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Australia take lead in second Ashes Test as England fumble



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Liverpool's defensive woes deepen, Arsenal face Villa test

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GULF TIMES

SPORT

FIFA ARAB CUP
QATAR 2025

FOOTBALL

Favourites get a favourable path in 2026 World Cup draw

Tournament will kick off on June 11 with joint-hosts Mexico playing South Africa at Azteca Stadium

AFP
Washington, United States

Holders Argentina and leading contenders Spain were handed kind draws for the 2026 World Cup in a star-studded ceremony yesterday which saw US President Donald Trump receive FIFA's new peace prize.

The event in Washington started the final countdown to the tournament, six months out from the first-ever 48-team World Cup, with much-fancied France among those receiving a harder task.

Lionel Messi's Argentina will begin their defence of the trophy they won in Qatar in 2022 against Algeria, and will also face Austria and debutants Jordan in Group J. Heavily-fancied Spain, the European champions, will kick off their campaign against first-time qualifiers Cape Verde before also taking on Uruguay and Saudi Arabia in Group H.

Thomas Tuchel's England will hope to win Group L that features beaten 2018 finalists Croatia as well as Ghana and Panama. Two-time winners France, meanwhile, face awkward tests against Senegal and Erling Haaland's Norway in Group I, which will be completed by an intercontinental play-off winner from either Iraq, Bolivia or Suriname.

The 2026 tournament will be held across the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11-July 19, with 16 more teams added to the global showpiece, up from the 32 nations involved in Qatar in 2022. That means a total of 104 matches, compared to 64 games last time.

While the US will host the majority of matches including the final at the MetLife Stadium outside New York, three of the 16 venues will be in Mexico and two in Canada. "We've worked closely with those two countries, and the coordination and friendship and relationship has been outstanding," Trump said at the Kennedy Centre after receiving his prize from FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

"It is truly one of the great honours of my life. It is such an honour to be with Gianni. He has done such an incredible job," he added. "The world is a safer place now. The United States a year ago was not going too well but now it is the hottest country anywhere in the world."

Trump seized the limelight, but Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum were also in attendance. While snow fell outside amid freezing temperatures in the US capital, some of the biggest stars in the American sport and entertainment world appeared on stage inside. The event was co-hosted by supermodel Heidi Klum and American actor and comedian Kevin Hart, and featured performances by the Village



Qatar's flag is displayed on a screen during the draw for the 2026 FIFA World Cup at the Kennedy Centre, in Washington, DC. (AFP)

People, Robbie Williams and Andrea Bocelli. NFL legend Tom Brady, ice hockey icon Wayne Gretzky and former NBA superstar Shaquille O'Neal were among the stars helping to conduct the draw.

Elsewhere in the draw, co-hosts Mexico will take on South Africa in Group A in the opening game of the tournament at the Estadio Azteca in Mexico City on June 11.

Carlo Ancelotti's Brazil and surprise 2022 semi-finalists Morocco came out together in Group C, which also features Scotland and Haiti. Germany's opponents in Group E will be Ivory Coast, Ecuador and Caribbean minnows Curacao, while Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal will face Uzbekistan, Colombia and a play-off winner.

Co-hosts the United States got a manageable draw, with Paraguay, Australia and

a European play-off winner in Group D. The top two teams in each group advance to the last 32, joined by the eight best third-placed teams.

"It will be the greatest World Cup ever, the greatest event that humanity has ever seen. We have three beautiful countries, 16 wonderful host cities, 48 excellent teams who will compete in 104 matches to become the one and only world champion," Infantino said. "This is like 104 Super Bowls in one month - this is the magnitude of what we are organising," he added of the tournament.

Six finals berths are still to be decided in play-offs to take place in March. Because of the complexity, teams will only learn the full details of their match venues and kick-off times today, a day after the draw.



FROM LEFT: FIFA President Gianni Infantino, US President Donald Trump, Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum and Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney pose for a selfie on stage during the draw for the 2026 FIFA Football World Cup in Washington, DC. (AFP)

Qatar to face Switzerland in opener

Qatar will open their FIFA World Cup 2026 campaign against Switzerland at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, on June 13. The Asian champions will then face co-hosts Canada in Vancouver before moving to Seattle to take on the winner of European Play-Off A, which features Italy, Northern Ireland, Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At the draw ceremony in Washington last night, Qatar avoided the big guns from Pot 1, though they could still face four-time winners Italy, who are favourites to emerge from European Play-Off A despite struggling in the qualification stage.

