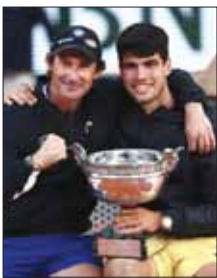


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Alcaraz ends 'incredible ride' with coach Ferrero

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FOOTBALL

Safonov the saviour as PSG beat Flamengo to clinch Intercontinental Cup

Enrique's side claimed its sixth title in 2025 after having won their maiden Champions League in May

By Sahar Biddappa
Doha

Goalkeeper Matvei Safonov emerged as the unlikely hero as Paris Saint-Germain edged a resilient Flamengo to win the Intercontinental Cup, sealing their sixth trophy of the season after a dramatic penalty shootout at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday.

Safonov, preferred again, with regular goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier still regaining fitness from an ankle injury, saved an astonishing four penalties as PSG triumphed 2-1 in the shootout following a 1-1 draw after extra time. The 26-year-old Russian's heroics ensured the Parisians ended a glittering year on the highest possible note.

Already crowned Ligue 1 champions and winners of the Coupe de France, the Trophée des Champions, the UEFA Champions League, and the UEFA Super Cup, Luis Enrique's side became only the third club to complete a sextuple, after Barcelona in 2009 and Bayern Munich in 2020.

Before last night, no French side had won the Intercontinental Cup, which was contested for over four decades until 2004, when it was rebranded as the Club World Cup. FIFA revived the competition last year following the revamp of the Club World Cup into a 32-team summer tournament. PSG had lost to Chelsea in the Club World Cup final in the United States in July, having won their maiden Champions League title in May.

By no stretch of the imagination was it a smooth sailing for PSG on the night. South American champions Flamengo pushed the Parisians to the limit, matching them stride for stride before Safonov's brilliance from the spot finally settled the contest.

"We're proud of ourselves, we played a very, very good match, a very good final, against a good team that played with a lot of intensity," said PSG midfielder Warren Zaire-Emery. "I hope we can continue like this throughout the season. This team has a lot of character; we're showing that we're a team, a collective. That's what the coach wanted when he arrived here. He has always emphasised that to us: the collective comes first. It shows our strength, the kind of team we are."

Much of the pre-match focus centred on whether newly-crowned FIFA Best Player award winner Ousmane Dembele would start after having been sidelined in the last two matches due to illness. Ultimately, he began on the bench, as did Chevalier, with Safonov retaining his place in goal.

PSG asserted their authority early, dominating possession and pinning Flamengo deep in their own half. Lee Kang-in tested the Brazilian side inside three minutes, while Joao Neves soon followed with another probing effort. The Parisians thought they had struck in the ninth minute when Fabian Ruiz slotted the ball into the net after Flamengo goalkeeper Agustin Rossi mishandled a clearance, but VAR ruled that the ball had already crossed the line earlier in the move.

Rossi was again involved in a decisive moment eight minutes before half-time. Desire Doue's low cross appeared to have too much pace, but the Argentine keeper diverted it straight to Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, who reacted quickest to tuck home from close range and give PSG a deserved 1-0 lead.

Flamengo, however, returned with renewed intent after the break. PSG became increasingly passive, and the equaliser arrived just after the hour when skipper Marquinhos clipped Giorgian de Arrascaeta inside the area. Following a VAR review, former Chelsea and Arsenal midfielder Jorginho sent Safonov the wrong way with a stuttering run-up to make it 1-1.

Dembele was introduced with 12 min-



Paris Saint-Germain players celebrate after winning the FIFA Intercontinental Cup at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan yesterday.



Matvei Safonov is lifted into the air by his teammates in celebration after saving four penalties in the shootout.



Flamengo's Jorginho scores a penalty to equalise in the 62nd minute.

utes of regulation time remaining as PSG searched for a winner. The clearest chance fell to Marquinhos, but the defender sliced wide from inside the six-yard box, sending the final into extra time.

Both sides had opportunities to settle it in the additional period. Flamengo substitute Luiz Araujo snatched at a chance, while Dembele scooped one wide from close range. With no decisive blow landed, penalties were required.

Flamengo converted their opening kick through Nicolas de la Cruz, but that proved to be their only success. Safonov denied Saul Niguez, Pedro, Leo Pereira, and Araujo in succession, displaying remarkable composure and anticipation as Flamengo's hopes evaporated. Even missed attempts by Dembele and Bradley Barcola did not cost PSG.

