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CRICKET

South Africa begin WTC title defence with target on their back

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FOOTBALL

Qatar step up preparations for World Cup play-offs

Al Annabi will open their campaign against Oman tomorrow, before facing the UAE on October 14

By Sports Reporter
Doha



Qatar are aiming to qualify for the FIFA World Cup on merit after having made their debut as hosts in 2022.

Qatar have intensified their preparations for two crucial matches that will decide their fate in the Asian qualifiers for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, as they prepare to host Oman and the United Arab Emirates at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Al Sadd.

Al Annabi will open their campaign against Oman tomorrow, before facing the UAE on October 14, with Oman and the UAE meeting in between on October 11. The group winner will qualify directly for the World Cup, co-hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada next year. The runner-up will face the second-placed team from Group B — which includes Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Indonesia — in a two-legged play-off on November 13 and 18, with the winner advancing to the intercontinental play-off.

Of the three sides in Group A, only Qatar and the UAE have appeared at the World Cup — Qatar making their debut as hosts in 2022, while the UAE's sole appearance came in 1990. Oman are still seeking their first-ever qualification. Oman will hope to repeat their 2–1 victory over Qatar in last year's Gulf Cup — their first win in 11 meetings since 2009.

But Qatar, buoyed by the home crowd and the confidence of being back-to-back Asian Cup winners, will aim for a strong start. All matches will be played in Doha, giving the reigning Asian champions a clear home advantage as they target back-to-back qualifications, albeit first time on merit. Qatar topped their group in the second round of qualifying with 16 points, finishing ahead of Kuwait, India and Afghanistan. However, they struggled in the third round, ending fourth in Group A behind Iran, Uzbekistan and the UAE. Iran and Uzbekistan secured direct qualification, while Qatar and the UAE dropped into the play-offs.

Qatar appointed Julen Lopetegui, the former Spain and Real Madrid coach, in May following his departure from West Ham United. Tasked with guiding Al Annabi back to the World Cup, Lopetegui has faced challenges, particularly in defence, and will need to manage pressure carefully in these decisive fixtures.

Several former players have expressed confidence in Qatar's chances. Former national team and Al Sadd forward Hassan Mattar told *Qatar News Agency* that a strong start against Oman is crucial for building momentum and confidence. "Victory in the opening match will be a major step toward qualification," Mattar said. "It will help the players settle early and give them belief ahead of the UAE clash."

He acknowledged that Qatar fell short of expectations in the previous qualifying round but said hosting the play-off stage in Doha provides a chance to reset. "This is the ideal opportunity for the team to get back on track," he added. "Experience will be vital — these matches demand focus, discipline, and a fighting spirit. Small details often decide games at this level."

Mattar also called on the team to minimise errors and make full use of home support, saying the players' mental and physical readiness will be key to achieving the desired results.

Another former international, Abdulaziz Hassan, expressed optimism that Qatar's current squad has the experience to handle pressure and the attacking firepower to make a difference. "Playing at home will give the players a strong push," he said. "This group includes quality players like Akram Afif, Almoez Ali and Edmilson — players who can decide matches in key moments."

Hassan cautioned that Qatar must avoid complacency, noting the group is evenly matched. "The levels of Qatar, Oman and the UAE are quite close," he said. "Every point matters — especially in the first game against Oman, which could shape the path to qualification."

WORLD CUP PLAY-OFFS: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

FORMAT
The six teams have been divided into two groups of three, with matches to be played in a single round-robin format in two centralised venues.

THE HOPEFULS
Group A (Doha): Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman
Group B (Jeddah): Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Indonesia

QUALIFICATION SLOTS
The two groups winners will qualify for the FIFA World Cup 2026 co-hosted by Canada, Mexico and the United States.

FIXTURES
Group A (Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, Doha) All times local
Oman vs Qatar - Oct 8, 18:00
UAE vs Oman - Oct 11, 20:15
Qatar vs UAE - Oct 14, 20:00

Group B (King Abdullah Sports City Hall Stadium, Jeddah)
Indonesia vs Saudi Arabia - Oct 8, 20:15
Iraq vs Indonesia - Oct 11, 22:30
Saudi Arabia vs Iraq - Oct 14, 21:45

FINAL CHANCE
A final qualifying chance is available to the runners-up of each group, who will square off in a two-legged showdown across November 13 and 18. This knockout stage will determine the Asian representative at the FIFA Playoff Tournament, where they will have to fend off two teams from CONCACAF and one team apiece from CAF, CONMEBOL and OFC to claim one of two berths..

PREVIOUS FIFA WORLD CUP APPEARANCES
Qatar - One (2022)
UAE - One (1990)
Oman - Nil
Saudi Arabia - Six (1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2018, 2022)
Iraq - One (1986)
Indonesia - One (1938, then known as Dutch East Indies)

ALREADY THROUGH
Six Asian teams have already sealed their places at the global showpiece. Iran and Uzbekistan qualified for the FIFA World Cup after finishing top of Group A of the Asian Qualifiers. South Korea and Jordan were the sides to advance from Group B while Japan and Australia finished first and second respectively in Group C.

SPOTLIGHT

Metallica to perform at this year's Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix



Metallica's headline show promises to deliver an unforgettable night for fans, combining world-class entertainment off-track with world-class racing on track.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

As excitement builds ahead of the Formula 1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix 2025, Lusail International Circuit (LIC) has announce that globally acclaimed rock band Metallica will light up the Lusail Live stage on Sunday, November 30.

