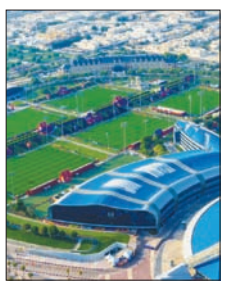
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FOOTBALL | Page 3

Qatar set to host AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup Qatar 2025



PREMIER LEAGUE | Page 4

Arsenal 'have to make another statement against title rivals Chelsea'

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CRICKET

No Cummins as Australia name unchanged squad for second Ashes Test

Page 2

FORMULA 1

Piastri says 'it's nice to be back' after Qatar sprint pole

Championship leader Norris was third fastest, while four-time champion Verstappen came sixth

By Sahan Bidappa
Doha



McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri drives during qualifying session for the Qatar sprint race at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday. *(AFP)*

The last time Oscar Piastri stood on a podium was at the Italian Grand Prix in September. His most recent Grand Prix victory came a month earlier in the Netherlands, when he held a 34-point lead over McLaren teammate Lando Norris.

Since then, however, the Australian has endured a sharp dip in form, slipping 24 points behind Norris in the title race with just two Grands Prix remaining. But Piastri will hope to chip away at that deficit after securing pole position yesterday for the Qatar sprint race at the Lusail International Circuit.

Today, Piastri will chase a third successive sprint victory in Qatar, though it is the later qualifying session for tomorrow's Grand Prix that will ultimately determine whether the title fight carries into next weekend's season finale in Abu Dhabi. There are 58 points still available: eight in today's 100km sprint, and 25 each from the final two Grands Prix in Qatar and Abu Dhabi.

Mercedes' George Russell will line up alongside Piastri on the front row after producing another superb lap, while Norris will start third, having run into traffic on his final attempt. He began his last lap tucked up behind Williams' driver Alex Albon, costing him crucial time throughout the run.

Behind the leading trio, Fernando Alonso impressed to secure fourth. Reigning four-time champion Max Verstappen – who also trails Norris by 24 points – could manage only sixth, slotting in behind teammate Yuki Tsunoda. Verstappen complained about severe bouncing throughout qualifying and was unhappy with the set-up of his Red Bull car.

Piastri admitted it was "nice to be back" having slightly shifted momentum away from Norris in their title fight. "It's been a good day, which is nice for a change," said Piastri, a smile returning to his face. "It's been a day where things have clicked from the start, and I think the sprint qualifying session went really well. I had a pretty big moment on my lap but it was just enough in the end, so thanks to the team – it's a great car and it's looked really good this weekend so far. I'm pretty happy with that."

The other Mercedes driver, Kimi Antonelli, was seventh ahead of Williams' Carlos Sainz, while Charles Leclerc was the sole Ferrari inside the top 10 in ninth. Albon rounded out the top 10. It was another poor qualifying for Lewis Hamilton, who was knocked out in the first session, his time only good enough for 18th on the grid.

Verstappen set the early pace in the opening phase, prompting Norris to accuse him of impeding – though stewards, after reviewing the incident, opted against taking action. Norris then led phase two, ahead of Piastri, who had been quickest in the sole practice session. Piastri ultimately delivered a best lap of one minute 20.055 seconds in the final segment, 0.032 clear of Russell, whose late effort pushed Norris down to third.

Norris admitted he made an error in the final corner. "I would be stupid not to try and win, but it's impossible to overtake, so I think I will probably finish P3," he said. "Getting past George Russell on the line is probably the best I can hope for."

Norris can become Britain's 11th world champion this weekend in Qatar. To achieve it, he must simply outscore both Piastri and Verstappen by two points, ensuring he reaches Abu Dhabi with a decisive 26-point advantage. A top-six result in the sprint, paired with victory in tomorrow's Grand Prix, could allow Norris to seal the title with one race remaining.

Verstappen, meanwhile, faces a considerable challenge. His remarkable second half of the season – cutting a 104-point deficit since Zandvoort by finishing on every podium – has hauled him back into the fight, with four wins, two seconds, and two third-place finishes. Yet the Dutchman accepts that a fifth straight world championship will demand a sizeable measure of fortune. If he succeeds, it would stand among Formula One's finest comebacks.

During qualifying yesterday, Verstappen repeatedly complained that his car was "bouncing like crazy". Whether his off-track moment caused any damage remains unclear, but he was out-qualified by Tsunoda for the first time this season. The Japanese driver has already stated he will do everything possible to support Verstappen, last year's Grand Prix winner at Lusail.

