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England's hopes hanging by a thread as Australia press for victory



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Fame and followers to the forefront as Paul faces Joshua

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SPORT

FIFA ARAB CUP QATAR 2025

FOOTBALL

Super sub Hamdallah leads Morocco to Arab Cup triumph

SECOND-HALF SUBSTITUTE HAMDALLAH STRUCK TWICE, INCLUDING THE WINNER IN THE 100TH MINUTE

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Morocco were crowned FIFA Arab Cup champions after the Atlas Lions secured a dramatic 3-2 extra-time victory over Jordan in the final at the Lusail Stadium.

Second-half substitute Abderazak Hamdallah struck twice, including the winner in the 100th minute, to settle a gripping final that lived up to its billing as a clash between the tournament's best defence and most potent attack. Despite heavy downpour, 84,517 fans attended the final.

As the rain continued to tumble down in eastern Qatar and not long after the lights from the pre-match festivities were dimmed, Morocco's Oussama Tannane produced an extraordinary opening goal.

An errant Jordan pass, inside the Morocco half, saw Amin Zahzouh nip in to win possession and, in the same movement backheel a pass to Tannane. The forward took the slightest of glances, spotted Yazeed Abulaila off his line and launched a floating effort that sailed and dipped past the retreating Jordanian custodian.

Morocco dominated much of the first half, forcing a string of corners and saves from the Jordanian goalkeeper, while their well-drilled back line once again stood firm. Jordan threatened sporadically, but Morocco went into the break 1-0 ahead, having largely dictated the tempo.

Jordan emerged with renewed intensity after the interval and equalised within three minutes of the restart.

Ali Olwan, the tournament's leading scorer, nodded home on the top of the six-yard box after as a quickly-taken corner kick was sent in by Mohannad Abu Taha.

Midway through the second period, Mahmoud al-Mardi drove a shot into the Moroccan box that clattered off the hand of Achraf El Mahdoui – on in place of the injured Karim El Berkouui – that saw the referee summoned to check for a possible penalty.

The verdict was a positive one for Jamal Sellami's men. Up to the spot stepped Olwan, scorer of four penalties already in the tournament, and he went straight down the middle as El Mehdi Benabid went to his left and Jordan went 2-1 up.

Morocco refused to yield and coach Tariq Sektioui's substitutions proved decisive. Introduced in the 71st minute, Hamdallah made an immediate impact.

After sustained pressure, the striker equalised in the 88th minute, calmly finishing after a goalmouth scramble, with VAR confirming the goal.

A drama filled final few minutes firstly saw Morocco have a penalty shout waved away before Olwan wasted a one-on-one chance on the end of a long counter.

Jordan came close to snatching a winner in stoppage time, but Morocco's goalkeeper Benabid produced a crucial save to send the final into extra time.

With both sides pushing for glory, Morocco's experience told. In the 100th minute, Marwane Saadane slipped a precise pass into Hamdallah's path and the forward made no mistake, firing home his second of the night to restore Morocco's lead at 3-2.



Morocco's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the FIFA Arab Cup at the Lusail Stadium yesterday. (AFP)



Morocco's goalkeeper Mehdi Benabid, Morocco's midfielder Mohamed Rabie Hrimat and Jordan's forward Ali Olwan pose with the Golden Glove, Player of the Tournament and Golden Boot awards yesterday. (AFP)



Morocco's Abderazak Hamdallah scores their third goal during the FIFA Arab Cup final against Jordan at Lusail Stadium yesterday. (Reuters)



Morocco's players celebrate with the fans after winning the Arab Cup final yesterday. (AFP)

Jordan threw everything forward in the closing stages, registering several late efforts and forcing desperate defending, but Morocco's back line – so impressive throughout the tournament – held firm once more to see out the victory.

Last night's triumph is a massive positive for Moroccan football. In three days' time, regular team will be playing their opening game of the AFCON against Comoros in front of home support at Rabat.

Third-place match abandoned due to adverse weather

Meanwhile, the third-place match between Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates earlier in the day was indefinitely suspended due to adverse weather conditions.

The decision to award the third place winner will be decided in due course by the relevant committee within FIFA.

Football governing body FIFA said in a statement: "While the venue retained full operational integrity and the pitch remained in good condition, this action was taken by the referee and match officials to ensure the safety of all the players, fans and staff at the stadium."