When the final save was made, teammates swarmed Safonov in celebration.



Paris Saint-Germain's coach Luis Enrique is delighted after his side's Intercontinental Cup triumph.



PSG's winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia attempts to get past Flamengo defenders.

ASHES

Emotional Carey slams ton to give Australia upper hand

Snicko decision creates a furore after Carey given not out following what seemed like a genuine edge

AFP
Adelaide

An emotional Alex Carey slammed a controversial 106 on his home ground and Usman Khawaja hit a defiant 82 yesterday to put Australia in the driving seat of the third Ashes Test against England.

Batting after captain Pat Cummins won the toss as temperatures topped 36C at Adelaide Oval, the hosts were 326-8 at stumps on day one after the shock of Steve Smith being ruled out with illness.

Mitchell Starc was not out 33 and Nathan Lyon yet to score. "To make a hundred here in front of home fans and family was special," Carey said, although it was shrouded in controversy over a let-off on 72.

Carey conceded he likely edged a delivery from England quick Josh Tongue that was caught behind by Jamie Smith.

"I thought there was a feather or some sort of noise when it passed the bat," he said. "If I was given out I think I would have reviewed it, probably not confidently."

He was given not out and England failed to have the decision overturned on review with replays showing a noise spike before the ball reached his bat. The "snicko" technology's operator, BBG, admitted to reporters after play there had likely been an error with England raising the matter with match referee Jeff Crowe.

"I don't think we've done anything about it so far but after today, maybe that might go a bit further," said England bowling consultant David Saker. It overshadowed Carey's maid-



Australian batsman Alex Carey celebrates scoring a century on the first day of the third Ashes Test at the Adelaide Oval in Adelaide yesterday. (AFP)

en Ashes ton that saw him gesture towards the sky in a nod to his father Gordon, who died from cancer in September.

"I guess you know as well why I was looking to the heavens. I'm trying not to tear up. But, no, it was great," he said.

A tireless Jofra Archer ended with 3-29 on a tough day for England's bowlers in the field.

"I thought it was a good performance from our bowlers, the

heat took us a bit by surprise," said Saker.

"The boys toiled away."

KHAWAJA REPRIEVE

Australia lead the five-Test series 2-0 and will retain the Ashes if they win or draw, after back-to-back eight-wicket thumpings in Perth and Brisbane.

Smith, who has more than 10,000 runs, had been feeling unwell in the lead-up but was on

Tuesday named in the side. He was on the field during the morning warm-up but left 20 minutes before the toss shaking his head.

His absence gave an unexpected reprieve to Khawaja, who had been overlooked as opener in favour of Travis Head and Jake Weatherald.

Khawaja, who missed Brisbane after suffering back spasms in Perth, grabbed his chance in a stoic knock.

He was eventually out just before tea, slog-sweeping to Tongue in the deep off the spin of Will Jacks.

Carey picked up the mantle, first alongside Josh Inglis (32), then Pat Cummins (13), and latterly Starc, who once more showed his prowess with the bat.

Carey hit eight fours and a six in his third Test century, bringing up the milestone in front of family, friends and 56,298 fans -- the

biggest cricket crowd ever at the venue.

ARCHER BURST

A blistering first over after lunch from Archer had left Australia reeling at 94-4.

He removed Marnus Labuschagne for 19 with his first ball after the interval.

Two deliveries later Cameron Green was gone, with Brydon Carse collecting catches at mid-wicket to dismiss both.

Inglis and Cummins fell in the final session to Tongue and Carse respectively.

Players from both teams wore black armbands as a mark of respect to the victims of the Bondi Beach mass shooting that took place three days ago.

A moment of silence was held before the game with security tightened and flags flying at half-mast.

At the start, Weatherald raced to 18 but his gung-ho approach cost him against the pace of Archer, who fired down a bouncer and induced a top edge to Smith.

Head followed next over for 10, with Zak Crawley taking a sensational instinctive catch low to his left off Carse.

Khawaja, on five, was fortunate to survive when Harry Brook dropped a sitter at second slip and went on to bring up his 28th Test 50 to big cheers.

Carey had another life on 52 when Carse put down a difficult chance in the covers and the 34-year-old made the most of it before falling when he top-edged Jacks to Smith just before the close.

