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in Adelaide
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TENNIS | Page 3

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INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

PSG face Flamengo, hunt for sixth title of the season

A victory today at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium will make PSG the first French club to win the competition

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

Paris Saint-Germain step onto familiar ground in Qatar today with the chance to write a new chapter in their history as they face Brazilian giants Flamengo in the Intercontinental Cup final at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan.

For PSG, the final represents an opportunity to become the first French club to win the competition and to complete an extraordinary year under Spanish coach Luis Enrique. Already winners of Ligue 1, the Coupe de France, the Trophée des Champions, the Champions League and the European Super Cup, a victory today would deliver an extraordinary sixth trophy of the season for the Parisians.

Enrique, who lifted the Intercontinental Cup with Barcelona in 2015 and coached Spain at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Doha, spoke about the importance of the occasion. "We are aware of the importance of this final. It's a beautiful thing to play an Intercontinental Cup final," he said yesterday.

The Spaniard has overseen a PSG project that has transformed the French giants, who finally lifted the Champions League earlier this year after having come close on a few occasions. PSG are now contesting their fourth international final under his guidance. "Making history at Paris was a very strong objective last season, and continuing to make history is the objective this season," Enrique said.

PSG sit second in Ligue 1 this season, one point behind Lens, but Enrique believes his side are as strong as they were last season. "We've shown our ability to overcome different situations. This moment is the continuation of what we experienced last season," he said.

Goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier is expected to return after missing three matches with an ankle injury, while Achraf Hakimi remains unavailable as he continues his rehabilitation. Warren Zaire-Emery is again expected to fill in on the right flank, with Nuno Mendes on the left. In central defence, Pacheco appears certain to start, while captain Marquinhos has trained following a recent hip issue. When asked whether Marquinhos would start against Flamengo, Enrique said: "There's one last training session, but he's ready."

In midfield, Enrique is expected to rely on the balance provided by Neves, Vitinha and Ruiz, while attacking selection remains a key talking point.

Bradley Barcola and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia are likely to start on the flanks, with competition for the central role after Ousmane Dembele's recent illness and Desire Doue's strong form.

Georgian winger Kvaratskhelia said having won five trophies this year has not



PSG captain Marquinhos (left) and his Flamengo counterpart Bruno Henrique pose with the Intercontinental Cup trophy with Doha skyline as a backdrop ahead of today's final.



Paris Saint-Germain's Spanish coach Luis Enrique (left) speaks to his staff during a training session at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan.

diminished their hunger as they hunt for a sixth today. "All trophies count, this is an important title for us, we are ready for it. This is our last chance to win a trophy this season, so it's important to do everything we can to win it," he said.

"Every title is a privilege. We all know that Qatar is PSG's second home. It's a great match to play in an incredible at-

mosphere. For everyone, this is a special match; I know that historically, it's very important for Brazilian teams to win this trophy."

Marquinhos echoed that ambition and warned his teammates against complacency. "For everyone, it's a special match. I know that historically, it's very important for Brazilian teams to win this trophy.

We're trying to convey that message here. We're ambitious, we're hungry to win this title. We're an ambitious team with a very demanding coach who pushes us to play well. A sixth title this season would be incredible," the Brazilian said.

Flamengo, meanwhile, are coming off a remarkable season that included domestic and continental success. While PSG qualified directly for the Intercontinental Cup final as reigning Champions League holders; Flamengo, however, had to take a longer route. The Brazilian side reached the final by defeating Mexico's Cruz Azul in the FIFA Derby of the Americas before overcoming Egypt's Pyramids in the FIFA Challenger Cup – with both matches played at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan.

Coach Filipe Luis expects a demanding contest and believes fine margins will decide the outcome against a strong PSG side. "We know we'll need the maximum contribution from everyone to win this match. We'll need to play a perfect game," he said yesterday.

"We've faced strong opponents, this year hasn't been easy, and several teams have caused us problems. No doubt PSG will too. The most important thing is that the team knows how to play in all phases of the game to deliver a perfect match and win. It's possible to beat PSG. Of course I believe it, and of course I tell the players



Flamengo's Jorginho controls the ball during a training session.



Flamengo coach Filipe Luis speaks at a press conference yesterday.



Paris Saint-Germain's Lucas Beraldo (left) and Brazilian Marquinhos duel for a ball at a training session. (AFP)

that. This group is capable of anything, of making history. I believe in them and they believe it's possible," added Luis, who played as a left-back for Atletico Madrid and Flamengo before switching to a coaching role.

SPOTLIGHT

It is difficult to choose between PSG and Flamengo: Ronaldinho

When you think about the names to have worn the colours of Flamengo and Paris Saint-Germain over the years, not many will stand out more than that of **Ronaldinho**.

The Brazilian legend, a football icon all around the globe, spoke to FIFA.com about his time at the two clubs, who are set to come face to face to decide the FIFA Intercontinental Cup today in Qatar, and he made it clear that he will not be choosing one side to support in this final.