AWARD WINNERS

Golden Ball for player of the tournament: Mohamed Hrimat (Morocco)

Golden Boot for top scorer: Ali Olwan (Jordan)

Golden Glove for best goalkeeper: Al Mehdi Benabid (Morocco)

CRICKET

England stagger to brink of series-deciding defeat

SNICKO TECHNOLOGY UNDER FIRE AGAIN AS LYON GOES PAST THE WICKETS TALLY OF MCGRATH

Reuters
Adelaide

Nearly four years of Ashes planning was left in smouldering ruins yesterday as England buckled under the heat and the pressure at Adelaide Oval to lurch towards a series-deciding defeat in the third test against Australia.

On a day when temperatures reached 40 degrees Celsius (104F) and fresh controversy erupted over the “Snicko” review technology, England were 213 for eight at stumps on day two, still 158 runs short of Australia’s first innings 371.

England captain Ben Stokes (45 not out) was battling cramp and Jofra Archer (30 not out) showed courage to keep the ninth wicket intact for 45 runs, but the duo’s late resistance could do little to make up for failures higher up the order. Leading 2-0 in the series, Australia need only draw the match to retain the urn they have held since 2017/18.

But there was little sign the hosts would be content with anything less than another crushing win after their comfortable victories in Perth and Brisbane.

There was certainly no easing back into the action for Australia’s returning captain Pat Cummins and recalled spinner Nathan Lyon, who combined to blitz England’s top order before lunch.

“Pretty proud about how the boys went about it,” Lyon told *TNT Sports*. “Pat’s been phenomenal as captain as always, but the effort from our fast bowlers to get them 213-8 off 68 overs it’s a pretty big



Australia's Nathan Lyon celebrates with team-mates after taking the wicket of England's Ollie Pope, caught by Josh Inglis, during the third Ashes Test at the Adelaide Oval yesterday. (Reuters)

effort so rest up, recover and we’ll have another crack in the morning.”

SNICKO IN THE SPOTLIGHT

England lost 3-5 in a collapse that may have snuffed out the last flicker of optimism from having earlier denied Australia a 400-plus total on a flat wicket.

Cummins threw his rehabilitated back into his work, removing Zak Crawley (9) caught behind in a partnership-breaking dismissal before Lyon struck with two wickets in four balls.

Lyon’s second dismissal was a peach, bowling Ben Duckett for 29 with a ball that gripped, turned and beat the outside edge.

It put the wily offspinner second on Australia’s all-time Test wickets list on 564, one ahead of pace great Glenn McGrath and behind only Shane Warne.

Lyon’s first wicket was a gift, though, as under-fire number three Ollie Pope surrendered it for three with a flick off his pads caught at midwicket.

Pope’s 10-ball knock was not quite what captain Stokes had in mind when he urged his players to “show a bit of dog” in the buildup to Adelaide, and further questions will be asked about his place in the Test setup.

Joe Root fell softly for 19, pushing needlessly at a Cummins delivery to nick behind, leaving Eng-

land 71 for four.

Saddled with an improbable rescue mission, Stokes was rapped on the helmet by a brutish Mitchell Starc bouncer but the England captain dug in grimly with Harry Brook for most of the second session.

It took a special delivery from all-rounder Cameron Green to break their 56-run stand, the ball ripping back sharply off the seam to catch an edge off Brooks’s bat through to wicketkeeper Alex Carey.

A Snicko controversy had engulfed day one and a new one flared late on day two.

England wicketkeeper Jamie Smith was at the centre of the con-

fusion, first surviving a caught-behind appeal when on 16 then being given out caught behind for 22 when he appeared to completely miss a Cummins ball.

With third umpire Chris Gafaney having to rule on both decisions, Snicko only appeared to muddy the waters rather than clear up matters.

Australia paceman Mitchell Starc said Snicko needed to be “sacked” after Smith’s earlier reprieve, while Smith left the field furious when he was eventually dismissed.

When focus shifted back to the cricket, England ended up losing 3-9 to fall to 168 for eight courtesy of a two-wicket burst from pacer

Scott Boland before Archer joined Stokes to push England past 200.

“Disappointing, I suppose,” England assistant coach Marcus Trescothick said of the tourists’ day.

“We know we’re behind the game again, in the situation we currently stand.

“We’ve just got to keep digging in and keep scrapping away and seeing what we can do,” Trescothick added.

BRIEF SCORES

England 213 for 8 (Stokes 45*, Brook 45, Archer 30*, Cummins 3-54, Boland 2-31, Lyon 2-51) **trail Australia 371** (Carey 106, Khawaja 82, Archer 5-53) **by 158 runs.**



England's Ben Stokes and Jofra Archer bump fists at stumps on day two of the third Ashes Test yesterday. (Reuters)

THIRD TEST

Conway, Latham in 323 opening stand as WI wilt

AFP
Mount Maunganui

Devon Conway and Tom Latham plundered a poor West Indies attack yesterday for a mammoth opening partnership on day one of the third Test in Mount Maunganui as New Zealand piled up 334-1.