WORLD CUP DRAW 2026

QATAR IN GROUP B

CANADA

EUROPEAN PLAY-OFF A
(ITALY - WALES - BOSNIA - NORTHERN IRELAND)

QATAR

SWITZERLAND

Qatar preparing perfectly for the 2026 World Cup: QFA president

Doha: Jassim bin Rashid al-Bueinain, President of the Qatar Football Association, reflected on the World Cup draw and Qatar's prospects, highlighting the nation's preparation and confidence ahead of the tournament.

After attending the draw in Washington yesterday, he said: "The World Cup is the biggest tournament in the world and our national team's participation in it is a significant strategic goal that has been achieved.

"We are preparing perfectly for the 2026 World Cup, and we have complete confidence in our players' abilities for the next stage. There is a comprehensive plan to support the national team with fans during the World Cup, and its details will be announced after all procedures are finalised. Everyone is a partner in supporting the national team, and we call on national companies to play an active role in this global event. All the groups are strong in the World Cup."

Qatar will open their campaign against Switzerland at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, on June 13, before facing co-hosts Canada in Vancouver. They will then move to Seattle to take on the winner of European Play-Off A, which features Italy, Northern Ireland, Wales, or Bosnia and Herzegovina.

TECHNICAL DRAW RESULTS			
GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D
<div>MEXICO</div> <div>SOUTH AFRICA</div> <div>KOREA REPUBLIC</div> <div>FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF A (BENIN/PAKISTAN/USA)</div>	<div>CANADA</div> <div>FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF A (BENIN/PAKISTAN/USA)</div> <div>QATAR</div> <div>SWITZERLAND</div>	<div>BRAZIL</div> <div>MOROCCO</div> <div>HAITI</div> <div>SCOTLAND</div>	<div>USA</div> <div>PARAGUAY</div> <div>AUSTRALIA</div> <div>FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF C (INDONESIA/TURKEY)</div>
GROUP E	GROUP F	GROUP G	GROUP H
<div>GERMANY</div> <div>CURACAO</div> <div>COTE D'IVOIRE</div> <div>ECUADOR</div>	<div>NETHERLANDS</div> <div>JAPAN</div> <div>FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF B (JAMAICA/NEWCASTLE)</div> <div>TUNISIA</div>	<div>BELGIUM</div> <div>EGYPT</div> <div>IRAN</div> <div>NEW ZEALAND</div>	<div>SPAIN</div> <div>CAPE VERDE</div> <div>SAUDI ARABIA</div> <div>URUGUAY</div>
GROUP I	GROUP J	GROUP K	GROUP L
<div>FRANCE</div> <div>SENEGAL</div> <div>FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF D (MEXICO/PAKISTAN)</div> <div>NORWAY</div>	<div>ARGENTINA</div> <div>ALGERIA</div> <div>AUSTRIA</div> <div>JORDAN</div>	<div>PORTUGAL</div> <div>FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF E (KAZAKHSTAN/NEWCASTLE)</div> <div>UZBEKISTAN</div> <div>COLOMBIA</div>	<div>ENGLAND</div> <div>CROATIA</div> <div>GHANA</div> <div>PANAMA</div>

CRICKET

Australia take lead as England fumble on day 2

AUSTRALIA GO TO STUMPS AT 378 FOR 6 WITH A 44-RUN LEAD

Reuters
Brisbane

Australia dominated day two of the second Ashes Test yesterday with a punishing batting assault on a lifeless Gabba pitch as England shot themselves in the foot with five dropped catches.

Half-centuries for top-order batters Jake Weatherald (72), Marnus Labuschagne (65) and Steve Smith (61) made light work of England's first-innings 334 as Australia went to stumps at 378 for six with a 44-run lead.

Wicketkeeper Alex Carey (46 not out) and tailender Michael Naser (15 not out) held firm through the last half-hour under the floodlights and will look to press home Australia's advantage on day three.

"It was a crucial last hour there for us," said number three batter Labuschagne, who scored his second fifty of the series.

"To get to the end of play six (wickets) down, it gives us a bit of time in the morning session and obviously pushes our bowling later into the night."

While England grabbed three wickets in the final session, they also spilled four catches under the lights.

Ben Duckett grassed two chances, the first reprieving Carey on zero after Carse sent a delivery pinging off the batter's gloves.

Moments later, number seven batter Josh Inglis (23) sent a shot flying through Duckett's hands in the gully.

The fumbling continued as Carse dropped Naser on six off a Jofra Archer ball before Joe Root reacted late to a nick in the slips from Carey when the wicket-keeper was on 25.

Root dropped the one-handed chance, denying pacer Gus Atkinson a first wicket in the series.



Australia's Steven Smith hooks on day two of the second Ashes Test against England at the Gabba, Brisbane, Australia, yesterday. (Reuters)

England wicketkeeper Jamie Smith set the tone early, though, dropping opener Travis Head on three when Archer caught his edge.

Head scored 33 before being caught trying to slog Carse over his head.