"When you have a history with both sides, it's difficult to choose just one of them. The most important thing is to appreciate what this final represents," said Ronaldinho. "Flamengo are in great form at the moment and it's great for us to see

a Brazilian club in another big final like this. PSG are also enjoying a good spell; they're a confident and competitive side."

Having begun his career at Gremio back in Brazil, Ronaldinho made the move to Paris in 2001, where he began a successful career in European football. With his dazzling footwork and outstanding natural ability, he had no trouble quickly winning over the PSG fans. His impressive displays for the Parisians resulted in a place in the Brazil squad for the FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan 2002, where he became a world champion with the Seleção shortly before signing for Barcelona.

"My time at PSG was a special period of growth and transformation at the club," he reminisced. "It was around the time when PSG

began to cement their place on the world stage, and being a part of that, helping them to forge an identity and leave their mark, is something I'm still very proud of today."

After spells at Barcelona and AC Milan, Ronaldinho decided to return to his native Brazil in January 2011 when he signed for Flamengo. He played 74 times, scored 28 goals and won the Rio state championship title during his time at the Rio giants.

Contrary to their current situation, the Rubro-negro did not have the financial muscle to put out a star-studded team back then. Despite only being at the club for barely more than a season, he gave the fans some unforgettable memories that they still look back on fondly.

"They were two very important points of my career. What stood out most to me at Flamengo was the size of the club and the support from the fans. Wearing that shirt comes with enormous responsibility, and experiencing the day-to-day of Brazilian football, with that passion and demand, was a very intense experience," he said.

When Flamengo and PSG come face to face to decide who takes home this latest global competition, Ronaldinho's loyalty will be very much divided. What he hopes for, though, is for the fans to be as happy as those who were lucky enough to see him play for their club up close. "I expect it to be a great, high-intensity game, full of technical quality and emotion. Let's hope that it's a great spectacle for football."



PREVIEW

England face crunch time as Australia eye series win

CAPTAIN BEN STOKES BACKS PLAYERS TO PULL OFF MIRACLE COMEBACK WIN IN ADELAIDE



Australia's Pat Cummins bowls in the nets during a training session ahead of the third Ashes Test match against England yesterday. **Centre:** England's Joe Root bats in the nets during a training session. **Right:** Australia's batsman Steve Smith in the nets in Adelaide yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Adelaide

The Ashes could be decided within days at an Adelaide Oval furnace where England's hopes of wrestling back the urn will fire anew or flame out entirely against a strengthened Australia.

Trailing 2-0 after eight-wicket defeats in Perth and Brisbane, Ben Stokes' team must win the match starting today or become the fourth touring England squad in succession to crash out after three Tests.

Only one team has ever pulled off a series win from a 2-0 deficit in nearly 150 years of Test cricket - Don Bradman's Australia in the 1936/37 Ashes.

Outplayed with bat, ball and in the field this series, England will need the grit of

Bradman's battlers to create their own history.

Stokes is adamant his team can rally, having led them from 2-0 down in the 2023 Ashes to draw the series 2-2. Australia, as holders, kept the urn anyway.

"We're able to draw on experience, being in the situation before," Stokes said yesterday.

"Everyone knows what needs to happen in the coming week and after that as well. So if anything, it actually makes everything more simple, a little bit more clear for us."

Though the series remains alive, some cricket pundits have already written off England's "Bazball" game after seeing it fail twice.

Head coach Brendon "Baz" McCullum is under genuine pressure for the first time since ushering in England's attacking rev-

olution in the wake of their 4-0 loss in the 2021/22 Ashes.

Former England players have been aghast at the squad's lack of match practice. The sight of England players necking drinks in the holiday hotspot of Noosa Heads last week, straight after their Brisbane thrashing, may have been hard for fans to take, even if the trip was long planned.

While pace bowler Josh Tongue has dislodged Gus Atkinson in the England XI, selectors have otherwise backed the players to come good with the red ball in Adelaide following trouble with the pink one during the Gabba's day-night match.

The toss could prove crucial, with the opening days in Adelaide set for scorching weather.

Day two tomorrow could hit 39 degrees Celsius (102F), raising the prospect of an

exhausting slog for the fielding side on a pitch often regarded as Australia's best for batting. With young spinner Shoaib Bashir spurned again, England will stick with three quicks and spin-bowling all-rounder Will Jacks.

Australia have gone back to basics in their attack with the return of captain Pat Cummins from a back injury.

The funky, four-pronged pace setup that dominated at the Gabba has been shelved, allowing veteran spinner Nathan Lyon to return and share what could be punishing workloads for the bowlers in Adelaide.

Michael Neser, the five-wicket hero in the fourth innings in Brisbane, has made way along with fellow pacer Brendan Doggett.