Conway ended the day 178 not out and captain Latham was out just before the close for 137.

The pair put on 323, the second highest opening partnership for New Zealand, only bettered by Glenn Turner and Terry Jarvis’s 387 stand against the West Indies in Georgetown in 1972.

It was only the eighth time New Zealand had registered a stand in excess of 300 in Tests.

“I’m pretty grateful to be part of that partnership,” Conway said of his stand with Latham.

“A lot of credit needs to go to Tom with the way he played.

“Quite often throughout that partnership, he just reminded me about looking straight, you know, be there, be present, don’t look too far ahead.”

Conway said it was the best partnership he had been in but he had been unaware of how close they were to setting a New Zealand record.

Conway batted all day in facing 279 balls for his second century of



New Zealand's Tom Latham (left) celebrates his century with Devon Conway during day one of the third Test against West Indies at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui yesterday. (AFP)

the calendar year, but his first at home since January 2022 against Bangladesh in Christchurch.

He scored 153 against Zimbabwe in August.

Nightwatchman Jacob Duffy was on nine at the close of play.

The 34-year-old Conway brought up his sixth Test century from 147 balls, and stroked 25 fours during his 279-ball stay.

Latham’s 15th Test century contained 15 fours and a six as he faced 264 balls.

Conway and captain Latham were flawless. For the first two sessions the West Indies toiled without so much as a single lbw shout.

Early in the third session they finally created a chance, but Latham was dropped by wicketkeeper Tevin Imlach off the bowling of Anderson Phillip when on 104 and New Zealand on 253.

The marathon partnership justified Latham’s decision to bat first on a green-looking wicket that is tipped to suit spin later in the match.

The West Indies seamers found good movement off the grassy surface in the opening overs, bowling tight lines which had both Conway and Latham defending cautiously, but they became more aggressive once the new ball was seen off.

West Indies skipper Roston Chase said he would have bowled had he won the toss.

At a suggestion spin would play a part later in the match said he would “have to see it to believe it”.

But after just 22 overs, Chase was on to bowl his offspin, and ended up bowling 19 overs throughout the day.

Kemar Roach was the best of the bowlers, taking the lone wicket for figures of 1-63 from 17 overs.

He walked off with a potential muscle injury after the second to last over of the day, and is in doubt for the rest of the Test.

West Indies assistant coach Rayon Griffith said the New Zealand batters put on a clinic, but insisted the match wasn’t over.

“The game is still in progress,” Griffith said. “We’ve been through this before. We will come better tomorrow.”

New Zealand included spinner Ajaz Patel in their side for his first home Test in five years. Tom Blundell returned to keep wicket after missing the previous Test with injury.

New Zealand lead the three match series 1-0, after a draw in the first Test in Christchurch, and a nine-wicket win in Wellington.

BRIEF SCORES

Stumps New Zealand 334 for 1 (Conway, 178*, Latham 137, Roach 1-63) **vs West Indies**

Lyon roars on return to Ashes stage in Adelaide

Adelaide: After an upsetting omission from the second Ashes Test in Brisbane, spinner Nathan Lyon was all smiles yesterday as he celebrated his recall to the Australian XI with a two-wicket burst that launched a day of pain for England at Adelaide Oval. Lyon teamed up with recalled skipper Pat Cummins to blitz England’s top order before lunch on a scorching day two. By stumps, the tourists were 213 for eight with their hopes of turning the series around all but gone. Inserted into the Australian attack early, Lyon struck with his third ball to have Ollie Pope caught for three. Three balls later, he bowled opener Ben Duckett for 29 with a peach of a delivery that beat the bat’s outside edge before clipping the top of off-stump. The Duckett wicket put Lyon second on Australia’s all-time list for test wickets with 564, one better than pace great Glenn McGrath. Only legspin king Shane Warne has more (708). Rarely one to rave about milestones, Lyon made it clear this one felt special. “I hadn’t really thought about it just yet, but I grew up idolising Shane Warne, Glenn McGrath and these guys,” he told reporters after an exhausting day in the field. “To be able to take over or equal Glenn, or however you want to put it, it’s pretty humbling to be honest with you, and it’s something that I’ll look back at the end of my career, or even tonight, and sit back and try and have a moment.” Two weeks ago, Lyon was stewing about being dropped for a