"We practise really hard," Root said of England's fielding.

"We had five days leading into it, made sure we got our work done.

"And unfortunately, it's just one of those days where a few didn't quite stick to hand."

While his England teammates struggled, all-rounder Will Jacks pulled off a diving, one-handed catch at backward square leg to remove Smith when the Australia captain tried to pull Carse to the fence.

That was a rare highlight for England who were dismissed for

334, adding nine runs to their overnight total of 325 for nine.

With Archer well caught by a diving Labuschagne for 38, Root was left unbeaten on 138, his first Test century in Australia.

England fans' cheer was soon drained by a dismal first session by the tourists' wayward bowlers.

Bowling too short and wide, they failed to build any meaningful pressure and were duly punished for it.

Australia charged to 130 for one at six runs an over by the first session break and finished the day with the run-rate comfortably above five, showcasing their own version of "Bazball".

Carse was flayed by the batters but rallied with a two-wicket burst in four balls, bowling number five batter Cameron Green for 45 before taking the prized wicket of Smith.

He finished the day with 3-113, having leached 6.6 runs an over.

Ben Stokes made key breakthroughs, having Labuschagne caught behind and later bowling Inglis.

But the England skipper's bowling was cut short when he started suffering cramp in the final session.

At 1-0 down after losing the Perth opener by eight wickets, England need to bowl out Australia quickly today to keep in the match and the series.

"We've obviously got some more work to do tomorrow, but certainly, (we're) well and truly in this game," said Root.

BRIEF SCORES
Australia 378 for 6 (Weatherald 72, Labuschagne 65, Smith 61, Carse 3-113) **lead England 334** (Root 138*, Starc 6-75) **by 44 runs**

SPOTLIGHT

Hope's resistance keeps West Indies alive in New Zealand Test



West Indies' Shai Hope bats during day four of the first Test against New Zealand at Hagley Oval in Christchurch yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Christchurch, New Zealand

A sparkling century by Shai Hope ably supported by Justin Greaves had the West Indies 212-4 at stumps yesterday and clinging to the remote chance they can save the first Test against New Zealand in Christchurch.

Hope was 116 not out and Greaves 55 with the pair putting on 140 for the fifth wicket after the West Indies were in dire straits at 72-4.

New Zealand need six more wickets with the new ball six overs away while the West Indies, set a mammoth 531-run target, need a further 319 runs.

The tourists' cause was helped by injuries to New Zealand's pace ranks which have forced captain Tom Latham to be creative with how he managed his bowlers.

A side strain sidelined seamer Nathan Smith for the remainder of the Test and lead bowler Matt Henry was restricted to 11 overs because of a hamstring issue.

That brought off-spinner Michael Bracewell and part-timer Rachin Ravindra into the attack earlier and longer than expected.

New Zealand bowling coach Jacob Oram said the result could depend on how they use their two fit pace bowlers - Jacob Duffy and Zak Foulkes - with the new ball.

"That's a tricky conversation to make. Do we attack in the morning or do we hold them back for the new ball?" he said. "We'll probably see what the overloads are like tomorrow. That second new ball is going to be crucial."

But New Zealand's injuries take nothing away from the stubborn

performance of Hope, who is enjoying a purple patch despite battling an eye infection, with 56 in the first innings and coming to New Zealand off a century against India.

Hope played briskly with 15 fours and one six and the delight was evident when he raised his bat after driving Ravindra to the covers for a single to bring up his century.

Greaves played his support role admirably, offering two faint edges but both fell well short of the slip cordon. After the West Indies went to lunch at 11-0, New Zealand dominated the second session with four wickets. Duffy removed John Campbell for 15 in the second over after lunch with a seaming delivery that clipped the edge of the bat and Bracewell held the catch diving in front of first slip.

At the start of his next over Duffy had Tagenarine Chanderpaul caught behind for six. Right-arm spinner Bracewell picked up an easy wicket when he accounted for Alick Athanaze (five).

A gentle long-hop which should have been despatched to the boundary went instead to Foulkes at mid-on. Henry made a brief return to the attack to remove captain Roston Chase for four.

New Zealand resumed the day at 417-4 and added 49 runs in an hour before Kemar Roach ended the innings taking a return catch from Duffy (10). Roach also took the wickets of Bracewell and Henry to finish with 5-78.

BRIEF SCORES
West Indies 167 and 212 for 4 (Hope 116*, Greaves 55*, Duffy 2-60) **trail New Zealand 231 and 466 for 8 dec** (Ravindra 176, Latham 145, Roach 5-78) **by 319 runs**

COMMENT

Veteran spinner Lyon feels 'absolutely filthy' at being dropped for Ashes Test

AFP
Brisbane, Australia

Frustrated Australian spinner **Nathan Lyon** said he was "absolutely filthy" at being axed for the second Ashes Test against England.