Cummins and Lyon add more than 800 Test wickets of experience for the hosts, compared to 130 combined for England's

pace trio of Jofra Archer, Brydon Carse and Tongue. The return of Australia's big guns will be welcomed by home fans but some purists may miss the elegant, patient batting of Usman Khawaja.

Selectors have stuck with the new opening combination of Travis Head and Jake Weatherald, while declining to find a place in the middle order for the 85-Test opener.

While the hosts would prefer another win to seal the series, they need only draw the match to retain the urn they have held since 2017/18.

Pragmatism should ultimately trump risk if the contest is tight.

Adelaide Tests are usually festive affairs with big crowds revelling in the lead-up to Christmas. But this one will start on a sombre note and with a heavy security presence following the mass shooting at Sydney's Bondi Beach on Sunday.

FOCUS

\$2,7mn! Green becomes IPL's most expensive overseas player

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Australia all-rounder **Cameron Green** became the most expensive overseas buy in Indian Premier League history yesterday.

Green was in the first set of players in the auction in Abu Dhabi and his name triggered a bidding war with former champions Kolkata Knight Riders finally signing him for next season for Rs252mn (\$2.77mn).

In rupees, Green surpassed the previous overseas record of Rs247.5mn paid by Kolkata in the 2024 auction for Australian pace ace Mitchell Starc.

The fall of the rupee means Starc's 2024 price was higher in dollars at \$2.98mn.

Three-time winners Kolkata also acquired Sri Lankan speedster Matheesha Pathirana for Rs180mn.

England's Liam Livingstone went to Sunrisers Hyderabad for Rs130mn in the accelerated round after he went unsold in the first phase.

Green has a capped salary of 180 million rupees due to a new "maximum fee" rule, with the remainder going to the Board of Control for Cricket in India.

"Very happy, something we were focused on and hoping. Happy with the price with which we got him," Kolkata chief executive Venky Mysore told reporters.

"He adds a lot to our team, especially with our new power coach Andre Russell. Very nice to have a young all-rounder. We know what he does with bat and ball."

Green, 26, becomes the third most expensive player in the IPL, after India's Rishabh Pant and Shreyas Iyer.

He has scored 707 runs in 29 IPL matches for five-time winners Mumbai Indians and defend-



ing champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru. He missed the 2025 edition with a back injury but is currently playing in the Ashes against England.

Five-time champions Chennai Super Kings made a splash with when they bought uncapped Indians Prashant Veer and Kartik Sharma for Rs142mn each.

The duo's value jumped from their base price of Rs3mn to become joint-holders of the record for costliest uncapped players in IPL.

Another uncapped Indian Aqib Nabi - an up and coming fast bowler from Indian-administered Kashmir - went for 28 times over his base price for Rs84mn to Delhi Capitals.

Delhi got lucky landing explosive South African batter David Miller for his base price of Rs20mn.

Mumbai brought wicketkeeper-batter Quinton de Kock for the Rs10mn the South African had picked as his base price.

Australian Jake Fraser-McGurk, England's Jonny Bairstow and New Zealand batter Devon Conway went unsold.

The business value of the world's richest cricket tournament was estimated earlier this year at \$18.5bn, by US investment bank Houlihan Lokey.

The 19th edition of the IPL begins on March 26.

Veteran opener Khawaja overlooked for Adelaide Test

Adelaide: Captain Pat Cummins and spinner Nathan Lyon have returned to the Australia XI for the third Ashes test against England in Adelaide but opener **Usman Khawaja** has been left out, leaving his Test career at a cross-roads.

Cummins returns from a back injury after missing the opening tests in Perth and Brisbane, while Lyon is back after being dropped for the second test at the Gabba which Australia won by eight wickets.

The duo replace pace bowlers Brendan Doggett and Michael Neser in the Australian attack, joining Mitchell Starc and Scott Boland. Khawaja missed Brisbane after suffering back spasms in Perth, leaving Travis Head and Jake Weatherald to open the batting.

While Khawaja remained with the squad and was fit to return, Cummins confirmed selectors had decided to stick with Head and Weatherald following the new combination's promising start.

"I think the big thing that's shifted on us is probably Tray opening after that first Test and how good that's looked with Weathers (Weatherald)," Cummins told reporters at Adelaide Oval yesterday. "We were pretty happy with that batting lineup and it didn't feel like it



needed to change, the middle order."

Khawaja will turn 39 tomorrow but Cummins said he could still see a place in the test squad for the 85-Test opener, who has a batting average of 43.56 but has not scored a fifty since posting 232 against Sri Lanka in Galle last January.

"I think the selectors have been quite adamant we're picking a side each week. It doesn't mean it has to be the same side every week," said Cummins.

"One of Ussie's great strengths is he's scored

runs at the top and he's scored runs in the middle. If we didn't think he'd be good enough to come straight back in then he wouldn't be here in the squad with us.

"So, absolutely I can see a path back at some point if needed."