Reflecting on sprint qualifying, Verstappen said: "Not good. From the first lap, just really bad bouncing and very aggressive understeer that would shift into oversteer at high speed. Just not what you want to go faster. We tried to change a few things on the wheel but it never really worked. It made it quite tricky. Clearly it wasn't working well in qualifying, so that's something we need to understand."

Verstappen will have to run the sprint with the same setup. However, once the sprint concludes, Red Bull will be allowed to adjust the car, as it will no longer be under parc ferme restrictions.



Oscar Piastri is congratulated by McLaren teammate Lando Norris after securing pole.

FOCUS

Packed grandstands mark high-energy start to Qatar Grand Prix



Lusail International Circuit (LIC) set the tone for an electrifying weekend as the Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix kicked off yesterday. With an action-packed schedule featuring practice sessions, Sprint qualifying, and a host of off-track activities, fans of all ages filled the grandstands throughout the day.

The interactive Fan Zone was buzzing with activity as attendees explored food stalls, games, experiences, and merchandise, creating a lively and unforgettable atmosphere. Fans also had the chance to meet drivers and team managers during the Fan Forum, where exclusive merchandise was distributed – offering attendees an once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Adding to the race weekend experience, Paddock Club guests enjoyed an exclusive Pit Lane Walk, gaining unparalleled access to team garages and behind-the-scenes action. The excitement continued with a Paddock Club



Track Tour, providing a guided lap of the circuit and unique insights into the challenges drivers face on track. Off-track entertainment included a soulful performance by British singer Seal at the Lusail Live Stage, further delighting fans.

Today promises even more thrills with the Sprint race, highlighting Qatar as one of only six venues selected by F1 to host this high-octane format in 2025. The 100km sprint race, which requires no mandatory pit stops, is expected to deliver intense wheel-to-wheel action under the lights.

Circuit gates open at 1:30pm today. Complimentary Metro passes can be redeemed by the Ticket holders at the Goldclub office at any Doha Metro station or selected Lusail Tram stations. The Doha Metro will operate extended hours from 5am to 1:30am, with shuttle services running from Lusail QNB Station to the circuit.

SPOTLIGHT

Indian officials vow successful Games but ghosts of 2010 haunt preparations

AFP
Ahmedabad, India

Organisers are confident they can avoid the calamities of last time when India hosts the Commonwealth Games but there are many challenges for a country that also has Olympic ambitions.

Ahmedabad, in Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat, was confirmed on Wednesday as the venue for the 2030 Commonwealth Games.

It is seen in India as a stepping stone towards the goal of hosting the 2036 Olympics and authorities hope it will establish the world's most populous nation as a sporting destination.

A successful Commonwealth Games will also help erase the memories of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi, which were marred by accusations of corruption and construction delays.

Ahmedabad already boasts the world's largest cricket stadium, a 130,000-seat arena named after Modi, which most likely will stage the opening and closing ceremonies.

But beyond that, massive investment in roads, subway lines and sporting facilities are needed to reshape the city of more than seven million people. Barely five years until the competition is a comparatively short timeframe to get it all done.

Ashwani Kumar, a senior Gujarat official who looks after sports, said Ahmedabad's existing venues were capable of hosting the Games "with some modifications".

New arenas will also be built by "late 2028 or early 2029".

"We are very confident and we have done good homework as a team," Kumar told reporters, adding that a budget had been worked out already, without giving figures.

MANPOWER ISSUE

Aside from competition venues, India will need to boost infrastructure for the thousands of athletes, spectators and officials flooding into the city.

Hotels are expected to add thousands of new rooms while the local airport will start construction on a new terminal next year.

"Five years is enough for building our capacity," said Narendra Somani, president of the Hotels and Restaurants' Association of Gujarat.

"Also, we expect the government to come up with some industry-friendly policies that would boost the outlook further."

Somani admitted personnel challenges.

"We have a shortage of skilled workers in the hotel industry in Gujarat.

"We will have to hire workers from other states like Assam and Punjab," he said yesterday.

The spectre of the 2010 Commonwealth Games looms large.

At the time the Games were meant to showcase India's status as an emerging global power but headlines were instead about delays, shoddy construction and budget overruns.

English and Australian swimmers blamed Delhi's swimming pool for contracting a stomach virus while some athletes complained of finding a cobra in the Games village accommodation.

India's national auditor accused the Delhi government of wasteful spending to the tune of at least $29mn during its "ill-conceived and ill-planned" programme to beautify the city in the run-up to the Games.

A report by the Comptroller and Auditor General also listed several examples of alleged rigged bidding for lucrative contracts to supply timekeeping equipment, lighting fixtures for the glitzy opening ceremony and catering services.