first home Test since 2012. He said he was “filthy” (angry) with selectors for overlooking him at the Gabba where his replacement Michael Neser took a five-wicket haul in the fourth innings to help Australia win by eight wickets. But yesterday 38-year-old Lyon dismissed the idea he had extra motivation to prove himself at Adelaide Oval, saying it was “business as usual”. “To be honest with you, I’ve been around this group long enough to understand my role in the side, and it’s an amazing group to be a part of,” he said. “(I’m) just extremely grateful for that opportunity, I guess. So, yeah, emotions were, as usual, nervous, but that’s me.” Following a long recovery from a back injury, Cummins also enjoyed a fine return with the ball in his first Test since the West Indies tour in July. Bowling 14 overs, the biggest load among Australia’s seamers, Cummins dismissed opener Zak Crawley, Joe Root and wicketkeeper Jamie Smith, all three batters nicking behind the wicket. Lyon said Cummins had “worked his backside off” on his rehabilitation and never doubted he would return with a bang. “Extremely proud of the way he’s gone about it and that’s why he’s a pretty inspirational leader,” he added.

AUSTRALIA’S TOP TEST WICKET-TAKERS

- * Shane Warne: 708 at average of 25.41
- * **Nathan Lyon: 564 at 30.14**
- * Glenn McGrath: 563 at 21.64
- * Mitchell Starc: 420 at 26.59
- * Dennis Lillee: 355 at 23.92

SPOTLIGHT

WADA names India as worst doping offender for the third successive time

AFP
New Delhi

India tops the rankings of global sports drug cheats for a third straight year, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) said, marking a dubious hat-trick for the country.

India’s National Anti Doping Agency (NADA) collected 7,113 urine and blood samples out of which 260 tested positive in 2024, the international watchdog said in its annual report published late Tuesday.

The findings are a major blow to India, which is preparing to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games – an event seen as a stepping stone for the country’s ambition of hosting the 2036 Olympics.

Athletics (76) had the highest number of doping cases last year followed by weightlifting (43) and wrestling (29).

In July, under-23 wrestling champion and Paris Olympics quarter-finalist Reetika Hooda tested positive and was provisionally suspended.

At India’s University Games earlier this month, there were reports of just one ath-

lete showing up for some track and field events after others fled because of the presence of anti-doping officials.

India, the world’s most populous country with 1.4 billion people, was also ranked number one doping offender in 2022 and 2023.

French athletes accounted for the next highest number on the list in 2024 with 91 positive cases, while Italy were third with 85.

Russia and the United States come next at 76 cases each followed by Germany (54) and China (43).

NADA defended their fight against doping after the report.

“In recent years, India has witnessed a significant strengthening of its anti-doping framework,” it said in a statement yesterday.

“To tackle the menace of doping in sports, NADA India has not only increased the number of tests but also increased the emphasis on education and awareness,” the statement added.

NADA added that up to December 16, the number of tests conducted this year had been 7,068 with 110 positive cases.

The WADA report comes months after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) raised concerns about rampant use of performance-enhancing drugs in India and urged the country to set its house in order.

The Indian Olympic Association in August formed a new anti-doping panel after the IOC flagged India’s poor record.

The government also passed a new national anti-doping bill to enhance enforcement, expand testing facilities and “ensure the highest standards of integrity” in sports.

TENNIS

Kyrgios says few men would face top woman

Reuters
Bengaluru

Nick Kyrgios believes few male players would accept the chance to face a top woman as the maverick Australian prepares to take on women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka in a "Battle of the Sexes" exhibition later this month.

While many consider the December 28 meeting between Kyrgios and four-times Grand Slam champion Sabalenka in Dubai as nothing more than entertainment, critics believe it risks undermining the reputation of women's tennis.

Women's trailblazer Billie Jean King famously defeated the 55-year-old former Grand Slam

champion Bobby Riggs in a similar showdown, and Kyrgios conceded he was a bit nervous.

"I think my chances are really high. I'm very confident in my ability," Kyrgios said with a smile during the World Tennis League exhibition tournament in the south Indian city of Bengaluru on Wednesday.

"It's going to be fun, but also I'm a bit nervous. I like doing things that are outside the box. Honestly, not many males in my position would have done that and taken the opportunity."

Unlike Riggs, Kyrgios is still an active player on the men's circuit even though he has played only five professional matches in 2025 because of injuries that have dogged his career.

The former world number 13

had said in September that women cannot return men's serves and he would defeat Sabalenka without having to try 100% but added the match would increase respect between the men's and women's tours. Sabalenka said this month men were "biologically stronger" than women but her clash with the former Wimbledon finalist was not about that and the event would only help bring women's tennis to a higher level.

Kyrgios, a major draw on and off the court with his natural talent and unapologetic personality, said he was unsure how the Dubai event would unfold.