Cummins confirmed Josh Inglis will remain at number seven in the batting, having come in to the middle order at Brisbane following Head's promotion.

Australia lead the five-Test series 2-0 and need only draw the match in Adelaide to retain the urn.

Australia held a 2-0 lead in the last Ashes in England in 2023 before the hosts rallied to draw the series 2-2.

Cummins said lessons had been learned from that series.

"We probably let a couple of those (winning opportunities) slide, particularly at Headingley and The Oval," he said.

"You just can't let them go."

Australia XI
Travis Head, Jake Weatherald, Marnus Labuschagne, Steve Smith, Cameron Green, Alex Carey, Josh Inglis, Pat Cummins (captain), Mitchell Starc, Nathan Lyon, Scott Boland

ANNOUNCEMENT

Security beefed up for Test after Bondi shooting

AFP
Adelaide, Australia

Police armed with rifles will be part of a beefed up security presence at the third Test between Australia and England at Adelaide Oval after the Bondi Beach shooting attack, officials said.

South Australia state Premier Peter Malinauskas said extra measures would be in place for the Ashes clash that starts today, although there was no intelligence pointing to an elevated threat level.

"Given the events that have occurred in Sydney, there will be additional protocols put in place at Adelaide Oval," he said late Monday. "This is done only as a precautionary measure, but it is appropriate that we are an increasing sense of alertness just at



Mourners gather at a tribute at the Bondi Pavilion in memory of the victims of a shooting at Bondi Beach in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

the moment." An attack by a father and son on a Jewish celebration at Sydney's Bondi Beach on Sunday killed 15 people with dozens injured.

One of the assailants was killed, while the other is in a critical

condition in hospital. South Australia Police Commissioner Grant Stevens said special security-response police, armed with rifles, would be present in and around the Adelaide Oval during the Test.

"There's a balance between

the concern about police officers carrying rifles in and about the community, balanced with the need for us to be able to effectively respond to an event, should an event occur and these officers are specifically trained for that purpose," he said.

But Stevens stressed it was a precautionary measure and there was no increased threat level.

"There's no intelligence at this time to indicate that there are any increased levels of threat or security risks around the cricket or any other community event," he said yesterday.

"But notwithstanding that, we apply a level of diligence to make sure that people attending can do so with that confidence that they are attending a safe and well-managed event."

Players from both sides are expected to wear black armbands during the Test.

TENNIS

Djokovic to warm up for Australian Open in Adelaide

The Grand Slam ‘King’ is prepping up to start the 2026 season

AFP
Adelaide, Australia

Serbian great Novak Djokovic will play the Adelaide International as he kicks off his bid for an 11th Australian Open title and an elusive 25th Grand Slam crown, officials said yesterday.

The 38-year-old world number four has competed at Adelaide twice before, winning both times in 2007 and 2023.

He will be back in the city for the ATP-WTA tournament from January 12-17 ahead of the opening Grand Slam of the year at Melbourne Park which begins on January 18.

Djokovic won his last major in 2023 and has cut down on tour appearances since, but still lifted titles this year in Geneva and Athens.

Other Adelaide entrants include Jack Draper, Joao Fonseca, Tommy Paul and Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Defending Australian Open champion Madison Keys spearheads the women’s field alongside fellow top 10 players Jessica Pegula, Mirra Andrejeva and Ekaterina Alexandrova.

“The 2026 edition of the Adelaide International will showcase the tournament’s continued growth and prestige as it attracts world-class calibre from both the WTA and ATP tours,” said tournament director Alicia Molik.

Meanwhile the ATP men’s tennis tour will introduce an extreme heat policy from 2026 after criticism from players who sweltered through some tournaments this year.

The move brings the ATP into line with the women’s WTA tour, which has a long-standing policy, and sports such as Formula One which has its own measures to protect drivers.

In October, Danish tennis star Holger Rune called temperatures of more than 30C and humidity soaring past 80 percent at the



Novak Djokovic, who reached the semi-finals at all four Grand Slam tournaments in 2025, is playing Adelaide to tune up for the Australian Open where he will play for a record-extending 25th Grand Slam championship.

Shanghai Masters “brutal”

“Do you want a player to die on court?” Rune was heard to ask as he wilted in the fierce conditions.

The ATP has now acted, saying on Monday it was “strengthening protections for players competing in extreme conditions”.

The new rules are based on the Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT), which measures air temperature, humidity, wind speed and other factors to estimate heat stress.

Under the measures, a player

can request a 10-minute cooling break in best-of-three singles matches if the WBGT reaches 30.1 degrees or higher during the first two sets.

Play will be suspended when the WBGT exceeds 32.2 degrees.

“The new heat rule provides a structured, medically supported approach to managing extreme heat, with the objective of safeguarding player health,” the ATP said.

It added it will “also improve conditions for spectators, of-

ficials, ball persons and tournament staff”.

The rules do not apply to the four Grand Slams, which have their own policies.