The 140-Test match veteran was omitted in favour of an all-pace attack for the day-night clash in Brisbane, and only learned his fate two hours before the toss on Thursday.

It is the first time since 2012 that he has missed a home Test, replaced by right-arm paceman Michael Naser.

"Absolutely filthy," the 38-year-old told Australia's *Channel Seven* when asked about his demotion as

England reached 325-9 at stumps on day one.

"I can't do anything about it, so I hope I can play my role in making sure I get the guys ready, and do whatever I can to make sure that we get the right result here."

Lyon, who bowled just two overs in Australia's two-day first Test victory in Perth, described his conversation with chief selector George Bailey about the decision as "short".

"To be honest, I haven't really sat down with Ronnie (coach Andrew McDonald) or George yet," he said.

"I'm letting things settle down in my own head, and trying to make sure that I'm, as I said, doing whatever I can to make sure the guys out in the middle represent-



ing Australia do the right thing and get the right result for us."

Lyon generally thrives on home soil, where he has bagged 268 of his 562 Test wickets at an average of 31.11 and said he believed he would

have had an impact on the game.

"Obviously pretty gutted because I know the role that I can play within Australian cricket and especially a venue like this," he said.

Bailey admitted Lyon did not take being dropped well.

"Very much it's a one Test decision, Nath will play in Adelaide," he told reporters, referring to the third Test starting on December 17. "Don't think he agreed with it, and that's fine."

Australia's Hazlewood suffers fresh injury setback

Australia paceman Josh Hazlewood's hopes of playing in the third Ashes Test in Adelaide have dimmed after he suffered a new injury setback during his recovery from a hamstring strain.

Cricket Australia (CA) said yesterday that Hazlewood had reported Achilles soreness, delaying his rehabilitation.

"It is a low-grade issue, and he is

expected to recommence running and bowling next week," CA said in a statement.

Hazlewood missed the first Test against England in Perth and the current match in Brisbane but had returned to bowling in the nets before the new problem.

Regular captain Pat Cummins also missed the first two Tests with a back injury but the quick has a better chance of making the Adelaide match starting on December 17.

Australia picked a relatively inexperienced seam attack at the Gabba, with Scott Boland, Brendan Doggett and Michael Naser joining 35-year-old stalwart Mitchell Starc.

Holders Australia lead the five-Test Ashes series 1-0.

FORMULA ONE

Norris emerges quicker than Verstappen in Abu Dhabi practice, Piastri lags

Reuters
Abu Dhabi

McLaren's Formula One leader Lando Norris made a perfect start to the title-deciding Abu Dhabi Grand Prix weekend with the fastest laps in both practice sessions yesterday while Red Bull rival Max Verstappen was second.

The Briton, 12 points clear of the four-times world champion after 23 of 24 rounds, was 0.008 quicker in an unrepresentative afternoon session and then 0.363 faster in the second at night under the Yas Marina floodlights.

Verstappen was noted by stewards for impeding Norris in an early misunderstanding after being fed wrong information by his race engineer, but they decided not to investigate further.

"What's this guy doing? I almost crashed," exclaimed Norris. "Obviously, from the times, things look good at the minute," said Norris. "I still want a bit more from the car. I'm not completely happy or completely confident. We all know it gets a lot closer going into quali. So nothing to smile about just yet."

Teammate Oscar Piastri, the third title contender but four points behind Verstappen, was 11th on the timesheets after sitting out the first session with Mexican IndyCar driver and F1 reserve Pato O'Ward getting track time.

The Australian looked strong on long runs, however.

"Oscar is not totally dialled in yet but he will get there," said McLaren boss Zak Brown.

"I've been impressed with both of our drivers coming into the weekend, they seem more relaxed than normal."

Mercedes' George Russell, who could play a disruptive role in the title battle tomorrow, was third in practice two with Haas's Oliver Bearman fourth and Nico Hulkenberg fifth for Sauber ahead of his 250th start.

"The car is insane. I don't know how the car is so good," exclaimed Bearman over the team radio.

Last year's race winner Norris was one of only 11 race regulars taking part in a first session otherwise handed over to young prospects and development drivers.

Under Formula One rules each regular driver must make way in two Friday first practice sessions per season for rookies or drivers who have started no more than two Grands Prix.

Verstappen, a four-times winner in Abu Dhabi, had sounded concerned over the radio with his car's handling on a slippery sur-

McLaren's British driver Lando Norris drives during the second practice session for the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix at the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi yesterday. (AFP)



face in the afternoon heat. "There might be something broken on the car," he reported, but was happier later on.

"We just probably needed to be a little bit faster," he said.