The auditors blamed the organising committee for hyping up projected revenues from the Games to an astronomical Rs17.8bn.



A cotton candy seller walks past a billboard featuring potential sporting events in Ahmedabad. The Indian city of Ahmedabad will stage the 2030 multi-sport Commonwealth Games, it was confirmed on November 26. The choice of Ahmedabad, also known as Amdavad, was ratified by a decision of the Commonwealth Sport General Assembly in Glasgow following a recommendation from the executive board. *(AFP)*

"In reality the total committed revenues amounted to just 6.8 billion rupees," the report said.

'WELL PREPARED'

The Gujarat government official Kumar admitted that there were "some challenges" in 2010, but said this time was different.

"We all are well prepared," Kumar said.

"We are very confident that we will deliver the Games which would be remembered in years to come," said Kumar. But Kumar also added a note of caution when said quickly: "We don't want to overcommit on anything, and would rather learn from the past editions of the Games elsewhere in the world."

CRICKET

No Cummins as Australia name unchanged squad

FELLOW STAR PACEMAN JOSH HAZLEWOOD IS ALSO ABSENT

AFP
Brisbane, Australia



Skipper **Pat Cummins** was left out of an unchanged Australia squad named yesterday for the day-night second Ashes Test against England in Brisbane as he battles back from injury, but under-pressure opener Usman Khawaja kept his place.

Fellow star paceman Josh Hazlewood was also absent, as expected, as he continues his recovery from a hamstring problem.

Cummins has not played since picking up a lower back injury against the West Indies four months ago.

He missed the rapid-fire opening Test in Perth that Australia won by eight wickets inside two days, but has been at full pace in the nets in recent weeks and said last weekend he was "half a chance" to play in Brisbane.

But selectors are clearly taking no chances with the 32-year-old, who will now be targeting the third Test in Adelaide on December 17.

It means Steve Smith will remain captain while Brendan Doggett is set to once more lead the attack with Perth 10-wicket hero Mitchell Starc and Scott Boland, on what is expected to be another fast track.

The Gabba Test gets under way on December 4 with Australia looking to ram home their advantage and take a 2-0 lead in the five-Test series.

Despite missing out Cummins will travel to Brisbane to continue his preparations, Cricket Australia said.

Khawaja made the squad amid mounting calls for the veteran to be dumped.

The 38-year-old, who has not made a Test hundred on home soil since January 2023, failed to open in either innings in Perth because of back spasms.

He was replaced at the top alongside Jake Weatherald initially by Marnus Labuschagne, and then by Travis Head in the second innings.

Head, who usually comes in at number five but opens in white-ball cricket, seized the opportunity with all guns blazing, slamming an incredible 123 from just 83 balls to drive Australia to victory.

Whether Khawaja keeps his spot in the XI remains to be seen with Australia not expected to finalise their starting side until the eve of the clash. Should selectors stick with Head and axe Khawaja, it could open the door to in-form allrounder Beau Webster and a handy extra bowling option.

Australia squad: Steve Smith (capt), Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Brendan Doggett, Cameron Green, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Michael Neser, Mitchell Starc, Jake Weatherald, Beau Webster

FOCUS

First title for Russian judoka since neutral status lifted



FROM LEFT: Mongolia's Ariunbold Enkhtaivan (silver medallist), Russia's Ayub Bliev (gold), Georgia's Giorgi Sardalashvili (bronze) and Turkiye's Salih Yildiz (bronze) stand on the podium during the award ceremony for the men's under 60kg category during the Abu Dhabi Grand Slam tournament, in Abu Dhabi, yesterday. ***(AFP)***

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Ayub Bliev became the first Russian judoka in more than two years to win a title under his national flag when he triumphed at the Abu Dhabi Grand Slam tournament yesterday.

Bliev, 28, beat Mongolia's Ariunbold Enkhtaivan in the 60kg final and received his gold medal with his national flag being raised and the Russian anthem played.

Bliev and his compatriots had their neutral athlete status lifted by the International Judo Federation (IJF) on Thursday which had been in place since Russia invaded Ukraine in February, 2022.

Belarus, widely perceived as allies of Russia, had had their neutral status lifted in June.

The decision came despite the war still raging in Ukraine, with Russian President Vladimir Putin saying on Thursday the conflict would only end if Kyiv withdraws from its territory claimed by Moscow. Ukraine's judo federation slammed the decision and accused the IJF of a "blatant violation" of International Olympic Committee recommendations.

"Ukraine pays with the lives of its citizens every day. Among the victims are athletes, coaches, volunteers, and children," the federation said in a statement on its website.