Previously, decisions over weather conditions, including heat, were down to the on-site ATP supervisor in co-ordination with medical teams and local organisers.

The planet is on track to log its second hottest year on record in 2025, Europe’s global warming monitor said last week.

MOTORSPORT

Team Qatar GT shows promise at Asian Le Mans Series in KL



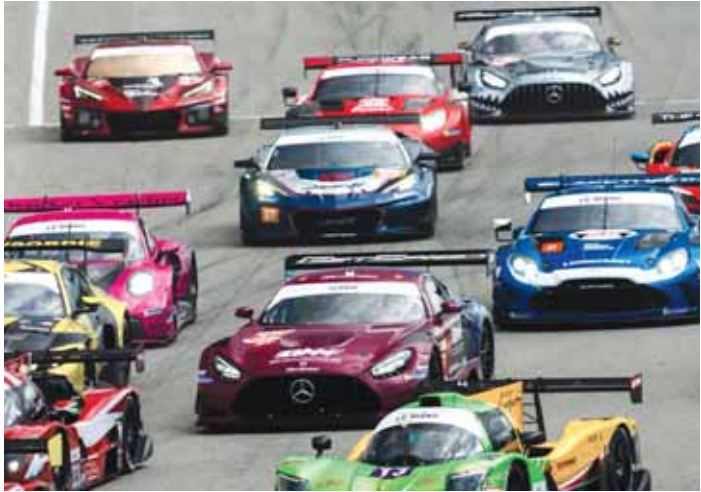
Team Qatar GT made an encouraging start in the GT-category at the Asian Le Mans Series with a promising show in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Represented by experienced drivers Abdullah al-Khelaiifi and Ghanem al-Maadeed, the Qatari outfit underlined its competitiveness early by securing an impressive second place in qualifying against a strong field. Race 1

proved challenging, with the team finishing 19th, though the outing provided valuable data and experience.

Team Qatar GT responded positively in Race 2, bouncing back with a solid 10th place finish to close the weekend on an upbeat note and demonstrate steady progress.

Team Qatar GT will now look forward to upcoming races in the Asian Le Mans Series.



FOCUS

Paris Olympics and Paralympics ‘net cost’ drops to €2.8bn

AFP
Paris, France

The “net cost” of the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics and Paralympics to the French state has been adjusted down to €2.8bn (\$3.3bn), a government think tank announced yesterday.

The figure is “considerably reduced” from the 6.6 billion euros announced by the national audit body in September with the adjustment reflecting the estimated impact on employment and infrastructure.

“By factoring in certain benefits, the climate dimension and legacy value – still measured only partially – the total cost of the Games decreases considerably: it would be more than halved, to under 3 billion euros,” the high commission for planning (HCP) said in a “summary note” obtained by AFP on Monday.

This “net cost” of €2.76bn “would even drop to 1.5 billion euros, a reduction by more than a factor of four,” when “less conservative assumptions” are taken into account, the HCP said.

The body led a “cost-benefit analysis” of the Paris Games “aimed at covering all economic, social, and environmental effects for France,” the note details.

The study was conducted by the Research Centre for the Study and Observation of Living Conditions (Credoc) and overseen by a scientific board.

The HCP said the infrastructures built would have “long-term” benefits.

“Under certain assumptions, which may be refined over time, their legacy value would amount to nearly 3 billion euros,” the body said.

Job creation was another important factor in bringing down the bill with its value to society estimated at €200mn. Employee bonuses produced “a net benefit of around 500 million euros” while increased participation in sports and the associated health benefits is estimated at €250mn.

The HCP also claimed the “well-being derived by French spectators” can be valued at €300mn.

“This is a snapshot estimate; several of these benefits may materialise or increase over time,” said the HCP.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Sabalenka named WTA Player of the Year again

Reuters
Madrid

World number one Aryna Sabalenka has been named WTA Player of the Year for the second consecutive season after spending the entire year at the top of the rankings, the governing body of women’s tennis announced on Monday.

Sabalenka capped a dominant 2025 campaign by successfully defending her US Open title, leading the tour in match wins and titles, reaching nine finals. She finished as runner-up at the Australian Open and Roland Garros and reached the semi-finals of Wimbledon.

The Belarusian won four trophies overall and recorded 63 victories over the season.

As she retained the year-end number one ranking for a second straight year, Sabalenka also set a single-season prize money record of \$15,008,519, the WTA said.

Amanda Anisimova was voted the Most Improved Player, having also been nominated for Player of the Year.

The American reached five finals, winning the first WTA 1000 titles of her career in Doha and Beijing, and advanced to her first Grand Slam finals at Wimbledon and the US Open.

Anisimova broke into the top 10 in July and qualified for the WTA Finals for the first time in her career, ending the year ranked fourth in the world.

Katerina Siniakova and Taylor Townsend were named Doubles Team of the Year after claiming a second Grand Slam title at the Australian Open, while they also reached the US Open final.

