on as well, and fired wide on five minutes.

The ball had barely left the opposition half during the opening 15 minutes, so it was very much against the run of play that Villarreal took the lead. Pape Gueye struck the post with a low shot from outside the area, and it pinged back into play off the diving David Raya's back. Arsenal failed to clear the cross back into the box and Pepe was there to capitalise on Arsenal's indecision and stab home. The former Gunner – who made more than 100 appearances for Arsenal over three seasons – made a point of not celebrating his goal.

Arsenal got back on the front foot instantly. Saka had a shot saved after chopping onto his left foot in the box, before Gabriel Martinelli couldn't generate power on his header from Ben White's cross. But for the second time in the half Arsenal were hit on the counter. Santiago Mourino forced a good low save from Raya, but Arsenal didn't deal with the rebound, and Etta Eyong tapped home from close range. Within moments though Arsenal pulled one back. Martinelli's inswinging corner floated over everyone, and found Norgaard unmarked at the far post to head home his first goal in Gunners colours.

Cristhian Mosquera and Martin Zubimendi were introduced for the second half and Arsenal started to put the Villarreal goal under more pressure. Nwaneri had a long-range free-kick saved before Gyokeres and Merino both forced saves from



Luiz Junior. Once again though Villarreal hit us on the break. This time Danjuma sprinted onto a long pass deep in Arsenal's half, then struck a sweet finish inside the far post.

The game continued to be open. Mikel Arteta made full use of his substitutes' bench and one of the second-half subs Max Dowman won the penalty to pull us back into the game. Pau Navarro brought down the 15-year-old – who was also making his first appearance for the first team at Emirates Stadium – for a spot kick with 15 minutes to go. Odegaard stepped up and stroked in from 12 yards to reduce the deficit again. From then on Villarreal defended well to hold onto their win.

Arsenal's final pre-season fixture will be also at Emirates Stadium on Saturday – against Athletic Club. Arsenal begin their Premier League campaign with a trip to Manchester United on August 17.



Arsenal's Martin Zubimendi (centre) attempts to get past Villarreal's Tajon Buchanan (right) and Santi Comesana during the pre-season friendly in London. *(AFP)*

SPOTLIGHT

Son joins LAFC from Tottenham

AFP
London

LAFC hailed the signing of a "global icon" yesterday after confirming the arrival of South Korea star **Son Heung-min** from Tottenham. The 33-year-old will reportedly cost a Major League Soccer record $26mn transfer fee, according to *ESPN* and *The Athletic*, after a decade in the Premier League where he became a household name.

An emotional Son announced on Saturday in his homeland that he would be leaving Spurs, just months after ending the club's 17-year trophy drought by lifting the Europa League as captain. He leaves as Tottenham's fifth highest goalscorer of all-time with 173 goals in 454 appearances.

"Sonny is a global icon and one of the most dynamic and accomplished players in world football," said LAFC co-president & general manager John Thorrington.

"We are proud that he has chosen Los Angeles for the next chapter of his extraordinary career. Sonny is a proven winner and a world-class individual, and we are confident he will elevate our club and inspire our community - both on and off the pitch."

Son is set to be presented at a press conference in Los Angeles. His imminent arrival drew crowds on Tuesday to Los Angeles International Airport with fans waving South Korean flags and messages of support.

Son will replace French striker Olivier Giroud, who was sold to Lille in July, and will share a dressing room with French goalkeeper Hugo Lloris, his former teammate at Tottenham.



"Sonny is one of the greatest players to ever wear the famous Lilywhite shirt and he has been a joy to watch over the past decade," said Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy.

"Not only is he a wonderfully gifted footballer, but he's also an incredible human being who has touched hearts and inspired people throughout the club and all over the world. The Europa League triumph in Bilbao was a truly magical moment in the club's history and Sonny lifting the trophy is a perfect lasting memory from his fantastic decade at Tottenham Hotspur."

ROUND-UP

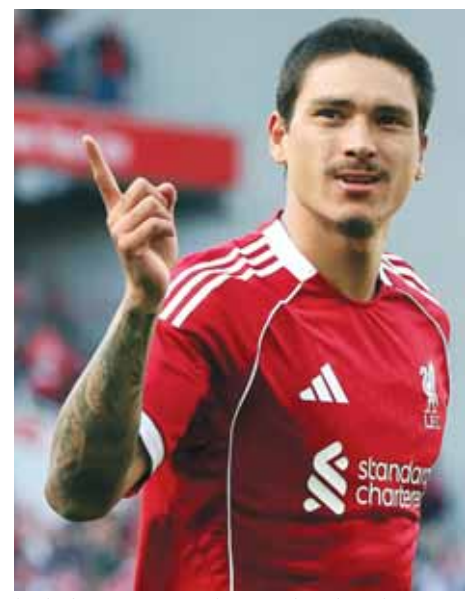
Liverpool's Nunez set to join Saudi's Hilal

Liverpool striker **Darwin Nunez** is reportedly closing in on a move to Saudi club Al Hilal, which could allow the Premier League champions to make a fresh bid for Newcastle's Alexander Isak. Nunez joined the Reds for an initial 75mn euros ($87mn) from Benfica three years ago but has failed to live up to that price tag.