It said the decision "contradicts the principles of peace, justice, and responsibility, and undermines trust in international sports institutions".

The full reinstatement was greeted with delight in Russia, where Putin is a judo black belt.

He was also an ambassador and honorary president of the IJF until those roles were suspended as a result of the invasion.

"Judo is one of Russia's favourite sports, around half a million citizens regularly participate in it," Mikhail Degtyarev, Russia's Minister of Sport said in a statement published on Telegram.

"It is important to our country, judo is a presidential sport."

Russia has been effectively shut out from international sporting competitions since it invaded Ukraine, with major sporting bodies including the IOC banning Russian athletes from competing under their own flag.

"Sport is the last bridge that unites people and nations in very difficult conflict situations and environments," said the IJF. "Athletes have no responsibility for the decisions of governments or other national institutions, and it is our duty to protect the sport and our athletes."

ANNOUNCEMENT

Deepti, Kerr snap top deals at Women's Premier League auction, Healy unsold

AFP
New Delhi

India's cricket World Cup-winning star Deepti Sharma became the joint second-most expensive player in the Women's Premier League history after a winning bid of $358,000 by UP Warriorz yesterday.

The mega auction in New Delhi opened with a surprise after Australia skipper Alyssa Healy went unsold, as franchises finalised their teams for the fourth edition of the women's T20 tournament. New Zealand all-rounder Amelia Kerr was the most expensive foreign buy with current champions Mumbai Indians getting the White Ferns star back in the franchise for $335,000.

Women's cricket came of age in the ODI World Cup with hosts India crowned champions after they beat South Africa at a packed DY Patil Stadium in Mumbai earlier this month.

Warriorz brought back Deepti, a right-arm spinner and left-hand batter who was the player of the tournament with 22 wickets and 215 runs. The most expensive player ever sold at the WPL auction is India's Smriti Mandhana, who was bought by Royal Challengers Bengaluru for Rs34mn ($380,000) in 2023.

Second on the list are Australia all-rounder Ashleigh Gardner and England's Nat-Sciver Brunt who were sold for $358,000 in the 2023 auction.

Warriorz also got back England left-arm spinner Sophie Ecclestone for $95,000.

Warriorz used the right-to-match card - a rule that allows franchises to retain a player who was released by matching the highest bid - for both Deepti and Ecclestone.

MEG LANNING COULD BE A POTENTIAL CAPTAIN

Another big signing for Warriorz was Australia legend Meg Lanning, who went to the franchise for $212,000 and is seen as a potential captain.

Some other notable foreign picks included New Zealand all-rounder Sophie Devine ($223,000 - Gujarat Giants), Australia batter Phoebe Litchfield ($134,000 - Warriorz) and South Africa skipper Laura Wolvaardt ($123,000 - Delhi Capitals). The most shocking outcome of the auction was that 35-year-old Healy had no takers after she missed this year's edition due to injury.

Next year's WPL begins on January 9 with the final scheduled for February 5.

The WPL, staged first in 2023, delivered the Indian cricket board roughly $700mn in franchise and media rights alone.

The deals made the WPL the world's second-most valuable women's sports league after WNBA women's basketball in the United States.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar set to host future regional football stars at the AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup 2025

Qatar is set to host the AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup Qatar 2025 from Dec 4-16, bringing together young football talents in one of the most important age-group tournaments in the region.

This is the first time that the competition is being held under the auspices of the Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF).

"The U-23 Gulf Cup is reflective of our strong commitment to nurturing young, emerging football talents in the region, and fostering competitiveness in this age group.

This is a pivotal stage for young players to make their transition to senior teams, and we encourage fans to show their support for these future stars in the making," said Jassim Sultan al-Rumaihi, AGCFF Secretary-General.

The tournament will feature eight teams, divided into two groups. Hosts Qatar will lead Group A, and will be joined by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Iraq will lead Group B, and will play alongside the UAE, Oman, and Yemen.

The group stage will see a total of 14 matches played across two state-of-the-art pitches at Aspire Zone, that has most recently served as a venue for a historic edition of the FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar 2025.

The group stage is designed as a non-ticketed event, welcoming fans from the region to enjoy the football action.

The tournament will get underway on December 4 at Aspire Zone, 2:45pm, when Iraq face Yemen. Hosts Qatar will play their first match, one day later, on December 5, 2:45pm, against Kuwait.

The Final will take place on December 16 at the iconic Stadium 974, the first fully demountable covered football stadium in FIFA World Cup history that hosted matches during the historic tournament in 2022. Tickets for the Final will be available in the coming days.