Former Olympic champion Belinda Bencic received the Comeback Player of the Year award after becoming a mother in April 2024 and producing a strong run of tournament results, highlighted by a victory over world number five Elena Rybakina to win the Abu Dhabi Open.

Meanwhile, 19-year-old Canadian Victoria Mboko was named Newcomer of the Season after surging to a career-high world ranking of 18, capped by her maiden WTA 1000 title on home soil in Montreal.

GOLF

Garcia loses Ancer to all-Latin American team in new LIV move

AFP
Madrid

Abraham Ancer is leaving captain Sergio Garcia’s Fireballs GC to become part of Torque GC’s all-Latin American lineup for the 2026 LIV Golf season.

Mexico’s Ancer replaces the relegated Mito Pereira and joins countryman Carlos Ortiz and Colombia’s Sebastian Munoz on Chilean captain Joaquin Niemann’s Torque roster, the league confirmed yesterday.

Ancer, 34, joined LIV Golf for its inaugural season in 2022 and played for Fireballs for four seasons, picking up his first LIV tournament victory at Hong Kong in 2024.

“I would like to thank Fireballs

GC players, caddies and staff for the last four years and for helping me grow as a person and a player,” Ancer said. “I will be forever grateful for that stage of my career and I wish them all nothing but the best in 2026 and beyond.

“Joining Torque GC is an exciting next step, both personally and professionally. Competing as part of an all-Latin team alongside close friends, whom I admire on and off the golf course adds a layer of connection and purpose that I can’t wait to be a part of.”

Ancer won the WGC-FedEx St Jude Invitational on the PGA Tour in 2021 before leaving to join the Saudi Arabia-backed LIV circuit. He also won the PIF Saudi International on the Asian Tour in 2023.

“Abraham is a proven winner and a fierce competitor, and

we’re proud to welcome him to Torque GC,” Niemann said. “As a fully Latin American team, we play with shared pride, duty, and purpose, and Abraham embodies that. His addition makes us stronger and deepens the bond that drives everything we do.”

Garcia thanked Ancer for his contributions.

“Abraham has been a cornerstone of Fireballs GC from day one,” Garcia said. “He has been integral in building up the culture of this team, setting the standard for how we prepare, how we compete, and how we represent our club.”

LIV Golf opens the 2026 season at Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from Feb. 4-7.

The league is switching from 54 holes to a 72-hole format in its fifth season.

FORMULA ONE REPLACING ZANDVOORT WITH PORTUGAL CIRCUIT IN 2027-28

Portimao, Portugal: Formula 1 announced that Portimao, Portugal, will return to the calendar in 2027-28 with the Dutch Grand Prix at Zandvoort exiting after the end of its six-year contract in 2026.

The 2,891-mile Algarve International circuit in southern Portugal was built in 2008 and hosted F1 events in 2020 and 2021 during the pandemic to help fill gaps in the calendar due to global travel restrictions. Now it will get at least a two-year stint on F1’s 24-race calendar.

Lewis Hamilton won the previous two Grand Prix in Portimao, both while with Mercedes. “I’m delighted to see Portimao return to the Formula 1 calendar and for the sport to continue to ignite the passion of our incredible Portuguese fan base,” F1 CEO Stefano Domenicali said.

“The circuit delivers on-track excitement from the first corner to the checkered flag, and its energy lifts fans out of their seats. The interest and demand to host a Formula 1 Grand Prix is the highest that it has ever been.”

Portugal does have a lengthy F1 history, with 2027 marking the 19th time the country will play host to a Grand Prix. Three races from 1958-60 were later followed by 13 more that took place at Estoril near Lisbon from 1984-96.

“We are thrilled to welcome Formula 1 back to Portugal and to the Autodromo Internacional do Algarve,” circuit CEO Jaime Costa said.

“The Portuguese Grand Prix will showcase the excellence of our circuit and the passion of our fans, delivering a powerful boost for our tourism, region, and community.

“Portimao’s unique ‘rollercoaster’ layout will challenge the best drivers in the world and create a spectacle that fans will love.”

Along with Zandvoort, the Spanish Grand Prix at the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya will also be in the final year of its contract in 2026, while a street race in Madrid will replace the Emilia-Romagna Grand Prix at Imola.

Other coming changes include the Belgian Grand Prix at Spa-Francorchamps moving to an every-other-year rotational contract beginning in 2027.

Portimao is not part of that rotation, with several potential new Grand Prix on the table to potentially join the F1 calendar in coming years.

“The interest in hosting a Formula 1 Grand Prix is as high as it has ever been,” said Domenicali. South Africa, Thailand and South Korea have also recently been discussed as possible candidates for the race calendar in the coming years, Domenicali told reporters.

FOCUS

Jordan players confident of winning FIFA Arab Cup

Jordan, who edged Saudi Arabia in the semi-final, will face Morocco in final tomorrow at Lusail Stadium

Full concentration for 90 minutes has been the hallmark of Jordan's campaign at the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025, helping them register five straight wins, collect maximum points, score 10 goals and concede only two.