"It seems like there is a decent gap that we need to close but we still need to work on the race pace,

so let's see how much we can find overnight."

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc was third and eighth fastest respectively in the two sessions with younger brother Arthur 16th in Lewis Hamilton's car in the afternoon.

The Monegasque siblings made

history at the track last year when they became the first brothers to take part in a practice session as teammates but the older Leclerc sounded less happy this time.

"The car just feels like it has zero grip. It is unbelievable," he said.

Hamilton returned for practice two and was 14th and 0.856 off the pace.

Mercedes had race regulars Kimi Antonelli and Russell fourth and sixth respectively in session one.

"In the hot conditions of the day, the car doesn't always feel at its nicest, but it improves once the sun goes down and the track cools a little. That certainly helped along with the changes we made between the sessions," said Russell.

Toyota-backed Japanese driver Ryo Hirakawa, 31, was the fastest of the non-race drivers in 11th for Haas, and ahead of Racing Bulls' Isack Hadjar in 12th.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool's defensive woes deepen as points leaders Arsenal face Villa test

AFP
London

Liverpool travel to Leeds this weekend with mounting questions over whether Arne Slot can stop the rot, while in-form Aston Villa take aim at Premier League leaders Arsenal.

Slot's defending champions are showing an alarming vulnerability at the back, with the poor form of captain Virgil van Dijk a growing cause for concern.

It is a different story for watertight Arsenal but the Gunners face a tricky trip to Unai Emery's Villa.

The three talking points ahead of the action:

VAN DIJK ERRORS MOUNT

Mohamed Salah's faltering form has been a major talking point during Liverpool's dramatic collapse but Virgil van Dijk is now also firmly in the firing line.

The club's success in tying down two of their modern greats on new contracts in April was seen as a major coup.

But there is growing unease over Van Dijk's displays at the heart of a creaking defence.

Former Manchester United and England forward Wayne Rooney said in October that Van Dijk's body language was a "big

concern" and that he had failed to lead the team this season. The Dutchman, 34, gave away a penalty with a handball in Liverpool's 4-1 home defeat by PSV Eindhoven last week - the third he has conceded in all competitions this season.

And he was at fault for Sunderland's goal in Wednesday's 1-1 draw at Anfield, giving the ball away before dropping off as Chemsdine Talbi beat goalkeeper Alisson Becker from long range.

"Virgil Van Dijk last season couldn't make a mistake. Every game he was impeccable," former Liverpool midfielder Jamie Redknapp said on *Sky Sports*.

"But right now he's making mistakes and second-guessing himself."

VILLA'S DRAMATIC TURNAROUND

Unai Emery's stock is sky-high, with Aston Villa on the charge.

The Birmingham club did not manage a single goal in their first four Premier League games of the season but they have won eight of their past nine league matches to climb to third in the table.

A major plus for Villa in their 4-3 win at Brighton in midweek was two goals for Ollie Watkins, who had previously found the net just once all season.

If they beat Arsenal today they would be just three points behind Mikel Arteta's



Arsenal's Eberechi Eze in action with Brentford's Kristoffer Ajer during their Premier League match at Emirates Stadium, London, on Tuesday. (Reuters)

front-runners. Villa, under former Arsenal boss Emery, have lost just once in their past four meetings with the Gunners.

Former Liverpool midfielder Danny Murphy says the Spanish manager's ability to keep calm under pressure has been crucial.

"He didn't panic at the start of the season," Murphy told the *BBC*.

"It has been just terrific coaching and

management and the players are responding."

SUNDERLAND DEFY THE ODDS

Sunderland are defying expectations and recent Premier League history as they prepare for a tough test at Manchester City. In each of the past two seasons the three promoted teams have gone straight back down to the Championship.

Leeds and Burnley, who came up with Sunderland, are struggling but Regis Le Bris's team are flying high, just five points behind second-placed City.

The Black Cats were close to a first win at Anfield in 42 years on Wednesday but had to settle for a 1-1 draw after Nordi Mukiele's unfortunate own goal.

Frenchman Le Bris, in his first season in charge at Sunderland, praised his men.

"Our ability to learn is one of the main strengths of this team," he said. "They are humble and they want to learn. In such a difficult league, if you don't learn every day then it is impossible to sustain the level."

Only Arsenal and Crystal Palace have conceded fewer than Sunderland's tally of 14 goals in the Premier League, though the Black Cats face a tough challenge against Pep Guardiola's free-scoring City.