Metallica's headline show promises to deliver an unforgettable night for fans, combining world-class entertainment off-track with world-class racing on track.

Formed in 1981 by vocalist/guitarist James Hetfield and drummer Lars Ulrich and including guitarist Kirk Hammett and bassist Robert Trujillo, Metallica has become one of the most influential and successful rock bands in history, selling nearly 125mn albums worldwide and generating more than 17bn streams while playing to millions of fans on all seven continents — more than 1.3mn of whom belong to the band's fiercely loyal and consistently growing Fifth Member fan club.

Metallica's catalogue of multi-platinum studio albums includes *Kill 'Em All, Ride the Lightning, Master of Puppets, ...And Justice for All, Metallica (commonly referred to as The Black Album), Load, ReLoad, St. Anger, Death Magnetic, Hardwired...To Self-Destruct*, and most recently, the Grammy-winning 72 Seasons, released April 14, 2023, on the band's own Blackened Recordings label.

Metallica's awards and accolades include nine Grammy Awards, two American Music Awards, multiple MTV Video Music Awards, a 2009 induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and Sweden's Polar Music Prize. In 2017, Metallica established its own charitable foundation, All Within My Hands, to give back to communities that have supported the band. To date, All Within My Hands' collective efforts have raised nearly $20mn since inception, including $11.4mn in grants to workforce education, $7.4mn to fight hunger globally, and $5.2mn donated to critical local services around the world. 100% of donations go directly to local organisations that the Foundation supports. As always, Metallica covers all administrative costs.

In build up to the electrifying concert, on Sunday at the Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix will showcase the FIA Formula 2 feature race, followed by the highlight of the weekend, the Grand Prix. Additionally, fans attending the Qatar Grand Prix, can catch Metallica live on Sunday night with a single-day Sunday General Admission ticket priced at QR500.

Three-Day Grandstand tickets are also available in the North Grandstand (QR1,500), Turn 2 Grandstand (QR1,000), Turn 3 Grandstand (QR1,000; student price QR800), and the Turn 16 Grandstand (QR1,000; senior citizen price QR750).

Access to Metallica's performance is included with all ticket types. As tickets are selling fast for Qatar's biggest motorsport and entertainment event, fans can secure their spot by visiting tickets.lcsc.qa

SPORT

CRICKET

South Africa begin WTC title defence against Pakistan

'We want to chase a place in the final again and lift the trophy'

Reuters
Pretoria



South Africa captain Aiden Markram during a fielding drill in Pretoria ahead of a two-Test series beginning against hosts Pakistan on October 12 in Lahore. *(@ProteasMenCSA)*

South Africa captain Aiden Markram says his side can expect to have a target on their back when they begin a new cycle of the World Test Championship as defending champions.

South Africa play a two-Test series in Pakistan, starting on Sunday, and two games in India in November as they bid to retain the trophy they won in June by beat Australia by five wickets at Lord's.

The World Test Championship is decided at the end of a two-year cycle, with the top two teams competing in a one-off five-day match.

"I suppose you create a bit of a target on your back if you've won (the WTC), and if that's the case, it's fair. We want to chase a place in the final again and lift that trophy once again but realise each team will be coming for us," said Markram, who stands in as skipper for Temba Bavuma who has been ruled out of the tour with a calf strain.

"We, as a team, have to keep getting better and improving and playing well in all different types of conditions. It starts for us in Pakistan, and it's a challenge the boys will be up for," he told a press conference on Monday.

South Africa have been practising on specially prepared spinning wickets at Pretoria's High Performance Centre.

"There were a couple of nets prepared where the spin is really exaggerated, and you'd rather err on that side, and maybe then it's a bit easier when we get to Pakistan," Markram said.

"We're expecting to face a lot of spin over there, and it's also, naturally, a lot lower there from a seam point of view," Markram said.

"There's a lot of skiddy, so it's hard to try and emulate that here in South Africa, but we've been looking to put a lot of emphasis on finding a way to train for that."

The first Test against Pakistan is in Lahore and the second begins on October 20 in Rawalpindi.

FOCUS

Bangladesh ex-captain Aminul elected cricket board chief for 4 years



Newly-elected President of the Bangladesh Cricket Board, Aminul Islam Bulbul (third left), speaks during a press conference held in Dhaka yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh's first Test centurion Aminul Islam was elected president of the country's cricket board yesterday, securing the post unopposed for a four-year term after serving an interim role.

The 57-year-old, better known as "Bulbul", captained Bangladesh in their first World Cup appearance in 1999.

"I have fallen in love with the development of cricket," Aminul told reporters.

Since his retirement from playing the game, he has worked for the International Cricket Council and the Asian Cricket Council.

He took over as temporary president of the Bangladesh Cricket Board in March 2025, but was yesterday formally elected into the post. Former captains Faruque Ahmed and Sakhawat Hossain were also chosen as vice presidents in an uncontested board election.

"I had come for a short tenure. That was always the plan," Aminul added.

"But when I started small initiatives... and began to see successes, I couldn't let go of that passion, and I have stayed on to serve my country further in this goal," Aminul said.

Cricket and politics go hand-in-hand in Bangladesh and the sport has been hit by the turmoil that has wracked the country.

Former prime minister Sheikh Hasina was ousted in August 2024, fleeing by helicopter as crowds stormed her palace.

Faruque Ahmed initially took up the post as BCB president after the resignation of Nazmul Hassan, a close ally of Hasina, but it was later handed to Aminul.