Both tournament venues are accessible, ensuring a barrier-free experience for disabled fans.

The AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup Qatar 2025 is part of an exciting football season in Qatar, which includes the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 taking place from 1-18 December, as well as the FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2025, taking place on December 10, 13 and 17, reflecting Qatar's capabilities in hosting world-class mega-sporting events at the same time.

For all information related to the AGCFF U-17 Gulf Cup Qatar 2025, follow @AGCFF on all major social media platforms.



GOLF

Merger unlikely with LIV spending 'irrationally'

McIlroy doesn't see a pathway for reunification of professional golf

Reuters
Madrid



Rory McIlroy said it will be difficult for the PGA Tour and LIV Golf to reach an agreement so long as the Saudi-backed league continues to spend "irrationally". Speaking at the *CNBC CEO Council Forum*, the world's No 2-ranked golfer doesn't see a pathway for the reunification of the professional golf world any time soon.

"You see some of these other sports that have been fractured for so long," McIlroy said.

"You look at boxing for example, or you look at what's happened in motor racing in the United States with Indy and NASCAR and everything else, I think for golf in general it would be better if there was unification.

"But I just think with what's happened over the last few years, it's just going to be very difficult to be able to do that."

LIV Golf has totalled more than $1.4bn in losses over its first four years of existence, according to a report from *The Athletic* last month. However, that hasn't deterred the league, whose prize money expenditure for 2024 was roughly $400mn alone.

With several of the league's early big- money signings approaching the end of their initial contracts, Dustin Johnson has reportedly already agreed to a new deal while Bryson DeChambeau is also expected to recommit to the league early.

LIV is also expanding its format to 72 holes in 2026 as it seeks to earn Official World Golf Ranking points for its events.

A little less than $1.4bn has been distributed to players thus far, with *The Athletic* estimating that outside funding has invested over $4.89bn into the league. That is more than three and a half times the recorded prize money.

"As someone who supports the traditional structure of men's professional golf, we have to realise we were trying to deal with people that were acting, in some ways, irrationally, just in terms of the capital they were allocating and the money they were spending," McIlroy said.

"It's been four or five years and there hasn't been a return yet, but they're going to have to keep spending that money to even just maintain what they have right now.

"A lot of these guys' contracts are up. They're going to ask for the same number or an even bigger number. LIV have spent five or six billion U.S. dollars, and they're going to have to spend another five or six just to maintain where they are. I'm way more comfortable being on the PGA Tour side than on their side but who knows what'll happen?"

FOCUS

Kobori dazzles to take lead at Australian PGA Championship



Reuters
Melbourne

New Zealand's **Kazuma Kobori** shot an eight-under-par 63 in the second round of the Australian PGA Championship yesterday to take sole lead of the DP World Tour's season opener at Royal Queensland, while local hero Cameron Smith missed the cut.

Kobori, who had a hole-in-one on a rain-hit first day, came up with a brilliant round of nine birdies that included four on the trot with a single bogey to go 10-under overall and lead a trio of challengers by a stroke.

"I'm happy for the most part," Japanese-born Kobori said yesterday.

"Yesterday was a bit frustrating. I had a hole-in-one but didn't do much a part from that, but I made up for that today which was good.

"The wind dropped off nicely so I knew coming in 15, 16 and 17 were quite good opportunities, because I knew I had wedges in my hands so I hit a few close and was able to birdie 18 as well which was a nice bonus."

DING, QUAYLE AND RANKIN IN CHASING PACK

The chasing pack behind the 24-year-old Kobori included China's Ding Wenyi (66) and Australians Anthony Quayle (66) and Brett Rankin (69), who were all on nine-under for the tournament in a share of second place.

Three-times champion Smith had a shocker of a day with the putter and carded a four-over 75 to miss his seventh straight cut. It was the second time in three years at the tournament that he was thwarted at the halfway stage.

The 2022 British Open champion said he never saw his woeful round coming.

"If you told me that was going to happen this morning, when I was warming up, I'd have told you otherwise," a dejected Smith said.

"I don't know, I just don't know. I'm so confused. I was feeling good, really confident and just couldn't get anything going. It was weird. I was in between clubs a lot today.

"I hit a couple of bad shots that I'd have liked to have again. Drove the ball well... hit a lot of nice shots. Tough lies killed me today... and then couldn't get up and down," added Smith, who missed the cut at all four major tournaments this year.

Rankin had emerged as the surprise clubhouse leader at the halfway mark after having to complete his first round earlier in the day due to poor weather on Thursday.