BRIEF SCORES: Australia 326 for 8 (Carey 106, Khawaja 82, Archer 3-29) **vs England.**

PREVIEW

Chase says team bonding may do the trick in 3rd Test



Devon Conway of New Zealand bats during a team training session in Christchurch yesterday. (@BLACKCAPS)

AFP
Mount Maunganui, New Zealand

Captain Roston Chase hopes that a bonding session over an early Christmas dinner will give the West Indies the festive spirit to beat New Zealand in the must-win third and final Test starting Thursday at Mount Maunganui.

The visitors trail 1-0 after being thrashed by nine wickets last week in Wellington and have not won in their previous seven Tests.

The first Test at Christchurch was drawn. "Guys had some time to reflect," Chase said yesterday of the heavy defeat at the Basin Reserve. "We had a bit of a chat and we had a team bonding session, a Christmas dinner. Just enjoying each other's company."

The players ran a Secret Santa, with Chase receiving an Adidas tracksuit and a blender.

"My guy was Jayden Seales and I bought him a Prada cologne," said Chase, getting into the Christmas spirit.

The weather has not been quite in keeping with the buoyant mood.

Heavy rain has battered the ground in recent days, hampering preparation of a pitch that usually suits spinners.

Chase called the unusually green Mount Maunganui wicket "a bit shocking" after an initial assessment.

"Looking at it I don't think there will be much spin," Chase said.

"I think seam will be more dangerous on this wicket."

Fast bowler Ojay Shields will miss the Test through injury, with batter Alick Athanaze returning to the XI in his place.

Chase said he backs his four remaining seam

options to do the job, and that he is prepared to bowl more overs of spin if the pitch does indeed take turn.

He'll also lean heavier on all-rounder Justin Greaves, who Chase suggested could be a "complainer" at times, but always gave his all with the ball.

Greaves scored 202 not out in the first Test to rescue the West Indies from defeat.

"He will say stuff and act like he doesn't want to put in that extra effort," said Chase.

"But when he gets there and I call on him, he's always more than willing to work."

New Zealand captain Tom Latham said his team are yet to settle on their line-up, with the same question marks about the pitch.

Either 37-year-old spinner Ajaz Patel or 24-year-old uncapped seamer Kristian Clarke will play, depending on the shades of green Latham sees today morning.

"The games that we've played here in the past, we've tended to see that spin's played a little bit more of a part than what it has around the country at different venues," he said.

"So we are going to have a look at it in the morning whether we do go with that extra spin option."

Latham said he was confident in either player, as he praised the experience Patel brought to the squad and the form Clarke had shown in first-class cricket.

Clarke has a first-class bowling average of 32 and scored his first List A century this season.

Patel has 85 Test wickets, including being just the third person in Test history to claim 10 wickets in an innings - 10-119 against India in Mumbai in 2021.

Patel has never taken a wicket in New Zealand.

FOCUS

India vs South Africa 4th T20 abandoned due to fog



Officials inspect the pitch during the fourth Twenty20 international between India and South Africa at the Ekana Cricket Stadium in Lucknow yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Lucknow, India

The fourth T20 international between India and South Africa was abandoned without a ball being bowled due to dense fog in the northern Indian city of Lucknow yesterday.

The toss was scheduled for 6:30pm local time (1300 GMT) but never took place despite several pitch inspections at the Ekana Stadium. The umpires eventually called off the match at 9:30pm.

T20 world champions India lead the five-match series 2-1 ahead of the final match tomorrow in Ahmedabad. The series is part of the build-up for the T20 World Cup which starts in February in India and Sri Lanka.

A statement said, the match "has been abandoned due to ex-

cessive fog, making playing conditions unsafe".

Indian all-rounder Hardik Pandya was seen wearing a mask to trigger online discussions on deteriorating pollution levels.

Levels of cancer-causing PM 2.5 microparticles hit 78 micrograms per cubic metre in parts of Lucknow, according to monitoring organisation IQAir, more than five times the World Health Organisation's recommended daily maximum. But recently pollution levels have been found to be much worse in northern India, including in capital Delhi where the PM 2.5 microparticles rose to more than 20 times the WHO levels during football star Lionel Messi's visit on Monday.

Acrid smog blankets parts of northern India, when cooler air traps pollutants close to the ground, creating a deadly mix of emissions from crop burning, factories and heavy traffic.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Sri Lanka hire fielding coach Sridhar ahead of next year's T20 World Cup

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka have hired former Indian fielding coach R Sridhar to do the same job for them ahead of the men's T20 World Cup starting in February, the board said yesterday.