SPOTLIGHT

Tazmin Brits cracks superb hundred as South Africa spoil Bates' party in six-wicket victory

AFP
Indore

Tazmin Brits cracked a brilliant century as South Africa spoiled New Zealand's Suzie Bates' record 350th international appearance with a six-wicket victory in a Women's World Cup match yesterday.

Brits hit 101 off 89 balls with 15 boundaries and a six - her fourth century in five ODIs - to help South Africa chase a 232-run target in 40.5 overs at Holkar Stadium in Indore.

Left-arm spinner Nonkululeko Mlaba grabbed 4-40 as New Zealand were bowled out for 231 in 47.5 overs with Bates dismissed off the very first ball of the match by pacer Marizanne Kapp.

Bates, 38, became the first woman to play 350 internationals - 173 ODIs in addition to 177 T20Is - in a glorious career.

The win revived South Africa's campaign after they were shot out for 69 in their ten-wicket defeat against England in Guwahati on Friday.

New Zealand, the reigning Twenty20 world champions, have lost both their matches following their 89-run loss against title-holders Australia.

Brits shared a solid 159-run second wicket stand with Sune Luus, who hit the winning runs during her unbeaten 83 studded with ten fours and a six. South Africa skipper Laura Wolvaardt praised the comeback.

"It is such an amazing turnaround," said Wolvaardt. "This is what we knew we were capable of, really happy of how quickly we put that behind us and bounced back today."

New Zealand skipper Sophie Devine admitted defeat has put the team in a tough position.

"We have to win a lot of games now, " said Devine. "This puts a bit more pressure on the remaining games. We know exactly where we stand and what we have to do."

Earlier, New Zealand - who won the toss and batted - rode on Devine's 98-ball 85 in her 300th international, atoning for her long-time friend Bates' failure.

Devine and Georgia Plimmer (31) lifted New Zealand from a precarious 44-2 with a 57-run stand for the third wicket while Brooke Halliday (45) further added 86 with her skipper.

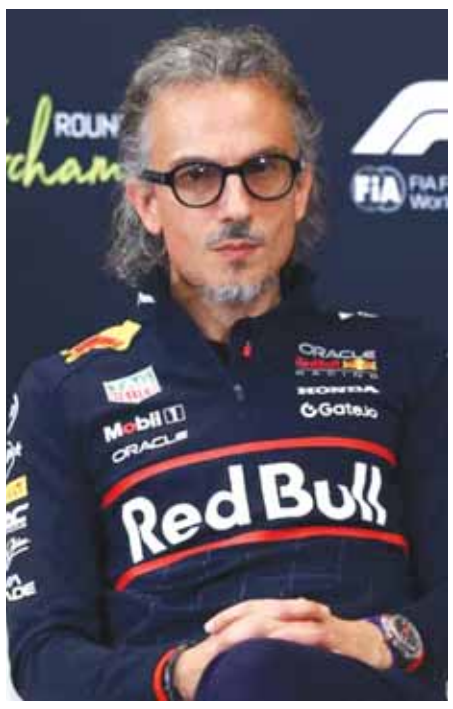
But New Zealand lost their last seven wickets for a mere 44 runs as Mlaba dismissed Devine in an incisive spell.

Devine hit nine boundaries.

BRIEF SCORES
South Africa 232 for 4 (Brits 101, Luus 83, Amelia Kerr 2-62) **beat New Zealand 231** (Devine 85, Halliday 45, Mlaba 4-40) **by six wickets**

MOTORSPORT

Red Bull boss Mekies refuses to take credit as Verstappen narrows gap in Formula One race



Reuters
London

Red Bull boss **Laurent Mekies** is refusing to take any credit for the Formula One team's improved performance since the Frenchman replaced Christian Horner at the helm in July.

Four-times world champion Max Verstappen has won twice since Mekies arrived six races ago and has been on the podium in the last four races, finishing second in Singapore last weekend.

Before Zandvoort, a home race where he finished second, Verstappen had not been on the podium for four races.

"It's still zero, guys. It's still zero," Mekies told reporters in Singapore when asked how much credit he felt he could take for the turnaround.

"The improvement in performance is very basically due to the work of everyone trying to analyse the limitations of the car, race after race.

"What is stopping us from exploiting the potential of the car?

"How can we add performance to the car? Where do we need to add performance for it to convert into lap time?"

Verstappen has gone from being 104 points behind McLaren's championship leader Oscar Piastri after the Dutch Grand Prix at the end of August to 63 adrift of the Australian following Sunday's race. With six Grands Prix and three Saturday sprint races remaining, Verstappen is still in the title reckoning although very much a long shot.

"I think Laurent is probably being too nice," the champion said of Mekies' words, with Red Bull consultant Helmut Marko earlier saying the boss was 'too humble'.

"At the end of the day, what is very good is that we just approach it as a proper team effort. We always tried to look into the details. We tried to understand what our weaknesses were. And since a few races it's definitely picked up a lot.

"I do think that now we understand why or how we can be better. By asking the right questions, including Laurent being involved in that, it's just working well."

McLaren retained their constructors' title in Singapore and are expected to do the double and end Verstappen's run of four successive drivers' crowns.

ANNOUNCEMENT

FIFA renews confidence in Hani Ballan as Deputy Chair of Referees Committee



QNA
Zurich

FIFA recently convened a meeting during which it renewed its confidence in **Hani Taleb Ballan** as Deputy Chair of the Referees Committee.

The meeting also took many decisions, including appointing members of the standing committees following a consultative process with continental and national federations under FIFA, in addition to appointing members to the newly established standing committees for the upcoming 2025-2029 term.