Min Woo Lee, the 2023 champion, was joint-fifth in a group of four before play was suspended due to poor light with several players yet to complete the round.

EQUESTRIAN

Qatar Children's team shines at FEI Group VII Finals

By Sports Reporter
Doha



Young Qatar riders delivered outstanding performances to secure first place in the CSICh-A Children Teams category on the second day of the FEI Group VII Finals at Al Shaqab's Longines Outdoor Arena.

The team comprising Abdul Aziz Jassim al-Thani, Mohammed Hamza al-Kuwari, Mohammed Faisal al-Marri and Abdulla Tamim al-Thani impressed throughout the round. Saudi Arabia finished second, while Kuwait secured third place to complete the podium.

In the CSJ-A Junior Teams category, the UAE claimed first place, followed by Egypt in second and Saudi Arabia in third.

Closing the day, the Young Riders Teams category saw the UAE take top spot, Egypt finish second and Saudi Arabia secure third.

Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, Equine Education Director at Al Shaqab, said yesterday: "The second day reaffirmed the strength of Group VII's emerging athletes and the importance of hosting these finals in Qatar for the first time. The level of competition continues to rise, and the performances we witness each day reflect the commitment, discipline, and ambition of these young riders.

"We look forward to a strong final day that will crown the champions of this historic edition."

The Finals conclude today, with rounds across all categories set to determine the 2025 Group VII champions.

TWO-TIME MAJOR GOLF CHAMPION ZOELLER DIES

Los Angeles, United States: Fuzzy Zoeller, a two-time major champion who was known for his humour but sparked a firestorm with a racially insensitive joke about Tiger Woods, has died at the age of 74, the PGA Tour said Thursday.

"The PGA Tour is saddened by the passing of Fuzzy Zoeller," commissioner Jay Monahan said in a statement. "Fuzzy was a true original whose talent and charisma left an indelible mark on the game of golf."

No cause of death was disclosed.

Zoeller remains the last man to win the Masters in his first attempt, triumphing at Augusta National in a three-way playoff in 1979.

He beat Australian Greg Norman in a playoff at Winged Foot to take the 1984 US Open - not before waving a white towel in mock surrender when he erroneously thought Norman had seized the lead with a birdie at the final hole of regulation.

In fact Norman had made par, and Zoeller calmly forced the 18-hole decider. Beloved by fans for his gregarious nature and lighthearted approach, Zoeller was plunged into controversy in 1997 as 21-year-old rising star Woods was marching to a stunning victory in the Masters.

Asked to comment, Zoeller told *CNN* that "that little boy" was playing well. "Tell him not to serve fried chicken next year ...or collard greens or whatever they serve," he added in a reference to the champions' dinner. Zoeller apologised, but said he received death threats for years.

In 2008 he wrote in Golf Digest that it was "the worst thing I've gone through in my entire life".

SPOTLIGHT

England submits joint bid for 2035 Women's WC

Reuters
Macnhester

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have submitted a joint bid to host the Women's World Cup in 2035 in what the Home Nations described as the largest single-sport event ever staged in the UK and the first World Cup there since 1966.

The bid outlines plans for 22 stadiums across 16 host cities, including 16 venues in England, three in Wales, two in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland.

The four nations are sole bidders after FIFA President Gianni Infantino said in April the UK was the "one valid bid" for the finals. The vote on hosts for the 2031 and '35 World Cups will be made at the FIFA Congress in Vancouver on April 30.

The tournament will involve 104 matches contested by 48 teams over 39 days, with 48 team base camp training sites, 82 venue-specific training sites and 32 fan-festival sites.

The four federations said that with 63 million people living within two hours of a proposed venue, it would be the most accessible World Cup tournament ever. England's men won the World Cup for the first and so far only time when the country hosted the finals in 1966.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer backed the bid, calling it a chance to build on the success of England's women's team, who are back-to-back European champions, and inspire the next generation.

"Our bid to host the 2035 FIFA Women's World Cup shows the UK's passion for football," he said.

"The Lionesses' success has inspired girls across our country, and we'll build on that momentum by welcoming millions of football fans from around the world to a tournament that will benefit communities and businesses in host cities up and down the UK."

Organisers project 4.5 million ticket sales and a global TV audience of 3.5 billion.

"We are proud of the growth that we've driven in recent years across the women's and girls' game, but there is still so much more growth to come, and this event will play a key role in helping us deliver that," the four federations said in a statement.

"Working together with FIFA, a Women's World Cup in the UK has the power to turbocharge the women's and girls' game both in the UK and globally." The football federations of the United States, Mexico, Costa Rica and Jamaica announced last month a joint bid to host the 2031 Women's World Cup, the first edition of the tournament to feature 48 teams. If successful, it would be the first Women's World Cup staged across four countries. Brazil are set to host the 2027 global women's tournament.