The 55-year-old Indian will also help Sri Lanka's team for the

upcoming home series against Pakistan and England, Sri Lanka Cricket said.

He will be on a three-month contract, SLC said, noting that he is already familiar with the national team, having conducted a 10-day specialised fielding programme earlier this year.

In October, Sri Lanka expanded their coaching team with the induction of Julian Wood, known for

his power-hitting programme, and spin specialist Rene Ferdinands.

Sri Lanka's former skipper Sanath Jayasuriya continues as head coach.

Italy drop Aussie-born skipper who helped seal WC berth

Joe Burns, the former Australian cricketer who masterminded Italy's fairytale qualification to their maiden T20 World Cup, will

miss the tournament after being dropped by the Italian Cricket Federation (FCRI) amid contractual wrangles.

Burns captained the side that booked a maiden T20 World Cup berth in July through European qualifiers, setting up the nation's tournament debut in India and Sri Lanka from February 7.

However, the FCRI said Burns will not be a part of the World Cup

squad, with South African-born Wayne Madsen to lead the side instead.

"Although preliminary contacts regarding his (Burns) availability have been made in recent weeks, no final agreement has been reached and, as a result, no contract has been formalised," the FCRI said in a statement yesterday.

"At the same time, internal technical and organisational as-

sessments have led to Wayne Madsen being identified as the most suitable choice to lead the team," the statement added.

The federation did not elaborate on what issues concerning team stability had influenced their decision.

But it was confirmed that Madsen will lead Italy in the upcoming tour against Ireland before they head to the World Cup.

TENNIS

Alcaraz ends ‘incredible ride’ with coach Ferrero

Ferrero guided Alcaraz to 24 titles including six Grand Slams, they began their partnership seven years ago

AFP
Paris

Men’s tennis world number one Carlos Alcaraz announced yesterday he is splitting from his coach Juan Carlos Ferrero after seven hugely successful years together with assistant coach Samuel Lopez taking over.

Alcaraz has won six Grand Slams among his 24 tour level titles under the guidance of fellow Spaniard Ferrero, including this year’s French and US Opens.

Alcaraz, 22, ends this year as world number one having claimed eight tournaments during the season including his dramatic victory over Jannik Sinner in Paris.

“It is very difficult to write this post,” Alcaraz said on social media with photos of the pair hugging.

“After more than seven years together, ‘Juanki’ and I have decided to end our story together as coach and player.

“Thank you for making the dreams of a child become reality,” Alcaraz added.

Alcaraz began working with 45-year-old Ferrero, a former

world number one, in August 2018, when he was a teenager.

As a player, Ferrero won the 2003 French Open and was runner-up in New York later in the year before becoming a coach working alongside Alexander Zverev in 2017.

Alcaraz won his first Grand Slam at Flushing Meadows in 2022 before clinching Wimbledon and the French Open, to mark a change in men’s tennis following years of dominance by Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic.

His first success at New York sent the then 19-year-old to the top of the world rankings for the first time, becoming the second youngest man to do so, behind Lew Hoad in 1953.

‘NOSTALGIA’

Alcaraz has never made it further than the quarter-finals of the Australian Open, with the main draw of the first Grand Slam of next year starting on January 18.

“We started this journey when I was barely a kid, and throughout all this time you’ve been by my side on an incredible ride, on and off the court,” Alcaraz said.

“And I’ve enjoyed every step with you immensely.

“Now change is coming for both of us, new adventures and new projects.

“I’m at peace knowing we left everything out there, that we gave everything for one another,” he added.

The Ferrero tennis academy said Lopez will step up to take over as coach.

“Carlos Alcaraz and Juan Carlos Ferrero go their separate ways, with Samuel Lopez continuing as head coach,” the academy based in Alicante, Spain said on X.

“Endlessly grateful for the unforgettable points, emotions, and moments that defined the 2025 season,” it added.

Lopez, 55, took on his current role with Alcaraz in 2024.

Ferrero and Lopez won the 2025 ATP coach of the year award, having also secured the title three years earlier.

“Today, a very important chapter of my life comes to an end,” Ferrero said on Instagram.

“I close it with nostalgia, but also with pride and excitement for what may come next.

“I wish I could have continued. I am convinced that good memories and good people always find a way to cross paths again,” he added.