The Uruguayan has scored 40 goals in 143 appearances but slipped down the pecking order at Anfield under both Jurgen Klopp and Arne Slot. According to transfer specialist Fabrizio Romano, Al Hilal will pay an initial 53mn euros for the 26-year-old. Nunez was likely to play even less this season after Liverpool signed Hugo Ekitike and Florian Wirtz as part of a 300mn euro spending spree that also includes full-backs Milos Kerkez and Jeremie Frimpong.

However, the club could still break the British transfer record by signing Isak, with Newcastle reportedly demanding a fee of up to £150 million for the Swedish striker. The sale of Nunez would take Liverpool's income for transfer sales this window to nearly 200 million euros after the departures of Luis Diaz, Jarell Quansah, Caoimhin Kelleher, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Tyler Morton.

Harvey Elliott is also attracting interest from RB Leipzig, with Liverpool wanting at least 45 million euros for the England midfielder. Nunez would become the latest big name to join Al Hilal, who shocked Manchester City to reach the quarter-finals of the recent Club World Cup. Coached by former Inter Milan boss Simone Inzaghi, the Saudi club's squad



includes Portuguese internationals Ruben Neves and Joao Cancelo, Senegal captain Kalidou Koulibaly and former Fulham striker Aleksandar Mitrovic.

SERIE A PLAYERS TO FACE AUTOMATIC 25% PAY CUT IF RELEGATED

Italian top-flight players will see their salaries slashed by 25% if their teams are relegated to Serie B, under a new agreement between the Italian Footballers' Association and Serie A.

The five-year agreement was announced on Tuesday. The pay cut is aimed at easing the financial strain on clubs that drop out of Serie A and will apply to all contracts signed after September 2, 2025 – the end of the transfer window.

The new system automatically reduces salaries unless otherwise stipulated in a player's contract. Existing deals will remain subject to previously agreed terms. If a team earns promotion back to Serie A, affected salaries will return to their original value. The collective bargaining agreement also introduces a minimum salary structure based on a player's age, which cannot be lowered even after relegation.

WEAH JOINS MARSEILLE FROM JUVENTUS

US international Timothy Weah has joined Marseille on loan from Juventus with an option to buy, the French club confirmed. The 25-year-old winger arrives on loan for 1mn euros with a purchase option of 14mn euros, according to several media reports. The son of the only African Ballon d'Or winner in history and former Liberian president George Weah has played for Italian club Juventus since 2023.

Born in New York in 2000, he trained at Paris Saint-Germain at the age of 14, signing his first professional contract with them in 2017. After two seasons, he moved to Scottish side Celtic where he won the Premiership and Cup double in 2019, then to Lille, where he won the French Ligue 1 title in 2021. Capped 44 times for the United States Weah becomes Marseille's sixth signing of the summer transfer window.

Isak told to train alone by Newcastle: reports

London: Alexander Isak's future at Newcastle hangs in the balance after the Swedish striker was reportedly told to train apart from the rest of the squad yesterday.

The 25-year-old has been linked with a British transfer record move to Liverpool after failing to feature in Newcastle's pre-season preparations. Isak missed the Magpies' trip to Singapore and South Korea, citing a minor thigh injury, and instead flew to Spain to train at former club Real Sociedad.

He has since returned to Tyneside but *Sky Sports* reported that Isak was instructed to train after the rest of the squad had departed yesterday. "You have to earn the right to train with us. We are Newcastle United," Howe told reporters earlier in pre-season. "We will make sure that any player earns the right to train with the group. No player can expect to act poorly and train with the group as normal."

Liverpool have seen a £110mn ($146mn) bid for Isak rejected, according to reports, with Newcastle seeking closer to £150mn. Another major hurdle to any deal is Newcastle's ongoing struggles to finalise a deal to replace Isak. They face competition from Manchester United for RB Leipzig striker Benjamin Sesko after missing out on Joao Pedro, Hugo Ekitike and Liam Delap earlier in the window.

Liverpool have already splashed out over £250mn this window on Ekitike, Florian Wirtz, Milos Kerkez and Jeremie Frimpong. However, they have also recouped major funds from the sales of Luis Diaz, Jarell Quansah, Caoimhin Kelleher, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Tyler Morton.

And Darwin Nunez is close to a £46mn move to Saudi side Al Hilal that would free up more resources and space in the squad for another bid to sign Isak.

Since joining Newcastle for £63mn in 2022, Isak has scored 62 times in 109 appearances, including the goal that secured the club's first domestic trophy for 70 years in the League Cup final against Liverpool in March.