Floating Ballan for this position for a second term came after he had become Deputy Chair of FIFA's Referees Committee in 2019. He has been serving as Chairman of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Referees Committee since 2019, Chairman of the Gulf Football Association (GFA) Referees Committee since 2024, and Chairman of the Qatar Football Association (QFA) Referees Committee since 2014.

This renewal of confidence came by virtue of his massive capabilities and expertise as a certified instructor with the English Football Association (FA) since 2006.

He is also an accredited instructor with both FIFA and AFC.

Between 1998 and 2004, Ballan served as an international referee, participating in numerous prestigious football tournaments, including the AFC Asian Cup and the Gulf Cup.

PARNASSE WINS FIGHT IN PARIS



France's Salahdine Parnasse (right) lands a right hand on France's Franck PetitJean during their boxing clash at the Adidas Arena in Paris. Parnasse won the fight against PetitJean by knockout in the second round. *(AFP)*.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Qatar Polo Club confirms Polo AlMarsa Qatar in Dec

Presented by Qatar Calendar, the hugely popular event will be held from December 11-13 at Old Doha Port



Qatar Polo Club (QPC), under the Ministry of Sports and Youth, yesterday announced the launch of Polo AlMarsa Qatar, the country's first ever polo showcase, presented by Qatar Calendar.

Taking place from Dec 11-13 at Terminal Park, Old Doha Port, the event will debut exhibition polo in a purpose-built grass arena, featuring a sporting festival of high-calibre polo matches, cultural showcases, hospitality, and horsemanship.

Players from Argentina and Chile will join the showcase as part of the Qatar-Argentina and Chile 2025 Year of Culture, an initiative that spearheads long-lasting cultural partnerships between Qatar and other nations.

Over three days, spectators will experience the excitement of Polo, from a Juniors play-off and a Women's exhibition match to the Years of Culture Championship Cup, celebrating how sport brings people together and builds trust between nations, celebrating Argentina and Chile.

At the heart of the competition is the Polo AlMarsa Championship Cup, where Qatari and international players will play in mixed teams marking a landmark sporting debut for the country.

Ashraf Abuissa, Chairman for QPC, said: "As the official home of polo in the country, our mission is to celebrate equestrian and athletic excellence and raise awareness of this sport. Polo has long been part of the culture and sporting landscape of our region for centuries, symbolising skill, unity, and tradition."

Fuad Al-Mudahka, Director General, Qatar Polo Club, added: "Polo AlMarsa reflects our commitment to rekindling this heritage sport, enabling us to create a new tradition that connects our community, honours our equestrian culture, and elevates local talent on an international stage."

Mohammed al-Kuwari, Years of Culture Adviser on Latin America and Qatar's former ambassador to Mexico said: "The Years of Culture has always shown that sport and culture are two sides of the same coin as both bring people together across borders. This Polo AlMarsa event connects Qatar's equestrian heritage with beloved traditions in Chile and Argentina, creating a new cultural and sporting bridge that will endure long after this year."

"Hosting Qatar's first-ever polo event at Old Doha Port marks a new milestone in our journey to establish the Port as a vibrant cultural and tourism destination," said engineer Mohammed Abdulla al-Mulla, CEO of Old Doha Port. "Through hosting this event, we aim to bring together Qatar's rich heritage and modern spirit, reflecting our vision to deliver experiences that celebrate national identity through a contemporary lens. Polo AlMarsa is more than just a sporting event; it represents a strategic step toward strengthening the Port's role within Qatar's cultural and sporting landscape."

Jassim al-Mahmoud, Director of Public Relations and Communications at Visit Qatar, said: "Polo AlMarsa is a remarkable addition to our events calendar, showcasing Qatar's equestrian tradition while introducing a global sport that resonates with culture and heritage. Through this partnership, we are enriching the diversity of experiences available to both residents and visitors. By hosting such distinctive events at Old Doha Port, Visit Qatar continues to enhance the country's reputation as a vibrant destination for sport and culture events."

Beginning with the Polo AlMarsa Youth Camp on Day 1, December 11, and followed by two days of Polo matches and experiences at Old Doha Port, the three-day programme will combine international exhibition polo with hospitality, entertainment, cultural shows and family activities, international cuisine, fashion and art.

Day two of the program, the official first day of Polo AlMarsa Qatar, on December 12 includes an exhilarating welcome parade with over 50 horses, the official opening ceremony hosted by the Years of Culture and Chile featuring a world class Chilean Cultural Horse Show.

This will be followed by the Mini Mallet Cup, a Women's Exhibition Match, and the Years of Culture Championship Cup celebrating the great bond between Argentina, Chile and Qatar.

The International Day of Polo, hosted on Day 3, December 13, will be headlined by the Polo AlMarsa Championship Cup. Guests will also enjoy a Historical Horse Show, heritage demonstrations, the closing awards, and the finale of Fashions on the Field.

Throughout the event, the Polo Village will be a lively hub with food trucks, retail, live entertainment, cultural and family activities.

Those seeking elevated comfort can access ticketed lounges with prime pitch-side views and dining, while exclusive VIP and sponsor lounges will offer tailored spaces for dignitaries and partners.

Tickets for Polo AlMarsa Qatar are available through the event website. For details and reservations, please visit www.poloalmarsa.com

TENNIS

Zverev dumped out of Shanghai by Rinderknech

AFP
Shanghai


France's Arthur Rinderknech hits a return against Germany's Alexander Zverev in their singles match at the Shanghai Masters yesterday. *(AFP)*

World number three Alexander Zverev said he was playing "terrible tennis" after he was knocked out of the Shanghai Masters by France's Arthur Rinderknech 4-6, 6-3, 6-2 yesterday.