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz celebrates with coach Juan Carlos Ferrero after winning the French Open final against Germany's Alexander Zverev at Roland Garros in Paris on June 9, 2024. (Reuters)

BOXING

‘Catastrophic mismatch’: Safety fears as Paul faces Joshua

AFP
Los Angeles

YouTube-turned-prize-fighter Jake Paul faces former heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua tomorrow in a money-spinning made-for-streaming bout that has triggered alarm across the boxing world.

Just over a year after his much-derided victory over a 58-year-old Mike Tyson, the 28-year-old American Paul will climb into the ring at Miami’s Kaseya Center to confront a far younger - and vastly more dangerous - opponent in the 36-year-old Joshua.

The Netflix-backed spectacle, which reportedly will see the fighters split a staggering \$184 million purse, has drawn fierce criticism, with many questioning why it was sanctioned.

The British Board of Control has said it would not have approved the fight on safety grounds. Other fighters have warned that given the gulf in class, physical size and talent, Paul risks serious injury.

For his most recent fight in June, the 6ft 1in (1.85m) Paul tipped the scales at 199.4 pounds (90.4kg). Britain’s Joshua, who at 6ft 6in towers above Paul, weighed in at 252.5 pounds for his last outing in 2024. Eddie Hearn, Joshua’s long-time promoter, described Friday’s fight as a “catastrophic mismatch” before the contracts had even been signed.

‘SCARY’ DAMAGE

Other voices in the boxing world though have painted a darker picture, with former world heavyweight champion David Haye warning that the fight could be Paul’s “last day on earth”. Amir Khan, Britain’s former light-welterweight champion, said a crushing victory for Joshua may even have lasting implications for boxing, turning viewers off the recent trend of crossover fights involving internet celebrities like Paul.

“I think this could be the end of YouTubers jumping in with real active fighters,” Khan told the *Daily Mail*. “Because it only takes one shot. One bad night, one clean shot, and someone can get seriously hurt.

“We’ve seen the way someone’s whole life can be altered.”

Khan believes Paul will have no chance if Joshua makes full use of his physical advantages and superior ringcraft, as he did when inflicting a devastating second-round knockout of novice boxer Francis Ngannou last year.

“AJ can bang,” Khan said. “He’s a former world champion. He’s got power, size, everything. If he lands



Anthony Joshua and Jake Paul (below) during the open workout sessions in Miami ahead of their fight. (Reuters)

clean, the damage he can do is scary. Especially when he is landing it on someone like Jake Paul. He’s not capable of taking that sort of power.”

Paul, whose limited ring record includes 12 wins and one defeat with seven knockouts, insists he is ready to shock the world while acknowledging his ambitions are “delusional.”

‘IN BOXING PEOPLE DIE’

“I like to challenge myself against the best. We’re going to go to war and the best man will win,” Paul said last month.

“I have gotten to where I am today because of delusional optimism. It’s delusion until it’s not. It’s got me to where I am today.”

Joshua insists he is tackling the fight as seriously as any other.

“If I’m gonna be honest, I’m gonna break his face, I’m gonna break his body up, I’m gonna stomp all over him,” Joshua said.

That gruesome scenario is precisely what some analysts fear.

Michael Bisping, the UFC hall-of-famer and combat sports commentator, has dismissed any chance of Paul springing a David v Goliath type upset. “There’s no way on this Earth that this fight ends with Jake Paul knocking out Anthony Joshua,” Bisping said on his *YouTube* channel.



“(Joshua’s) got way more experience. He hits harder. He’s the bigger man. He’s got the longer reach.

“He’s an Olympic champion. Jake Paul is not going to go out there and turn this into a real life David and Goliath. That ain’t going to happen, and everybody knows that.”

Bisping warned that if Joshua’s pledge to approach the fight seri-

ously carries weight, Paul could be in peril.

“If this is a real fight - and apparently it is, so we’ll go with that - there’s a very good chance that somebody gets hurt, and I’m sorry to say it ain’t going to be Anthony Joshua,” Bisping said. “Joshua has been in there with the best of the best. (In) boxing, people die.

“This is not a game. You don’t play at boxing.”

SPOTLIGHT

Undefeated boxing great Crawford announces retirement

AFP
Los Angeles

Undefeated world super middleweight champion Terence Crawford announced his retirement from boxing on Tuesday, hanging up his gloves three months after a career-defining victory over Saul “Canelo” Alvarez.