"I don't know what's going to happen, we'll see," he added.

"I've been in a lot of controversies in my whole career and this is another thing I get to experience."



BOXING

Fame and followers to the forefront as Paul faces Joshua

JOSHUA PROMISED \$50MN FOR NETFLIX-STREAMED FIGHT

Reuters
Miami

Jake Paul and Anthony Joshua will bring another year of seismic shifts in boxing to an end in Miami on Friday night in a mismatch that illustrates how much the sport has changed, with online fame now almost as important as punching power.

YouTube-turned-pugilist Paul, who is stepping up from cruiserweight, takes on the former heavyweight champ seeking to burnish his reputation against the 36-year-old Briton, who was knocked down four times as he lost his most recent fight, an IBF heavyweight title bout with Daniel Dubois in September 2024.

"You know, it's boxing, boxing skill, boxing on the outside. He's obviously going to come forward, bring the pressure, be the bigger man. And it's just being slick, float like a butterfly, sting like a bee," Paul said, channelling former boxing great Muhammad Ali.

While Ali took on a few odd-but-lucrative engagements in his time, such as a mixed-rules fight with professional wrestler Antonio Inoki in 1976, he would hardly recognise boxing's new world, even if money is still the main motivator.

Joshua, whose career began an alarming slide after he lost his four heavyweight belts to Andy Ruiz in a shocking upset in 2019, has been promised a reputed \$50mn plus bonuses for the fight, which will be shown on streaming platform Netflix.

The Netflix audience brings together die-hard boxing fans who will be eager to see what Joshua



Jake Paul (left) and Anthony Joshua face off during the press conference at The Fillmore Miami Beach. (AFP)

has left in the tank, and youthful admirers of Paul, with the former hoping Joshua wins convincingly.

"I heard people say like, 'oh, I'm not really into boxing, but I'm watching this fight,'" Joshua told a press conference yesterday.

"But no one's really coming up to me saying anything about Jake, or they want me to knock him out. Just positive vibes."

BIZARRE FIGHT

Leveraging his fame, Paul's path in boxing has taken him through former basketball player Nate

Robinson and retired MMA fighters Ben Askren, Tyron Woodley and Anderson Silva, as well as a bizarre fight with a 57-year-old Mike Tyson.

However, Swedish heavyweight Otto Wallin, who retired on his stool when he fought Joshua in Riyadh two years ago, told Reuters that Joshua possesses the kind of power that could see Paul get seriously hurt in the fight.

"When you're in that ring, it's a dangerous place to be, and anything can happen," Joshua said ominously.

"You hope your opponent leaves the ring safely, but if they don't, you know, you still have to go to bed and knowing that you've just done your job."

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Paul still believes that he belongs in the ring with a boxer light-years ahead of him in terms of reputation and skill.

"I believe he (Joshua) is locked in and knows that this could potentially be the biggest loss, and will be the big loss of his career, and he has so much to lose in this fight," Paul said.

FORMULA 1

Ricciardo clears Verstappen for No. 3 switch

Reuters
London

Max Verstappen will finally race a Formula 1 season with his favourite number on the nose of his car in 2026.

The Red Bull star confirmed that he will switch to No. 3 next season after former teammate Daniel Ricciardo gave him permission.

Ricciardo had the No. 3 when Verstappen joined the F1 grid with Toro Rossi in 2015, so the Dutchman went with No. 33. The two were also teammates with Red Bull from 2016-18. Verstappen won his first world title in 2021 and accepted the traditional honour of driving with the No. 1.

He retained No. 1 for four years until McLaren's Lando Norris won this year's title by just two points. That left Verstappen to make another number switch.

Rules state that a number must be out of F1 for two years before another driver can request it. Ricciardo, who retired after most recently racing for Red Bull's sister team RB in 2024, granted Verstappen his permission to use No. 3.

"My favourite number has always been 3, apart from No. 1. We can now swap, so it'll be No. 3," Verstappen told Viaplay, via Formula1.com. "No. 33 was always fine, but I just like one 3 better than two. I always said it represented double luck, but

I've already had my luck in Formula 1."

The only drivers to win a world championship racing with the No. 3 have been Jacques Villeneuve in 1997 and Michael Schumacher in 2000, according to Motorsport.com. The FIA also approved Verstappen's switch, with no other driver making a number change for 2026. Racing Bulls rookie Arvid Lindblad has chosen to join the grid with No. 41.

Having the defending champion race with the No. 1 on his car was mandatory until 2014 when drivers had the option of keeping their previous number. Seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton has been the only driver to decline the option during that time, choosing to stick with his No. 44.