His exit leaves Novak Djokovic as the tournament's top-ranked player, increasing the 38-year-old Serb's chances of winning a record-extending fifth title in the Chinese financial hub.

In stifling conditions, the 54th-ranked Rinderknech came back from a set down to stun an increasingly rattled Zverev into submission. It is the second time the Frenchman has beaten him, after bundling him out of Wimbledon earlier this year.

A despondent Zverev told reporters the match had been "nothing unusual for me, unfortunately, these days".

"Just no confidence, no belief in the shots... My year has been terrible, I'm just playing terrible tennis all round," he said, visibly emotional.

The German had injured his big toe towards the end of his last match in Shanghai but yesterday showed no sign of discomfort as he broke Rinderknech in the third game with a forehand.

He nearly went ahead early in the second set, but Rinderknech recovered his composure and broke in the fourth game.

"I'm not very sure (how I managed to turn the game around)," he said.

"I fought like hell, tried everything. (Zverev) is such a good player... I knew it was going to be a battle.

"Starting in the second set... I was able to be offensive at the right moment, in a smarter way," he said.

Keeping up the momentum, in the third set the 30-year-old broke in the third game.

Zverev had to pause to change his shoes because sweat was pouring out of them, as spectators wafted fans and wore cool packs on their foreheads to counter the suffocating humidity. But switching footwear was not enough to save the German, and a double fault in the seventh game led to Rinderknech breaking again.

Holding with an ace to win, the Frenchman lolled his body in delighted disbelief, then danced around the court in glee.

TOP SEEDS VANQUISHED

Zverev's loss means world number five Djokovic now leads ranking-wise as the tournament heads into the last 16, with the 24-time Grand Slam winner facing Spain's Jaume Munar today.

On Sunday the competition lost both defending champion Jannik Sinner, who was forced to retire with extreme leg cramps, and fourth-ranked Taylor Fritz.

World number one Carlos Alcaraz withdrew at the last minute to rest.

Alex de Minaur is the next highest seed after Djokovic through to the fourth round, comfortably getting past Poland's Kamil Majchrzak 6-1, 7-5.

The Australian will next meet Portugal's Nuno Borges, who put an end to the hopes of home favourite Shang Juncheng 7-6 (7/5), 4-6, 6-3.

MEDVEDEV ADVANCES

Daniil Medvedev, the 2019 Shanghai champion, is through too, after beating Spain's Alejandro Davidovich Fokina 6-3, 7-6 (7/5).

"I haven't had a title since two years, so (I'm) not a favourite yet, but I will take it match by match, and I'm happy with the way I play so far," he told AFP.

The Russian broke early to take the first set, before edging a sweat-soaked tiebreak in the second.

Medvedev said he relished the conditions.

"Whenever it's above 28 and humid, I suffer and many players don't. Here everyone suffers," he grinned.

He will once again take on US teenager Learner Tien, who defeated him last week in the China Open semi-final.

The 19-year-old beat Britain's Cameron Norrie 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 to make the last 16 yesterday.

Kasatkina ends season early citing mental and emotional strain

LONDON: **Daria Kasatkina** has become the latest leading player to end her season early, saying she is at breaking point, mentally and emotionally.

The Russian-born Australian posted a statement on social media yesterday explaining she had continued until now, saying she was fine even though she knew that was not the case, and keeping a lid on her feelings so as not to sound weak or unappreciative.

"I've been far from fine for a long time and truth be told, my results and performances show that," said the 28-year-old. "The fans aren't stupid, they can see it too.

"Truth is, I've hit a wall and can't continue. I need a break. A break from the monotonous daily grind of life on the tour, the suitcases,



the results, the pressure, the same faces (sorry girls), everything that comes with this life. The schedule is too much, mentally and emotionally I am at breaking point and sadly I am not alone," added the world number 19.

Kasatkina switched nationality this year after a spell as a neutral athlete. She has not returned to Russia after coming out as gay and speaking out against the war in Ukraine.

She said she had not seen her father for four years and had suffered emotional stress in the battle to gain full Australian competition eligibility.

"I know I am strong and I will get stronger by being away, recharging, regrouping and reenergising," said Kasatkina. "2025 is done for me, and like me, it's been far from fine."

Other players ended their seasons early recently, some highlighting the length and intensity of the tennis calendar.

Gainey wins title in Florida



Tommy Gainey poses with the tournament trophy after winning the Constellation FURYK & FRIENDS 2025 at Timuquana Country Club in Jacksonville, Florida. The 50-year-old walked in a birdie at the last hole for a two-shot victory over Australia's Cameron Percy. *(AFP)*

GOLF

Fisk rides strong finish to maiden Tour win

Reuters
Jackson, Mississippi

PGA Tour rookie Steven Fisk finished birdie-birdie-birdie to notch his first career tour victory Sunday at the Sanderson Farms Championship in Jackson, Mississippi.

Fisk posted an 8-under-par 64 in his final round, carding a 24-under-par 264 at the Country Club of Jackson to overtake South Africa's Garrick Higgo by two strokes. Ranked No. 183 in the world, Fisk got hotter as the week went on (70-65-65-64), and his 64 was the lowest score of the day.

"Based on the scores earlier this week I didn't have a target score in mind today, but I knew it was going to be - I knew it was going to require more birdies than anything else," Fisk said. "Just trying to make as many as I possibly could because I knew I'd need them at the end."