The 38-year-old from Nebraska, who dominated Mexican legend Alvarez in Las Vegas in September to claim the undisputed super middleweight crown, announced his decision in a video posted on social media.

“I’m stepping away from competition, not because I’m done fighting, but because I’ve won a different type of battle,” Crawford said in his retirement message. “The one where you walk away on your own terms.”

Crawford, (42-0, 31 knockouts), retires as the reigning WBA, IBF and WBO supermiddleweight champion after defeating Alvarez by unanimous decision in a masterful performance.

Crawford had also held the WBC super middleweight belt, but was stripped of it earlier this month following a dispute over sanctioning fees.

Speaking in his video, Crawford

said his career had been driven by a desire to keep “proving everyone wrong.”

“Every fighter knows this moment will come, we just never know when,” Crawford said.

“I spent my whole life chasing something. Not belts, not money, not headlines. But that feeling, the one you get when the world doubts you but you keep showing up and you keep proving everyone wrong.”

“I fought for my family. I fought for my city. I fought for the kid I used to be, the one who had nothing but a dream and a pair of gloves. And I did it all my way. I gave this sport every breath I had.”

Crawford’s career straddled three different decades, with the southpaw making his professional debut in 2008 and rapidly becoming one of boxing’s brightest talents.

He won his maiden world title, the WBO lightweight crown, with victory over Scotland’s Ricky Burns in 2014.

Crawford won 18 world titles in five weight classes, culminating in his win over Alvarez.

He retires having never been officially knocked down in a fight. All of his 42 victories have come by way of unanimous decision or stoppage, with no judge ever scoring in favour of an opponent during his career.

Golfer Thomas gives \$1mn donation to Alabama

Justin Thomas is giving back to his alma mater - in a big way. Thomas agreed to donate \$1mn to the Crimson Standard, which in turn will use the money to upgrade Alabama’s facilities for both the men’s and women’s golf teams. Thomas, 32, is a 16-time PGA event champion, having won the PGA Championship in 2017 and 2022. He also helped guide the Crimson Tide to the NCAA Championship in 2013. “It’s hard to put into words the love and feelings I have for The University of Alabama,” Thomas said in a release by the school. “I was so lucky to be able to spend two incredible years playing under coach (Jay) Seawell.

“He and his wife, Stephanie, were, and still are, like family to me. This dream of making the Crimson Reserve couldn’t be done without Coach Seawell and (women’s coach Mic) Potter and what they’ve done with the programs. I’m honored to have a very small part in it.”

Thomas’ “small” contribution was welcomed by both Seawell and Potter. “I am so proud of Justin and thankful for what he’s meant to our program and The University of Alabama,” Seawell said. “He is a big part of the legacy of Alabama golf. It means so much that he would be willing to give back to the golf programs. ... We could not be more grateful for his generosity and love of The University of Alabama.”

Said Potter: “Alabama women’s golf is extremely grateful for Justin’s commitment to not only the Crimson Reserve (the facilities), but also his investment in our student-athletes. Justin Thomas’ impact on Alabama Golf goes beyond the course, and we are thankful that he is giving back to the sport that he excelled in during his time at Alabama and currently in the PGA.”

PREVIEW

Morocco and Jordan set for Arab Cup finale at Lusail

‘We will do our utmost to achieve the goal we set from the beginning’

By Sports Reporter

Doha

African heavyweights Morocco and Asian Cup finalists Jordan meet at the Lusail Stadium today with the FIFA Arab Cup title on the line, in a final that pits the tournament's most prolific attack against its most resilient defence.

Jordan have been the free-scoring kings of the competition, plundering ten goals in five matches. Over the same span, Morocco have conceded just once, which was an own goal inside the first hour of their opening group match.

Even in the absence of injured Nashama forward Yazan al-Naimat, the decider at the regional showpiece is set up as a battle between a prolific Jordan side and a watertight Moroccan unit.

The Atlas Lions are aiming to continue their love affair with Qatar, three years after reaching the semi-finals of the FIFA World Cup. Lusail has also been a happy hunting ground for Jordan, who played the Asian Cup final at the same venue two years ago.

Jordan have been rocked by a long-term knee injury suffered by al-Naimat in their quarter-final win over Iraq, but head coach Jamal Sellami has quality depth to call upon, led by the prolific Ali Olwan, the tournament's top scorer.