Norris, 26, said his decision to switch from No. 4 to No. 1 was a matter of pride for his entire McLaren team. "It's tradition, it's there for a reason," Norris recently told Sky Sports News.

"It's there because you can go and try grab it and you can work hard to try and get it. All of us as a team that gets to have a role in McLaren, or my car, will get to wear that with pride," Norris said. "It's all my mechanics, my engineers, everyone that's part of McLaren gets to have that acknowledgment, too. So, it's not for me, it's for them as well. It's their pride, knowing that they put a lot of work and effort into everything that they can also go, 'We're No. 1.'"

Vuelta to start in Monaco next year

The 2026 Vuelta a Espana will start with a time-trial in Monaco and finish in Granada, after organisers on Wednesday unveiled what they say will be one of the most difficult routes in the race's history.

Four medium-mountain stages and six mountain stages have been scheduled for a total elevation gain of 58,156 metres, far more than both next year's Tour de France or Giro d'Italia. The second stage will also start from Monaco before heading into France and Andorra and then into Spain.

"This will be one of the most demanding editions in history," said race director Javier Guillen, who is hoping the route will attract a strong field. Tadej Pogacar has not competed in the Vuelta since coming third on his debut in 2019 but organisers are confident he will eventually return to the race.

FOCUS

MotoGP's sprint format has paid off as audiences soar: Dorna chief

Reuters
London

MotoGP's sprint format is no longer an experiment but its Chief Sporting Officer Carlos Ezpeleta knows it remains one of the championship's most contentious talking points, even as TV audiences soared this season to watch the shorter format.

Introduced in the 2023 season, the half-length races have turbocharged television audiences with a viewership increase of 26% on Saturdays while overall TV audiences are up 9%, according to figures published by MotoGP.

Moreover, the 22-round season brought 3.6mn fans to race tracks, breaking nine attendance records as MotoGP celebrated one of its most memorable seasons yet when Ducati's Marc Marquez returned to the summit with his seventh crown.

To the outsider, it looks like a win-win: more races, more viewers, more money. To the riders, however, 22 Grand Prix races and 22 sprints is a different proposition that results in a much heavier workload.

Formula One has sprint races only at select circuits and no more than six a season, but Ezpeleta left little room for ambiguity about its future as MotoGP tries to strike a balance between sporting tradition and accessibility for new audiences.

"We think having the same format every weekend is really crucial to our sport, especially in a phase where we're so focused on capturing new fans," Ezpeleta told Reuters.

"Having a sport that's easy to understand, that's the same every weekend... The same points are on the table every weekend. It gives that consistency of a world championship and we think that's very important."



Ducati Lenovo Team's Marc Marquez celebrates on the podium after the Japanese Grand Prix at the Mobility Resort Motegi in Motegi, Tochigi prefecture on September 28, 2025. (AFP)

DEFENCE OF SPRINTS

Ezpeleta's defence of sprints comes despite persistent concerns from riders over the dilution of the traditional Sunday Grand Prix and injury risk with fewer practice sessions. But Ezpeleta rejected the idea that sprints undermine MotoGP's marquee Sunday races.

"I don't see that, the points difference is so big," he said.

"It was always going to take some time for the riders and teams to get their head around the format of the weekend, where you want to push and where you want to be more passive.

"Of course, injuries are a big

part of our sport and we'll do anything to prevent that. But at the end, it's action on track and through experience, they've improved a lot."

INCREASE IN ATTENDANCES AND AUDIENCES

From the perspective of Dorna, the organisers of MotoGP, the numbers justify the approach.

Ezpeleta said the inclusion of sprints on Saturday has increased both attendance and TV audiences, describing it as their "biggest and most global season yet" as the championship reported a 12% rise in global fans to 632mn in 2025.

The shift in MotoGP's audience profile has only strengthened Dorna's resolve, with more than half their audience under 35.

"We are the sport of raw emotion, grit and of being defiant," he said proudly. "The pace of it, the risk - everything that is centric to MotoGP - has really helped establish a young fan base. I think

it's something that a lot of sports would kill to have."

GLOBAL EXPANSION PLAN

Despite the longer calendar, Europe remains a hotspot for MotoGP with 14 of the 22 Grands Prix held on the continent, including four in Spain.

But Ezpeleta said that could change in the future with global expansion central to the plan.

"In terms of markets, the US and the UK are very strategic to us and we continue to have focus in southeast Asia, including India and China," he said.

"They are two huge markets for the motorcycle industry, but for MotoGP also, and South America as well. That doesn't mean that we're forgetting about our more mature markets like Spain, Italy and France. "But we do have this focus for growth. Down the line, we will have more races outside Europe, that's what we're pushing for."