It was an emotional day for Fisk for multiple reasons.

His victory came five-plus months after his father, Christopher Fisk, died at 59 years old after fighting pancreatic cancer. Christopher Fisk got his son into golf and built a par-3 course and driving range in their hometown in Georgia.

Fisk also had Jay Green on his bag this week. Green was the caddie for PGA Tour pro Grayson Murray, who died by suicide in 2024.

"I think (his dad) nudged a couple putts in for me for sure, maybe him or Grayson," Fisk said. "I had a couple of helpers out there. I miss him very much, and I know he'd be really proud of how I played all week and especially today to keep my composure and just kind of go about my business the best way I know how.

"I'd like to think that he knew this day would happen."

Fisk and Higgo were tied for the lead at the par-4 16th hole when Fisk drained a 41-foot birdie. Higgo matched him from 11 feet to form another tie at 22 under.

At the par-4 17th, they threw darts at the flagstick with their approach shots, and each landed about 3 feet away. But Higgo couldn't convert his birdie putt, and Fisk calmly sank his for the outright lead. "I don't know. I didn't feel anything," Higgo said of his blunder. "The grain was pretty straight down. Obviously I think there was a little bit of movement. I took it pretty straight and moved slightly. Yeah, I was just as shocked as you were."

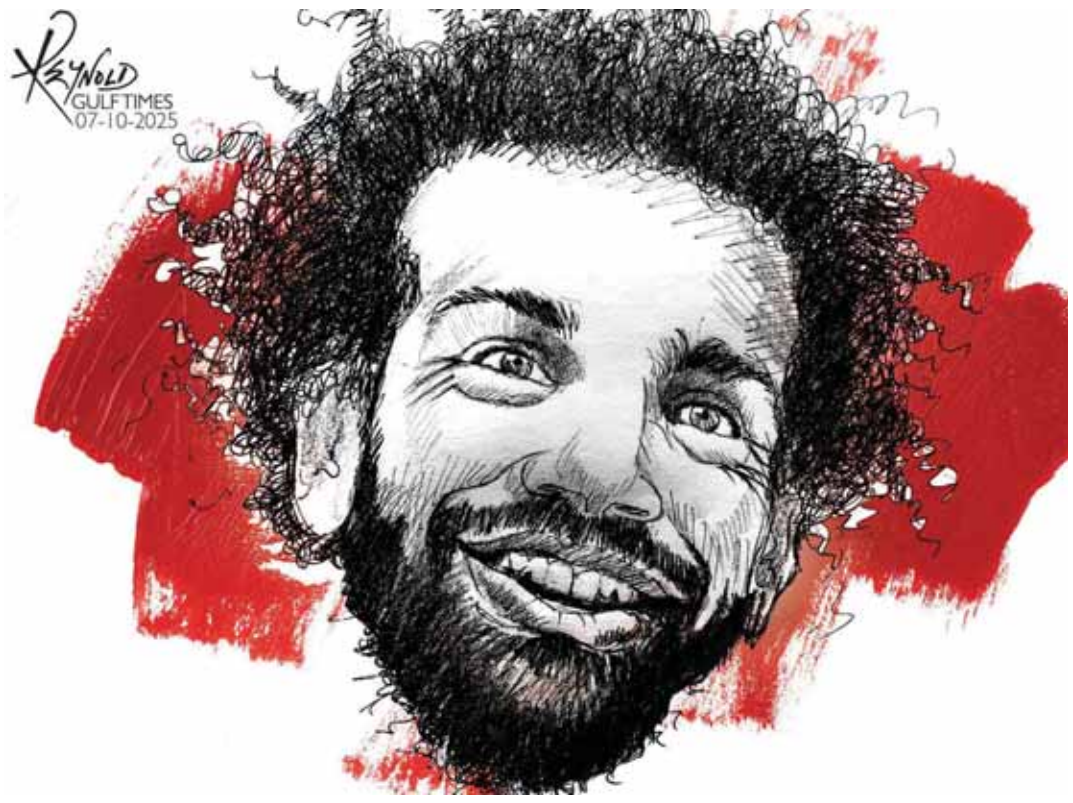
Higgo, a two-time PGA Tour winner, needed to bury a 30-foot birdie attempt at No. 18 to put pressure on Fisk but missed. Fisk had two putts to win but holed his 4-foot birdie look to finish in style. "It's job security," Fisk said. "I think I mentioned in another interview earlier that we all think we're good enough to compete out here and to win, and to come out here today and play like I did, and finally I truly know that I'm good enough to be a PGA Tour winner is really cool."

SPOTLIGHT

Salah under fire as Liverpool star loses his spark

SALAH'S LETHARGIC DISPLAY WAS IN KEEPING WITH A MAJOR DIP IN FORM SINCE THE CLOSING STAGES OF LAST SEASON

AFP
London



Mohamed Salah is Liverpool's "Egyptian King", but the forward's crown has lost a little of its lustre during a disappointing spell in which his work ethic has come under fire.

Salah was below his best again in Liverpool's damaging 2-1 defeat at Chelsea on Saturday as he wasted several chances and failed to help out in defence.

He has been absent from the scoresheet in five of Liverpool's seven Premier League games this season and the champions have suffered as a result.

The loss at Stamford Bridge was Liverpool's third in eight days as Arsenal leapfrogged them to the top of the table.

Salah has scored just three goals and provided three assists in nine appearances in all competitions this season.