Morocco have proved close to impenetrable at the tournament, even in the absence of several regulars. For the last four matches, goalkeeper El Mehdi Benabid, central defenders Soufiane Bouffini and Marwane Saadane, and full-backs Mohamed Boulacsout and Hamza El Moussaoui have played all but half an hour.

Together with captain Mohamed Hrimat, they have formed an outstanding defensive unit. The



Jordan players in action during a training session yesterday, on the eve of the Arab Cup final against Morocco.

Nashama will need to do what no team has managed so far – find a way through them. Both nations exited at the quarter-final stage four years ago and, with defend-

ing champions Algeria falling at that hurdle in the current edition, a new name will be engraved on the trophy today on Qatar's National Day. On the eve of the

final, Moroccan coach Tariq Sektioui stressed the scale of the task ahead, noting that both teams fully deserve their place after consistently high-level performances



Morocco coach Tariq Sektioui addresses the media yesterday.

throughout the tournament. Sektioui said: “We are ready and we will not squander our chances of winning the Arab Cup. We will do our utmost to achieve the goal we set from the beginning,” while acknowledging Jordan's advantage in squad continuity and cohesion. He also highlighted the presence of compatriot Jamal Sellami on the Jordan bench, noting the coach's deep familiarity with Moroccan players.

Despite limited preparation time, injuries and the challenge of assembling players from clubs at home and abroad, Sektioui remains confident, pointing to his squad's fighting spirit and tactical discipline. Moroccan midfielder Marouane Louadni echoed his coach's confidence, saying: “The entire team is fully prepared to face the final, and the goal is clear, which is to win and claim the title.”

Aware of Jordan's perfect record, Louadni underlined the importance of focus at both ends of the pitch, adding: “We know the method adopted by the Jordanian team and have studied it thoroughly. The most important thing is to remain focused at all times,

defensively to deal with counter-attacks and offensively by taking advantage of our opportunities.”

Jordan coach Jamal Sellami acknowledged the difficulty of facing Morocco but insisted his players are ready. He said: “This is a highly anticipated final in a fantastic tournament organised by the Qatar in an impressive manner. We know our task will not be easy against a strong opponent with many individual and collective qualities, which requires full technical, mental and physical readiness.”

Sellami also spoke of the personal significance of facing his homeland and former teammate Sektioui, calling it a reflection of Moroccan football's progress, while reaffirming his responsibility to an ambitious Jordan side.

He added: “I believe we need this title more. Morocco have achieved many titles and global successes in recent years, while we reached the Asian Cup final and fell short. Winning the Arab Cup would represent a major leap for Jordanian football, cement this generation and give a strong push to new players. Playing a final without winning means nothing.”

SPOTLIGHT

Frenchman Renard says he won't quit as Saudi coach

By Rizwan Rehmat

Doha

Saudi football coach **Herve Renard** has denied he plans to quit his job following his team's semi-final loss against Jordan at the FIFA Arab Cup on Monday.

Midfielder Nizar al-Rashdan headed home in the 66th minute as Jordan stunned Saudi Arabia 1-0 at the Al Bayt Stadium

on Monday. Renard, 57, is under pressure to remain in the job after Saudi Arabia's shock exit from the 16-team tournament.

The Frenchman is in his second stint as coach having managed the Saudi side from July 2019 until March 2023.

Renard replaced Roberto Mancini as Saudi coach in October last year. Three years ago, Renard oversaw Saudi Arabia's spectacular 2-1 win over Argentina at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

“I have a contract and I (will) continue my job,” Renard said as a matter of fact during a press conference yesterday.

“After all I am not the one deciding what to do (and) if someone wants something else... this is not my problem,” he added.

“I (will) continue (as coach). If someone (from the Saudi Football Federation) is telling me ‘your job is finished; I will go somewhere else. This is football life,’ Renard said.

The Frenchman said Saudi Arabia lacked coordination at the back against Jordan.

“They were crossing (in) a lot of balls when they were in the offensive part (of the field). We were 4 against 2 (players) when Jordan scored the goal. We were not efficient defensively. We got two very good chances but we didn't score,” Renard said.

“It was difficult for us to create a lot of chances and it was difficult for us to keep the score at 0-0 for

long. They continued to attack. We were not strong enough defensively,” he said.