SPOTLIGHT

Argentina, Spain to meet at Lusail Stadium for Finalissima on March 27

Argentina won the previous edition of the Finalissima, beating Italy 3-0

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Spain, the European champions, and Argentina, the Copa America winners, will compete in the Finalissima super final on March 27, 2026 at the Lusail Stadium in Qatar, the Local Organising Committee (LOC) said yesterday.

The match will kick off at 9pm local time. Further details on match organisation and ticket sales will be communicated in the coming weeks.

For Argentina, this match marks a symbolic return to the scene of their exhilarating victory over France in the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 final, where La Albiceleste ended a 36-year wait to reclaim football's most coveted prize. The match, which will take place less than three months before the kick-off of the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada, will be a chance to gauge the form of Argentina, the reigning world champions, and Spain, one of the favourites for the North American tournament.

Argentina won the previous edition of the Finalissima, beating Italy 3-0 with goals from Lautaro Martinez, Angel Di Maria and Paulo Dybala in June 2022 at Wembley Stadium. Spain currently top the FIFA world rankings ahead of Argentina in second.

One of the main attractions of the match will be the meeting between Argentina's Lionel Messi and Spanish prodigy Lamine Yamal – the past and present of Barcelona. Spain and Argentina have met 14 times, with both teams winning six times each.

At the World Cup, Spain are in Group H alongside Uruguay, Saudi Arabia and Cape Verde. Argentina have been drawn in Group J with Algeria, Austria and Jordan.

HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, Minister of Sports and Youth and Chairman of the LOC, said: "Qatar is proud



One of the main attractions of the match will be the meeting between Argentina's Lionel Messi and Spanish prodigy Lamine Yamal – the past and present of Barcelona.

to host this prestigious match between two champions. We have a track record of delivering world-class sports events, providing an exceptional experience for fans, supporters and media. Hosting Finalissima further demonstrates the trust our partners continue to show in Qatar."

Qatar's hosting of Finalissima comes following a record-breaking football season in 2025, which showcased the country's exceptional organisational capabilities and the international football community's

trust in its ability to deliver world-class football events.

This includes Qatar's hosting of the first 48-team FIFA U-17 World Cup, which saw 104 matches played at a single venue and the AGCFF U-17 Gulf Cup. Qatar also hosted the U-23 Gulf Cup, while simultaneously delivering the final three matches of the FIFA Intercontinental Cup during the rest days of the FIFA Arab Cup, which conclude at the Lusail Stadium yesterday.

UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin said:

"This match symbolises the unification of two footballing continents and showcases the global reach of our sport in such a prestigious fixture. We look forward to an unforgettable evening of elite football and international celebration."

CONMEBOL President Alejandro Dominguez added: "This showpiece game is more than a competition, it is a symbol of collaboration and respect between confederations, and an opportunity for fans to enjoy a truly historic occasion."

INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

Immense Safonov earns praise for penalty prowess

When a penalty shootout comes around, teams rarely take the win with a narrow 2-1 victory.

However, the final of the FIFA Intercontinental Cup between Paris Saint-Germain and Flamengo at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium on Wednesday was settled by such an anomaly.

The reigning European champions and their opponents were locked in a stalemate, and the French club feared that their dream of further title success would slip away in a penalty shootout, but then an unexpected hero emerged in the shape of Matvey Safonov. No one saw him coming to the rescue, especially after the French press expected Lucas Chevalier to return between the Parisian sticks.

After all, Jorginho expertly converted a penalty in the 62nd minute past the Russian, and nothing at that point suggested that he would cause such an upset for the Flamengo players by literally getting inside their heads. While he failed to deny Nicolas de la Cruz's opening spot-kick in the decisive shootout, leaving PSG trailing, Safonov, named the player of the match, went on to save attempts from Saul Niguez, Pedro, Leo Pereira and Luiz Araujo in quick succession in what was a truly outstanding performance.

"He had a great match and of course we all thanked him," said Portuguese defender Nuno Mendes, who had nothing but praise for his goalkeeper after the match. "We're really pleased for him and for the team. I think he showed how good he is to-



PSG goalkeeper Matvey Safonov celebrates with the Intercontinental Cup trophy.

day. We've been practising penalties, and thankfully, today he was on hand to save them. He stopped four from the spot in a great penalty shootout."

After arriving from Krasnodar in July 2024, the Russian goalkeeper spent much of the following season playing second fiddle to Gianluigi Donnarumma, the architect of Paris Saint-Germain's numerous successes in recent months.