FIXTURES

Saturday (1500 GMT unless stated)

Aston Villa v Arsenal (1230), Bournemouth v Chelsea, Everton v Nottingham Forest, Manchester City v Sunderland, Newcastle v Burnley, Tottenham v Brentford, Leeds v Liverpool (1730)

Sunday

Brighton v West Ham (1400), Fulham v Crystal Palace (1630)

Monday

Wolves v Manchester United (2000)

GOLF

McIlroy survives as Min Woo Lee surges into lead

DRAMATIC ROUND TWO ACTION AT THE AUSTRALIAN OPEN

AFP
Melbourne

Rory McIlroy fended off disaster by making the cut at the Australian Open as home favourite Min Woo Lee holed an eagle and four birdies to surge into contention yesterday during a dramatic second round.

The vast crowds were out for McIlroy but Lee showed why he is a PGA Tour winner as he sank a nine-iron on his second shot from 176 metres at the par-4 10th at Royal Melbourne to help him to a 65.

It took him to eight-under par and one off the co-leaders - Denmark's Rasmus Neergaard-Petersen (66) and Portugal's Daniel Rodrigues (64).

Lee erupted with an aeroplane celebration knowing he put himself in the hunt for a first Stonehaven Cup in front of bumper crowds.

"It was just random and felt good," Lee said of the celebration. "It was a big crowd, so I was just doing random stuff."

He added: "If I keep playing like this, it's very solid golf, I'll be pretty happy."

Lee's playing partner Adam Scott was a shot back at seven-under, tied with former British Open winner Cam Smith (65) and LIV golfer Carlos Ortiz (70).

After treading water with one birdie in 13 holes, McIlroy had the crowds gasping when he made an air-swing in the trees on the par-5 14th en route to a bogey.



Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy watches his putt during the second round of the Australian Open at the Royal Melbourne Golf Club in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

He fell to one-over for the tournament and one shot outside the projected cut-line. "That was not one of my finer moments on 14, I can't remember the last time I had a fresh air (swing) but I was trying to get in really low like Seve (Ballesteros) and flick it back into play," he said. "I caught a branch on the way down and completely missed the ball."

The five-time major champion channelled his sublime talent when he reached for the driver with the tee shot on the devilish but short par-4 15th.

He nearly drove the green and made the first of three birdies in his last four holes that took him from staring down a missed cut to two-under and just seven shots behind the lead.

"I think it would have been a big downer for everyone involved if I wasn't here for the weekend," McIlroy said.

"I needed to play those last four holes the way I did. I don't feel like I'm that far behind."

Scott, the 2009 Australian Open winner, said the first edition at Royal Melbourne since 1991

was "probably" shaping up to be the biggest one he had played in 25 years as a professional.

The former world number one made the turn in one-under before a late flurry featuring an eagle at the 14th and two other back-nine birdies.

"We've been lucky to have great Australian Opens in the past but I just think it's been a few years since we've had this level of hype around it," he said.

"I'm really proud to be playing in front of them and they're turning up for Rory."

FOCUS

Al-Marri shines with Gold Tour victory



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Rashid Tuwaim al-Marri claimed top honours in the 140cm Gold Tour as the eighth round of the Longines Hathab - Qatar Equestrian Tour continued at the Longines Arena at Al Shaqab yesterday.

Al-Marri delivered a sharp 32.11-second round astride Navarone to secure victory, edging Mohammed Khalifa al-Baker, who clocked 32.63 seconds on Dukhan 3. Sirine Sharif completed the podium in 33.07 seconds with Calamando.

In the team event, Team Ajwad topped the standings with a combined 65.18 seconds, followed by Lekhwiya (70.78) and Al Shaqab (71.01).

In the Open round, Hussein Saeed Haidan set the benchmark with a swift 24.99 seconds on Winnenhof, narrowly ahead of Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who finished second in 25.01 seconds with Cassandra. Yaqoub Nasser al-Mas placed third after posting 25.03 seconds on Equinox.

Abdullah bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani shone in the Junior category, winning the class in 25.01 seconds on Cassandra and taking



third with Horlovents in 26.14 seconds.

Abdullah Faisal al-Mana split the pair in second place with a 25.18-second performance on Barouq.

In the Future Riders Tour, Al-Qaqa bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani delivered the most accurate round to take first place with a 49.1-second effort on Squarini, only 1.1 seconds off the ideal time. Fahad bin Nasser al-Thani finished second on Delani with a time of 46.81 seconds (1.19 seconds off), while Hamad bin Mohammed al-Thani secured third on Malqa in 49.34 seconds, 1.34 seconds off the ideal mark.

FOOTBALL

Qatar begin Gulf Cup U-23 campaign with convincing 3-0 win over Kuwait



QNA
Doha

Qatar began their campaign in the Gulf Cup U-23 football tournament with a resounding 3-0 victory over Kuwait in their match yesterday at Aspire Academy.