Jordan's impressive form prompted Issam Smeeri, one of the standouts from their semi-final win over Saudi Arabia, to sum it all up in his post-match comments to FIFA.

"You have to play with full concentration until the final whistle," he admitted.

"We did exactly as the coach asked, applying his instructions to the letter, while also working on our mental strength to maintain our level throughout. Knockout games are decided by fine margins, but we stayed focused, achieved our goal, and we thank the Jordanian fans for helping us along the way."

Smeeri shouldered a major responsibility, tasked with containing Salem al-Dawsari, a two-time AFC Player of the Year and one of the tournament's stars, and he did so with considerable success.

"I thank God for granting me success in this match, and I thank coach Jamal Sellami for the confidence he showed in me at this stage of the tournament," he continued.

"I'm happy that I had the opportunity to play, and this was my moment to deliver. There's no doubt that Salem al-Dawsari is an outstanding player and part of a top national team, but with God's help I was able to limit his threat and deliver a positive performance. I'm hoping to play even better going forward."

Mahmoud al-Mardi also delivered an excellent defensive performance alongside Smeeri, and made his mark going forward by setting up Nizar al-Rashdan for



Jordan's players celebrate with goalkeeper Yazeed Abulaila after winning the FIFA Arab Cup 2025 semi-final against Saudi Arabia at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor on Monday. (AFP)

the decisive goal.

"The coach asked me to help close down the spaces, but Smeeri delivered a great performance and proved himself on the pitch," he stated. "We made a change in the second half by bringing on Shararh (Mohammad Abu Zrayq) with instructions to push forward.

"(For the goal) the ball looked like it was going out, and the opponent assumed I'd let it run, but I kept it alive and we went on to score, thanks to God."

The players' remarks underline the significant impact of coach Jamal, who handled the tie expertly. One of his key decisions was introducing Mohammad Abu Hasheesh in the 72nd minute, having identified Abdulrahman al-Oboud's growing threat on the right side following his half-time introduction in place of Saleh Abu al-Shamat.

"We're all on the same page. Our aim is to maintain this run of clean sheets in the next game

to secure a win," Abu Hasheesh said. 'The coach read the match perfectly and prepared for it in an excellent way, and that's why we achieved the result we wanted.'

Rajaei Ayed was another key part of the Jordanian machine, with coach Jamal deploying him to take control of the midfield battle.

"I thank the coach for giving me the opportunity, but whether it's me or another player, the performance will be the same," the

32-year-old stated. "We've seen that he has relied on all 23 players, and every one of them has delivered a strong performance in the tournament. I thank God for today's performance, as we all did our part and secured a place in the final."

Saleem Obaid, who began the tournament as a starter against the United Arab Emirates before sustaining an injury against Egypt, watched the match from the sidelines but couldn't have

been prouder of his side's efforts.

"Our defence is strong because we defend as one unit. I hope we can continue in the same way," he said.

"The coaching staff analysed Saudi Arabia's strengths and weaknesses before the match, and we worked to neutralise their attacking threat while successfully exploiting their vulnerabilities."

For his part, Ayed expressed strong confidence in the Nashama's ability to win the FIFA Arab Cup, which would mark the first official title in the nation's history.

"We're capable of winning the title. We now have the experience, having played a final at the same stadium (at the 2023 AFC Asian Cup), and this time we're ready to go one step further."

Saleem Obaid echoed that sentiment, saying: "We're ready for our second final in Qatar. Luck wasn't on our side last time, but we hope it will be with us this time so our fans can celebrate the title. We have what it takes to get the job done."

Abu Hasheesh stressed that Jordan should focus on their own strengths without fearing any opponent.

He also sent a message of support to his teammate Yazan al-Naimat, who suffered a serious ACL injury in the opening minutes of the match against Iraq, saying:

"I hope this title will be ours. We're on the right path. Thank you to our fans and to the Jordanian people. We need to focus on ourselves and aim to deliver the performance expected of us. If we manage to do that, we'll be close to achieving what we want. As players, we want to dedicate the title at the end of the tournament to Yazan al-Naimat."

Jordan are set to face Morocco in the final tomorrow at Lusail Stadium with the match kicking off at 7pm local time.

SPOTLIGHT

Saudi clinch U-23 Gulf Cup



Saudi Arabia players celebrate after winning the AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup in Doha yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Saudi Arabia have been crowned champions of the AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup Qatar 2025, after claiming a 2-0 win over Iraq in the final match held at Stadium 974 in Doha yesterday.

The tournament took place in Qatar from December 4-16, bringing together rising U-23 football stars from across the region to compete for the prestigious title. This was the first time that the competition was held un-

der the auspices of the Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF).