“We prepared (for) the game against Jordan very well. The statistics of the game are clear. We got 69 percent of ball possession vs 31 percent. We knew the strategy exactly of the Jordan team before the game,” Renard said.

Saudi Arabia will take on the UAE in the third-place play-off today at the Khalifa International Stadium (2:30pm).



HORSE RACING

Naseeb Zakhir lands Zekreet Cup

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Naseeb Zakhir confirmed his rising form with a commanding performance to capture the feature Zekreet Cup, a Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (75-95) for four-year-old+ over 1,200m, winning by four and a half lengths.

Owned and trained by Osama Omer al-Dafea and ridden by Faleh Bughenaim, the four-year-old grey colt recorded his second win from four starts this season, following two runner-up finishes.

Breaking sharply from barrier six in the seven-runner field, Naseeb Zakhir was prominent from the outset, briefly leading before settling just off the pace behind early leader Azzam FBR.

Flanked through the middle stages by Al Wasmi and Khaled Al Shahania, he travelled purposefully before unleashing a decisive turn of foot in the straight, quickly asserting superiority. Al Wasmi, representing Al Wasmiyah Farm, finished second, while Khaled Al Shahania held on for third.

Earlier, Aljalta delivered a breath-taking performance to open his account in the card opener, a Thoroughbred Handicap (0-60) for three-year-old+ over 1900m, Class 6, contested by 14 runners.



Jockey Faleh Bughenaim guided Naseeb Zakhir to the Zekreet Cup win yesterday. PICTURE: Juhaime

The three-year-old bay colt, owned by Khalid Rashid al-Mohannadi, trained by Rashid al-Jehani and ridden by Alberto Sanna, dismantled the field with a staggering 20-length victory.

Settled neatly in third after the break, Aljalta tracked the early pace set by Villain's Voice, who was closely attended by Allegorical as the pair edged a couple of lengths clear of the rest.

Aljalta travelled comfortably in behind, biding his time through

the middle stages as he began to close on the leaders. Approaching the home turn, Sanna asked his mount to quicken and the response was immediate and devastating. Turning for home, Aljalta raced against his own shadow, unleashing a devastating turn of foot that carried him clear with every stride.

He swept past the leaders with ease and quickly put the race beyond doubt, drawing further clear with every stride to leave his rivals

battling only for the minor placings.

Little Lips, racing for Mohammed bin Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attayah, trained by Jassim al-Ghazali and partnered by Marco Casamento, finished best of the rest to take second. Time Traveler, representing The Pearl Racing, trained by Mohammed al-Ghazali and ridden by Soufiane Saadi, stayed on strongly from midfield to claim third, a length behind the runner-up.

WINNERS OF 2026 FIFA WORLD CUP TO POCKET \$50MN IN PRIZE MONEY

The winners of the 2026 World Cup will receive \$50mn in prize money as part of a record financial contribution for the tournament from FIFA, world football's governing body announced yesterday. The total World Cup prize fund of \$655mn (558.5mn euros) represents an increase of almost 50 percent from the \$440mn distributed to teams taking part in the last tournament in Qatar in 2022.

However, next year's World Cup - to be held in the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11-July 19 - will be the first to feature 48 teams, a 50 percent increase from the 32 teams last time. The Argentine Football Association received \$42mn in prize money after Lionel Messi inspired them to glory three years ago, when they won on penalties in the final against France.

France received \$30mn for their run to the final. This time, the beaten finalists will pocket \$33mn, with the third-place finishers collecting \$29mn and the other defeated semi-finalists getting \$27mn. Teams eliminated in the group phase will receive \$9mn, while all 48 participating nations will

get an additional \$1.5mn to cover “preparation costs”. On Tuesday, organisers unveiled a new cut-price ticket category after a wave of criticism from fans over pricing for the 2026 tournament.

FIFA said it had created a limited number of tickets priced at \$60 for all 104 matches, including the final.

It said the plan was “designed to further support travelling fans following their national teams across the tournament”. Fan group Football Supporters Europe (FSE), which last week called prices “extortionate” and “astronomical”, responded to the move by saying FIFA was offering too little.

It described the creation of the new ticket category as “nothing more than an appeasement tactic due to the global negative backlash” and claimed few fans would benefit.

“Based on the allocations publicly available, this would mean that at best a few hundred fans per match and team would be lucky enough to take advantage of the \$60 prices, while the vast majority would still have to pay extortionate prices, way higher than at any tournament before,” the group said.