The Qatar goals were scored by Mustafa Al Sayed in the 3rd minute, Mohammed Abdul Fattah in the 37th minute, and Ahmed Riadh in the 45th minute of added time.

This win gives Qatar their first three points, placing them second in Group A behind Saudi Arabia on goal difference.



إتحاد كأس الخليج
العربي لكرة القدم
Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation

Kuwait sit in third place with no points, ahead of Bahrain, who are last in the group.

Saudi Arabia beat Bahrain

In another match in the same group, Saudi Arabia defeated Bahrain 5-0 in what was a lop-sided clash.

The goals were scored by Abdulaziz al-Alawi (2 goals in the 50th and 83rd minutes), Majed Abdullah (54th minute), Tamer al-Khaibri (90th minute of added time),

and Abdullah Saeed (90th minute of added time). According to the tournament format, the top two teams from each group qualify for the semi-finals, where the first-place team in Group A plays the second-place team in Group B, and the first-place team in Group B plays the second-place team in Group A.

The winners of these matches then face each other in the final.

The Gulf Cup U-23 tournament, organised by the Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF), is being held in Doha until December 16, with the participation of Gulf national teams in one of the most important youth tournaments in the region.

MATCH REPORT

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Saudi Arabia secured their place in the quarter-finals of the 2025 FIFA Arab Cup, becoming the first team to advance from Group B after defeating Comoros 3-1 at Al Bayt Stadium.

Mohammed Kanno opened the scoring with a header in the 45+4 minute following a cross from captain Salem al-Dawsari, and added a second in the 51st minute after al-Dawsari's precise assist. Comoros' Hussein Zakwati pulled one back in the 63rd minute, but al-Dawsari sealed the win with a solo effort

in the 76th minute, dribbling past multiple defenders before scoring. The win takes Saudi Arabia to six points, ensuring progression

In another match, Oman and Morocco played to a 0-0 draw at Education City Stadium.

Both sides created several chances as they sought victory, with Morocco, in particular, aiming to secure progression to the next stage.

The match's intensity peaked in the 53rd minute when Morocco's Abderrazak Hamdallah was shown a red card, reducing the Atlas Lions to ten men. Despite the setback, neither team could find the breakthrough, and the game ended in a goalless draw.



Saudi Arabia's Mohamed Kanno celebrates with teammates Salem al-Dawsari and Firas al-Buraikan after scoring against Comoros.



Morocco's Abderrazak Hamdallah is shown a red card by referee Juan Gabriel Benitez during the FIFA Arab Cup match against Oman at the Education City Stadium yesterday. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

At the World Cup draw, the winner is... Donald Trump

US president awarded FIFA's peace prize for promoting dialogue

Reuters
Washington

US President Donald Trump said he was not attending the draw for the 2026 World Cup to receive a prize, but he got one anyway. Trump, who has campaigned aggressively this year for a Nobel Peace Prize, was given FIFA's inaugural peace prize for his efforts to promote dialogue and de-escalation in some of the world's biggest hotspots.

The former TV reality show host dominated the scene at Washington's Kennedy Center, placing himself squarely at the centre of one of the biggest events in the sporting world in a glitzy, celebrity-studded affair that bore the unmistakable stamp of the president.

The United States, along with Canada and Mexico, will host the soccer tournament next year. The Prime Minister of Canada Mark Carney and the President of Mexico Claudia Sheinbaum were there, too, but it was Trump's show from start to finish.

In a nod to Trump's love of spectacle, FIFA President Gianni Infantino, who served as master of ceremonies, had the three leaders stand behind brightly coloured podiums - game-show style - to draw their teams.

After the draw, they all posed for a selfie with Infantino.

"This will be unique, this will be stellar, this will be spectacular," Infantino said at the outset of the ceremony, referring to next year's games.

But he could also have been talking about the Kennedy Center event itself, which was located in Washington at Trump's urging.

Last month, FIFA announced that a new annual award called the FIFA Peace Prize would be presented at the draw to "reward individuals who have taken exceptional and extraordinary actions for peace."

A video prior to the presentation celebrated Trump for resolving the war in Gaza and trying to end Russia's war in Ukraine. The trophy, a gold-plated globe carried by upraised hands, was considerably larger than the Nobel, which is just a simple medal. Trump was given a medal as well and donned it as Infantino lauded him. The president deserved the award for "promoting peace and unity around the world," he said. "This is truly one of the great honours of my life - and beyond," Trump said.

He took a moment to congratulate himself. The United States, he said, was "not doing too well" before he took office, but now "we're the hottest country anywhere in the world."

Earlier, Trump told reporters he did not care about the prize, but noted that he had "settled eight wars" in his 10 months in office. "I don't need prizes. I need to save lives," Trump said. "I saved millions and millions of lives, and that's really what I want to do."