"The U-23 Gulf Cup is part of a thrilling football season in the country, with Qatar making history by hosting numerous tournaments consecutively. The successful delivery of this tournament once again showcased Qatar's commitment towards supporting emerging football talents from the region, while uniting fans to celebrate our shared passion for football. Congratulations to all the players who took part, and to Saudi Arabia for clinching the trophy," said Jassim Sultan al-Rumaihi, AGCFF Secretary-General.

The Gulf Cup featured a total of 14 matches played on state-of-the-art pitches at Aspire Zone, that most recently served as a venue for a historic edition of the FIFA U-17 World Cup. Prior to the tournament, Qatar also hosted the AGCFF U-17 Gulf Cup that saw Saudi Arabia lift the trophy.

The Gulf Cup is part of an exhilarating football calendar in Qatar, which also includes the FIFA Arab Cup taking place from 1-18 December, as well as the FIFA Intercontinental Cup on 10, 13, and 17 December, reflecting Qatar's ongoing capability to host world-class sporting events.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Manchester United wanted me to leave, claims Fernandes

AFP
Lisbon

Manchester United captain Bruno Fernandes told Portuguese media the Premier League club had wanted to sell him this summer after receiving interest from Saudi Arabia. But the 31-year-old claimed manager Ruben Amorim still had him in his plans and that convinced him to stay at Old Trafford.

"My passion and empathy for the club were the same, but there comes a point where money becomes more important to them than you," Fernandes told Canal 11, a channel owned by the Portuguese Football Federation.

"The club wanted me to leave. I said it to the directors and I think they didn't have the courage to make that decision because the coach wanted me. But if I had said I wanted to leave, even if the coach wanted me to stay, the club would have let me go."

Fernandes, who has 103 goals in 307 appearances for Man Utd in all competitions since arriving in 2020, was also reportedly hurt by the club hierarchy's willingness to part ways with him.

"The feeling I got from the club was, 'if you leave, it's not so bad for us'. That hurt me a little," he said, according to comments reported on the website of Portuguese sports daily *A Bola*.

The playmaker said he had considered a move to Saudi Arabia, following in the footsteps of compatriot Cristiano Ron-



Manchester United's Bruno Fernandes reacts during the Premier League match against Bournemouth at Old Trafford in Manchester. (AFP)

aldo who made the move to the kingdom in 2023 after his acrimonious departure from Old Trafford.

Meanwhile, Manchester United boss Ruben Amorim said his side had inspired the Old Trafford crowd in a pulsating 4-4 draw against Bournemouth, but must be more ruthless to turn draws into victories. Three times United led the Cherries in arguably the best offensive performance of Amorim's reign in charge.

Matheus Cunha netted just his second goal for the club, Bruno Fernandes curled in a brilliant free-kick and Amad Diallo signed off for the Africa Cup of Nations with the opening goal.

But United's defensive frailties without the experienced duo of Harry Maguire and Matthijs de Ligt were exposed as they failed to win for the third consecutive home game.

The Red Devils were beaten 1-0 at Old Trafford by 10-man Everton last month and also blew the lead in a 1-1 draw against struggling West Ham.

Amorim, though, turned his frustration on the wasted chances during a dominant first half.

"We are really disappointed. Crazy game. It might look like we lost the two points in the second half but I think we lost them in the first half," said the Portuguese coach.

MANCHESTER CITY STAR DOKU SIDELINED UNTIL NEW YEAR

Pep Guardiola said Manchester City will be without injured Belgium winger Jeremy Doku until the new year.

Doku suffered a leg problem last week and was absent from City's 3-0 win at Crystal Palace. Speaking ahead of today's League Cup quarter-final against Brentford, City boss Guardiola said the influential Doku will not be back in action

for up to three weeks. Asked when he is likely to return, Guardiola said: "Jeremy (will be out) two or three weeks. New year at Sunderland maybe."

Doku's absence is a major blow to Guardiola in the midst of his most consistent season with City since arriving from French club Rennes in 2023. The 23-year-old has scored three goals and provided

five assists, with his dynamic play on the flanks helping City striker Erling Haaland enjoy another prolific campaign. As well as missing Brentford's visit to the Etihad Stadium, Doku will be sidelined for Premier League games against West Ham on December 20 and Nottingham Forest on December 27. City's trip to face Sunderland at the Stadium of Light on January 1 is

the earliest Doku will be back. Brazilian winger Savinho is likely to be given the chance to deputise for Doku after losing his place in recent weeks. He came off the bench to win a penalty against Palace, but impressed Guardiola was more with his work rate. "He lost one or two balls and in two seconds he was a full-back," Guardiola said. "I was incredibly pleased. Two actions

where he lost the ball he was a machine. He doesn't like to listen, but I had to tell him. "You come from the bench, you have to run double because the other guys are tired. Savinho is going to play a lot of minutes." Trailing leaders Arsenal by just two points in a tense title race, second-placed City cannot afford more injuries heading into the hectic Christmas period.