Even more alarming than Salah's statistics, mediocre by his stellar standards, was the sight of the 33-year-old taking little interest when Liverpool were under siege against Chelsea.

Without any protection from the forward, Liverpool right-back Conor Bradley was hauled off at half-time after earning a booking as he struggled to keep Chelsea at bay.

The killer ball for Estevao Willian's stoppage-time winner came from Salah's right flank, with Marc Cucurella advancing unchecked to set up the Brazilian's goal.

Cucurella revealed Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca told them exploit the defensive space vacated by Salah.

"We know that Salah is always ready for the counter-attack so we practised that and the manager said that the space might be there," he said.

Salah's lethargic display was in keeping with a major dip in form since the closing stages of last season.

He scored 29 goals in 38 league matches, earning the Premier League Golden Boot as Liverpool powered to a record-equalling 20th English title. But after scoring twice in a 3-1 win against Southampton in March, Salah's influence has waned.

'You need to help'

<!--closing bold italic-->He netted just twice in his last 11 games in all competitions, with Liverpool crashing out of the Champions League against Paris Saint-Germain during his power outage. After Liverpool clinched the title, Salah boasted he had convinced Reds boss Arne Slot to let him concentrate on scoring and creating at the expense of defending.

"I told him as long as you rest me defensively, I will provide offensively. I will show you the numbers. So I'm glad that I did," he said.

But giving Salah so much freedom is starting to backfire as opponents expose the gaping holes left by that plan.

Former Manchester United and England star Wayne Rooney has joined the growing chorus of disapproval over Salah's work rate.

"We know he doesn't always get back and defend as much. But in the Chelsea game his full-back is getting torn apart and he's watching," he said on the BBC's Wayne Rooney Show.

"When it's going well and you are scoring goals, the team will put up with that. But over the last week I'd question his work ethic.

"Those leaders in that dressing room should be telling him 'You need to help out'. He's looked a little bit lost over the last week."

Former Liverpool midfielder Danny Murphy agrees with Rooney.

"It feels like Mohamed Salah's lack of defensive work has become a little problem for Liverpool, especially against the better teams," he said. Slot must solve the issue if Liverpool are to emerge from their malaise.

Intriguingly, he left Salah on the bench for the first hour of the Champions League defeat at Galatasaray last week, while conceding that decision might have led to his lack of sharpness against Chelsea.

"That's interesting. Did he create so much because he didn't play during the week or did he miss the chances because he missed a bit of sharpness that he could have had if he would played against Galatasaray? We will never know," the Dutchman said.

For now, Slot is preaching patience as he looks to get Salah back on track.

"It's not like every chance he gets is always a goal," Slot said. "We feel sometimes it is, because of what he has done so many times. But yeah he is a human being."

FOCUS

UEFA 'reluctantly' approves European league games in US and Australia

AFP
Lausanne



UEFA yesterday said it had "reluctantly" approved the staging of a La Liga and a Serie A match in the United States and Australia respectively despite fan protests.

"While it is regrettable to have to let these two games go ahead, this decision is exceptional and shall not be seen as setting a precedent," UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said in a statement.

UEFA made its ruling after Spain's La Liga agreed to move a game scheduled for late December between champions Barcelona and Villarreal to Miami, Florida. Italy's Serie A also decided to stage the encounter between AC Milan and Como on February 8 in Perth, Australia, to avoid a clash with the Winter Olympics opening ceremony at Milan's San Siro stadium.

But that sparked protests from European supporters groups who branded the moves "absurd, unaffordable, and environmentally irresponsible".

In its statement, UEFA said that it had "reiterated its clear opposition to domestic league matches being played outside their home country".

But despite "the widespread lack of support that had already been raised by fans, other leagues, clubs, players and European institutions", UEFA said that it had found no clear regulatory framework in FIFA's statutes that would allow it to oppose the moves. "The UEFA Executive Committee has reluctantly taken the decision to approve, on an exceptional basis, the two requests referred to it," European football's governing body said in its statement.

While the idea of relocating European football matches to other continents seems shocking to many, other sports - particularly US ones - have been doing something similar for years, even decades. The NFL has held games in London since 2007 while it also expanded to Mexico and Germany. Last year it added a game in Sao Paulo and this year there has been one in Dublin for the first time. Another is slated for Madrid in November while Melbourne will play host to a game in 2026.

The NBA, which has relocated regular-season matches since 1990 to Japan and since 2013 to Europe, has already scheduled six games in Berlin, London, Manchester and Paris over the next three seasons. In rugby union, the French Top 14 club competition took its 2016 final to Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium, while Ireland and New Zealand played an international match in Chicago that same year - with Ireland claiming their first ever victory over the All Blacks.

Last weekend, Argentina played their final Rugby Championship match at home to South Africa at Twickenham in London. It is not unheard of in football to host matches abroad, but until now those had only ever been glorified friendlies.

MULLER ON TARGET AS VANCOUVER THRASH SAN JOSE TO GO JOINT TOP

Thomas Muller was among the goalscorers as the Vancouver Whitecaps thrashed the San Jose Earthquakes 4-1 to edge closer to Major League Soccer's Western Conference crown yesterday. Former Germany and Bayern Munich star Muller steered home a 57th-minute strike from the edge of the penalty area to continue his rich vein of goalscoring since moving to MLS. The 36-year-old has netted six times in seven appearances in all competitions for the Whitecaps, whose victory on Sunday propelled them to joint top of the Western Conference.