The claim that Trump has ended eight wars this year is widely disputed. Much work remains before most of the conflicts the president claims to have ended, including the Israel-Hamas conflict, can actually be considered resolved.

Trump received the award the same week his



US President Donald Trump reacts as he receives the FIFA Peace Prize from FIFA President Gianni Infantino during the draw for the 2026 World Cup in Washington, DC. (AFP)



Former Brazilian footballers Ronaldo and Kaka pose on the red carpet before the draw. (AFP)

administration froze immigration applications from 19 countries after last week's shooting of two National Guard members in Washington. It also came days after the president demeaned Somali immigrants in the United States as "garbage" - sparking an outcry both at home and abroad.

Trump has frequently made the trappings of the presidency a part of major sporting and cultural events this year. He attended the Super Bowl in February, to a mix of cheers and boos from the crowd, and on Sunday he plans to attend the Kennedy Center Honors, which he eschewed during his first term.

The FIFA event - where 48 teams learned their group stage opponents - opened with Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli singing "Nessun Dor-

ma", a favourite of Trump's and a staple at his campaign rallies.

Later, British pop star Robbie Williams and American Broadway chanteuse Nicole Scherzinger sang FIFA's 2026 World Cup anthem with highlights from past tournaments playing on a large video screen behind them.

American sports stars Tom Brady, Shaquille O'Neal and Aaron Judge - none of them soccer players - also took part. Also on hand was Canadian hockey great Wayne Gretzky.

The World Cup will be held from June 11-July 19, 2026, with a record 104 matches in 16 host cities. The spectacle ended with a live performance of the song "YMCA" by the Village People, the crowning touch for yet another event the president made his own.



Musicians Robbie Williams and Nicole Scherzinger perform during the FIFA World Cup 2026 draw in Washington. (Reuters)



The event was co-hosted by supermodel Heidi Klum and American actor and comedian Kevin Hart.

COMMENT

Al-Haydos confident of Qatar's chances after World Cup draw

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's most-capped player Hassan al-Haydos expressed optimism following the FIFA World Cup 2026 draw in Washington, as Al Annabi prepare to face a challenging group in the tournament.

The draw, held at the John F. Kennedy Centre for the Arts in Washington, DC, placed Asian champions Qatar in Group B alongside Canada, Switzerland, and the winner of European Play-Off A, which includes Italy, Northern Ireland, Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Speaking after the draw, al-Haydos said the World Cup will witness intense competition, highlighting the continuous development of teams worldwide. "The Qatar seeks to perform at a level that meets expectations and achieve better results than its participation in the previous edition held in 2022 at home," he added.

He explained that the team's preparation will not involve a long training camp, but will instead consist of varying training



days ahead of the tournament.

Mansour al-Ansari, Secretary-General of the Qatar Football Association, described Qatar's group as a tough challenge but reaffirmed the federation's commitment to preparing the team fully. "Participating in the upcoming World Cup finals requires high-level preparation, and the QFA will work to create all the appropriate conditions to ensure the team is ready," he said. "Al-Annabi aspires to appear in a way that meets expectations during the tournament."

FOCUS

England boss Tuchel wary of 'surprise' in World Cup draw



England's head coach Thomas Tuchel is all smiles as he poses on the red carpet prior to the FIFA World Cup 2026 draw at John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington. (AFP)

AFP
London

England manager Thomas Tuchel said the Three Lions are confident but must show Croatia, Ghana and Panama the respect they deserve after World Cup draw.

After narrowly missing out at two Euros and World Cups under Gareth Southgate, England head to North America as one of the favourites as they aim to end a 60-year wait to win a major tournament. Croatia beat England in the 2018 World Cup semi-final and also reached the last four at the 2022 World Cup.

The two will meet in their first game in either Toronto or Dallas before England face Ghana and finish the group against Panama, who they beat 6-1 at the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

"Difficult opener with Croatia and Ghana, two regulars in World Cups and two proud, strong nations," Tuchel said. "Panama I don't know much about at the moment but we will find out more about before the tourna-

ment starts. For me I only experienced group football in Champions League formats and the way to approach it was to give it the biggest respect and put all the focus into winning the group. It always seems difficult but we are confident and we will be well prepared when we arrive."

By landing in Group L, England will not begin their tournament until June 17, which could afford some of Tuchel's players extra time to recover should they be involved in major European club finals at the end of the season. However, Tuchel's men will then be met with a condensed schedule should they progress to the knockout stages.

"We know now we will start late in the tournament, it gives us a bit of time if players are involved in European finals, hopefully," the German added. "But we did not desire any (single) scenario because it is a more condensed schedule later."

Should the top seeds win their groups, England could face Brazil in the quarter-finals before a potential semi-final against Argentina.