Manchester United, in collaboration with Trafford Council, hope to be among the 16 host stadiums in England, saying they aim to have their new Old Trafford ground completed in time.

"Our ambition is to build a new 100,000 seater stadium fit to host the biggest international football games," United's Chief Operating Officer Collette Roche said.

"We also want to be a leader in the growth of women's football, in our own neighbourhood and around the world."

Some of the other proposed stadiums are Everton's Hill Dickinson ground (Liverpool), St James' Park (Newcastle), the Racecourse Ground (Wrexham) and London's Emirates Stadium, Selhurst Park, Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, Wembley Stadium and a potential new Chelsea stadium.


A computer-generated image of the interior of a new 100,000-seat stadium proposed for Manchester United at Old Trafford.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Coach Guardiola seeks Manchester City rebound

'I know the distance is already there and Arsenal is so strong'

Reuters
Manchester

Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola framed today's Premier League meeting with Leeds United as a must-focus, must-respond moment amid a widening gap to leaders Arsenal in the table.

Leading with a message of urgency, Guardiola said the priority is to lock in on the next 90 minutes rather than the bigger picture - but he did not shy away from the reality of the title race.

"I've always had experience to talk about the next game and then after that we will see," Guardiola said yesterday. "I know the distance is already there and Arsenal is so strong, we see it game by game they are getting better and better as a team."

City, third in the table, trail Arsenal by seven points after 12 games, and are a point behind second-placed Chelsea. Leeds are in the relegation zone in 18th.

Guardiola's men will be looking to reassert themselves after recent setbacks - a 2-1 league defeat at Newcastle and a 2-0 loss to Bayer Leverkusen in the Champions League.

In their defeat to Newcastle, the manager said his players had played "to not make mistakes, not to do something and that is so difficult".

"In football you have to play, in defence you have to try and if you lose in your actions you did it; they played to be safe," he said.

On the back of the Leverkusen defeat, he also suggested his players were lacking confidence.

"I had a lot of confidence in them and I still do," Guardiola said. "I put huge value as to what they are as football players.

"Maybe I think higher of them than they think about themselves. It was a good lesson for me, as experienced as I am as a manager it was a good lesson for me for the future." Guardiola made 10 changes to his team against Leverkusen on Tuesday and it backfired in a big way. City's league-leading scorer Erling Haaland was a second-half substitute but could not provide any late-game heroics.

Guardiola yesterday downplayed his reliance on the 25-year-old Norwegian, who has 14 goals in the league this season. No other City player has more than one. "Not the main concern but in general the last game, we did many good things in the game, in defence and of course Erling is massively important but others are as well," he said.

City and Spain midfielder Rodri remains sidelined with a hamstring injury, but Guardiola said he is "not far" from returning.


Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola (centre) on the pitch after the UEFA Champions League league-stage against Bayer Leverkusen at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on Tuesday. Leverkusen won the game 2-0. *(AFP)*

ANNOUNCEMENT

Iran to boycott 2026 FIFA World Cup draw over US visa row

AFP
Tehran

Iran is to boycott next week's World Cup finals draw in Washington because the United States refused to grant visas to several members of the delegation, the Iranian football federation announced yesterday.

"We have informed FIFA that the decisions taken have nothing to do with sports and the members of the Iranian delegation will not participate in the World Cup draw," the federation's spokesperson told state television.

Iranian sports website Varzesh 3 had claimed on Tuesday the United States had declined to issue visas to several members of the delegation including the president of the federation Mehdi Taj.

On Thursday Taj had denounced the decision as being a political one.

"We have told the head of FIFA mister (Gianni) Infantino, that it is purely a political position and that FIFA must tell them (US) to desist from this behaviour," added Taj.

According to Varzesh 3, four members of the delegation including Amir Ghalenoei, the coach, had been granted visas for the draw on December 5.

Iran qualified for the sport's quadrennial showpiece in March, guaranteeing them a fourth successive appearance and seventh in all.

They have yet to progress to the knockout stages but there was unconfined joy when in the 1998 finals in France Iran beat the USA 2-1 in their group match.

The USA avenged that by beating Iran 1-0 in the 2022 edition.

The United States - which is co-hosting the World Cup with Canada and Mexico - and Iran have been at loggerheads for over four decades.

They had, though, been holding high-level nuclear talks between Tehran and Washington that had begun in April, during which the two sides were at odds over Iran's right to enrich uranium - which Tehran defends as "inalienable".