The Whitecaps are now level on 60 points with San Diego but have played one game less. The Whitecaps will clinch the conference if they win their two remaining regular season fixtures.

Vancouver were set on their way to Sunday's win after a well-worked goal from Rayan Elloumi opened the scoring on 39 minutes before Muller doubled the Whitecaps lead after half-time.

PREVIEW

Indonesia sense World Cup chance as Asian qualifying reaches climax

AFP
Hong Kong

World Cup qualifying in Asia reaches its climax over the next week with Patrick Kluivert's Indonesia among six countries vying for two remaining spots from the region.

The football-mad nation of nearly 300mn people is on the verge of its first World Cup since gaining independence from the Dutch in 1945. Indonesian football authorities have looked to the Netherlands to achieve it, bringing in legendary Dutch striker Kluivert as coach in January. They have also naturalised more than a dozen players born in the Netherlands but with family ties to the Southeast Asian country. It comes three years after Indonesian football was plunged into mourning when 135 people were killed in a stadium crush during a domestic game. "The whole country needs to stand behind us," said Kluivert, the former Netherlands and Barcelona great whose side faces Iraq and Saudi Arabia in Group B. There are two groups in this stage of Asian qualifying, each with three teams that will all face each other once. The teams that finish top of each group qualify for next year's showpiece in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The 2026 World Cup has been expanded to 48 teams from 32, giving the likes of Indonesia a better chance of qualifying.

"We are doing our utmost best to perform at the highest level and prepare the players as good as possible," said Kluivert. "Inshallah (God willing) we are ready to make the country proud of us."

Indonesia will have to do it the hard way, with Saudi Arabia staging all the games in Group B and so having home advantage. Indonesia and Saudi Arabia meet on Wednesday in Jeddah to kickstart the action. Kluivert, whose coaching career has never lived up to his stellar playing days, has won three of his six games in charge, losing two and drawing one. The Saudis will be favourites to progress out of the group and are now back under French coach Herve Renard following the sacking of Italian Roberto Mancini a year ago. Renard masterminded the Saudis' shock 2-1 win over Lionel Messi's eventual champions Argentina at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Group A comprises Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, who are bidding to reach the finals for the first time. That group will play all its games in Qatar, giving the reigning Asian champions an undeniable advantage.

COMMENT

Mbappe undergoing treatment for 'small niggle' at France camp: Deschamps

AFP
Paris


Kylian Mbappe arrives for a training in Paris, yesterday. *(AFP)*

Kylian Mbappe is receiving treatment for a "small niggle" in his right ankle after meeting up with his international team-mates ahead of the latest round of 2026 World Cup qualifiers, France coach Didier Deschamps said yesterday.

The France captain sustained the knock at the end of Real Madrid's 3-1 La Liga victory over Villarreal on Saturday, casting doubts over his availability to the national team for their upcoming qualifying matches against Azerbaijan and Iceland. "I spoke with Kylian, he had a small niggle but it's not serious, otherwise he wouldn't be here today," Deschamps told reporters at the French team's Clairefontaine base near Paris. "We will take the time with the medical staff to assess the situation and then see how it develops."

Liverpool defender Ibrahima Konate also underwent tests, after coming off injured in the Reds' 2-1 defeat at Chelsea on Saturday.

The pair received treatment on Monday during training and are set to continue treatment on Tuesday, according to the French national team's coaching staff.

The French football federation (FFF) also confirmed Paris Saint-Germain forward Bradley Barcola would be sent home from Clairefontaine due to a hamstring injury.

"After consulting with the French national team doctor... (Barcola) has been diagnosed with a chronic injury to his right hamstring since Paris Saint-Germain's Champions League match against Atalanta (on September 17)," the FFF said. PSG then publicly rejected the diagnosis of the 23-year-old by France's medical team.

"The information published in this statement does not correspond in any way to the medical information provided by Paris Saint-Germain's medical teams," the club posted on social media.

"Prior to the gathering (at Clairefontaine) and following the Ligue 1 matchday 7 fixture against Lille, PSG provided the French national team with a medical report on Bradley Barcola that made no mention of any chronic injury following the match against Atalanta."

The attacker played 60 minutes of PSG's at Lille on Sunday before being replaced, showing no apparent signs of injury.

UZBEKISTAN NAME CANNAVARO AS HEAD COACH

Former Italy World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro has been named as the new head coach of Uzbekistan, the Central Asian country's football association announced yesterday. It is the second time that the 2006 Ballon d'Or winner has taken charge of a national team have coached China for two matches - both defeats- in early 2019 before stepping down. "The Uzbekistan Football Association has signed a contract with Fabio Cannavaro - a renowned specialist, one of the best defenders of his generation, a four-time World Cup participant, and the winner of the 2006 FIFA World Cup," the Uzbek football association said in an Instagram post also shared on Cannavaro's official account. "The Italian coach will lead our national team in preparation for the upcoming World Cup, which will take place in the USA, Canada, and Mexico."

Uzbekistan have qualified for the World Cup for the first time. Timur Kapadze, who guided Uzbekistan through the final part of their successful World Cup qualifying campaign, is rumoured to be remaining on as part of Cannavaro's backroom staff, according to press reports. Cannavaro made his name as a rugged centre-back first with Parma and then Juventus, where he twice won the Italian Serie A title - although those were later rescinded over the Calciopoli scandal. He moved on to Real Madrid where he won La Liga twice and then returned to Juventus for a season before ending his career in Dubai. As a coach he has had a nomadic career, taking over teams in China, Saudi Arabia and Croatia, as well as his homeland.