However, they ended when in mid-June, Israel launched an unprecedented bombing campaign against Iran, triggering a 12-day war that the United States briefly joined with strikes on key Iranian nuclear facilities.

Van Persie defends decision to give debut to son in Europa League loss

Rotterdam: Feyenoord manager Robin van Persie said his decision to give son Shaqueel a senior debut in their Europa League game against Celtic was made in his role as his coach, not his father, after the Dutch side lost 3-1 at home on Thursday.

The 19-year-old signed his first professional contract with the Dutch club in 2022 and was an unused substitute in Sunday's Eredivisie defeat by NEC Nijmegen after being called up to the first-team squad for the first time.

The forward's senior debut came four days later against Celtic when he came on to replace defender Jordan Lotomba in the 81st minute, with Feyenoord trailing by two goals.

"I made that call as a coach, not as a dad because we needed a goal," former Arsenal and Manchester United forward Van Persie said.

"Shaqueel is a player who can score a goal from all angles. That was the reason I brought him on."

The substitution did not have the desired effect as Feyenoord conceded a third just a minute later, Benjamin Nygren's goal sealing the win for the Glasgow side.

"From a father's point of view, when your son makes his debut that is always a special moment," the coach said.

PREVIEW

Arsenal 'have to make another statement against title rivals Chelsea'

Reuters
London

A six-point lead at the top of the Premier League table and a dominant midweek win over Bayern Munich are no cause for relief for Arsenal manager **Mikel Arteta**, who anticipates a big challenge when they visit second-placed Chelsea tomorrow.

Chelsea are on a three-match winning streak and thrashed Barcelona 3-0 in the Champions League on Tuesday. But Arsenal, who beat local rivals Tottenham Hotspur last weekend, are determined to maintain their relentless pace as they chase their first Premier League title since 2004, Arteta told reporters yesterday.

"After beating Spurs, we had to make a statement against Bayern Munich, we did that. Now we have to go to the next one," the manager said. "It's a big game, a big London derby. We're going to play a really good opponent, they are in really good form. We know the challenge and the opportunity we have. We are fully ready for it."

Arteta said Chelsea, who have staged a strong comeback in the league after losses to Manchester United and Brighton & Hove Albion in September, deserve to be in the title race.

"The squad they have assembled, the numbers they have, the amount of quality, the manager and the coaching staff they have, it makes sense what has happened which is very positive. They deserve to be there," the Spaniard added.

Arsenal, who had to settle for draws on their last two trips to Stamford Bridge, are hoping Leandro Trossard will be fit for the game after the Belgian attacker picked



up a knock against Bayern, Arteta said. "With Leo, there is another test today. We have to see how he is feeling. It doesn't look much. We still have a few hours and we have to wait and see. There is a potential chance," he added. Arteta stressed the need for his players, who are unbeaten in all competitions since August, to maintain their levels of consistency.

"Not that they surprised me but you have to be able to perform in the manner they did individually throughout long periods of the game against our opponents. That's very difficult to do," he added. "Now it's about evolving the same consistency on Sunday to win again."

Chelsea get Palmer boost ahead of clash vs Arsenal

Chelsea midfielder Cole Palmer is available for their Premier League clash against Arsenal, manager Enzo Maresca said yesterday, providing a boost as the Blues look to close a six-point gap on their London rivals at the top of the table.

The 23-year-old England international stubbed his toe on a door during the night, fracturing it and further delaying his return after a groin injury had already limited his availability this season.

"He is available to start and to play," Maresca told reporters.

"Everyone is happy, the teammates are happy, we are all happy and the most important thing is Cole is happy because a footballer wants to play games and make the sessions every day."

Palmer has only made four appearances for Chelsea across all competitions this campaign, scoring twice. Since joining from Manchester City in 2023, he has recorded 45 goals and 29 assists in 101 matches for the West London club.

"He is our best player, we are happy he is back, we need to give him time to be 100% fit. He has done fantastic in the past and no doubt he is going to do very good for this club in the future," Maresca said.

Chelsea find themselves in second place, with 23 points from 12 matches. Despite their standing, Maresca remains cautious about title aspirations.

Around this time last year, the Italian had said Chelsea were not in the title race. They eventually finished fourth last season.

"Too early in any case, if we win or don't (against Arsenal)," Maresca said. "Still end of November, still five, six months to go. More important in February, March, then from there we decide if you can achieve something important.

"I think is for sure different to one year ago. We spend one more year together. We went through a moment where we can learn from that moment.

"But it is still very early. Important to be where we are now in March, April and then we will see."