While the Italian, newly crowned The Best FIFA Men's Goalkeeper 2025, made

the move to Manchester City in September, the Russian - remarkably born on the exact same day - saw Lucas Chevalier join the club as the presumed new number one. However, Safonov was handed his chance when the former Lille player recently picked up an injury. Suffice to say, he seized the opportunity, and was hailed as a hero by his teammates after the match.

"We've all congratulated him; we're very pleased with him. He was fully focused. He waited for his time to come and showed

what he was capable of," said French international Warren Zaire-Emery afterwards. "He's settled in very nicely. He was quick to learn French and is always ready to listen. The team is his primary focus, and he always gives his all. We need players like him who are there to help the group as a whole."

The 26-year-old shot-stopper had previously shown his worth in a penalty shootout nearly a year ago. In the last match of 2024, PSG almost got knocked out in the first round of the Coupe de France away to Lens, but Safonov, on duty in the national competition, denied them twice from twelve yards.

His team emerged victorious in the end and lifted the trophy a few months later. Despite everything, the Russian still dazzled his manager Luis Enrique on Wednesday, and the coach will have no regrets about his decision to place his trust in him in Doha. "I think it's the first time I've seen my keeper save four penalties in a shootout. We're extremely pleased to have won this trophy, and I believe we deserve it," said the Spanish coach, while refusing to speculate on any potential reshuffling of his goal-keeping hierarchy.

Whatever the case, PSG's exceptional 2025 is coming to an end. If someone had told their fans following the win at Lens that a year on, another four saves from Safonov in a penalty shootout would secure them a sixth title in 12 months, they probably would not have believed it. Now who knows what the future holds for the club from the French capital?

Ecuadorian footballer Pineida shot and killed

Quito: Ecuadoran footballer Mario Pineida was shot and killed in the port city of Guayaquil on Wednesday, his team said. Guayaquil has become a hotspot for gang violence linked to drug trafficking and several football players in Ecuador have been targeted in recent months.

Pineida, 33, was part of Ecuador's national team for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup qualifiers, but was not selected for the squad for the 2022 finals in Qatar. He also played for Fluminense in 2022.

In a post on X, his club, Barcelona SC, said it "regrets to inform, with deep sorrow, that it has been officially notified of the death of our player Mario Pineida, an event that occurred following an attack against him" in Guayaquil. Pineida's death was confirmed by the interior ministry, which said it has assigned a special police unit to the case.

Digital news outlet Primicias reported Pineida was attacked by two people riding motorcycles, who opened fire on him, his mother and another woman. In September, three players from Ecuador's second division were killed, with one of them allegedly being linked to sports betting. A month later, local footballer Bryan Angula was wounded in a shooting.

Ecuador, once one of Latin America's safest countries, has become a key cocaine transit hub between top producers Colombia and Peru, and consumers around the world. Car bombings, shootings and extortion have been on the rise in Guayaquil, which recorded 1,900 murders between January and September – the highest toll in Ecuador.

REAL MADRID SCRAPE PAST THIRD-TIER TALAVERA IN SPANISH CUP

A Kylian Mbappe brace helped Real Madrid avoid an upset at third-tier Talavera as Xabi Alonso's side scraped home 3-2 to stamp their ticket into the Spanish Cup last 16 on Wednesday. Talavera may be only 100km from the Spanish capital but their modest 6,000-capacity Estadio El Prado is a world away from Real's Santiago Bernabeu fortress. Yet Alonso's 20-time Cup winners only narrowly avoided a potential banana skin. Mbappe opened the scoring from the spot and Manu Farranto's own goal in first-half injury time put the regal visitors in control at the break.

But Nahuel Arroyo's 80th-minute goal for the modest hosts set up a nerve-tangling ending. Mbappe fired in from outside the box with two minutes left on the clock only for Gonzalo Di Renzo to score in the first minute of injury time as Talavera went down fighting.

Elsewhere, high-flying La Liga outfit Villarreal came unstuck 2-1 at second-tier Racing Santander. Another second-division club Albacete celebrated knocking out La Liga's Celta Vigo 3-0 on penalties after the two sides were locked together 2-2 after extra time.

NIGERIA ALLEGE DR CONGO FIELDLED INELIGIBLE PLAYERS IN WORLD CUP PLAYOFF

Nigeria have submitted a petition to FIFA alleging the Democratic Republic of Congo fielded ineligible players in their African qualification play-off for next year's World Cup, a federation (NFF) spokesperson said.

DR Congo beat Nigeria on penalties last month to keep alive their hopes of appearing at the tournament in North America, and are set to compete in an inter-confederation playoff in March where six teams will chase two places at the 48-team finals.

FOCUS

Cherki inspires City, Newcastle strike late to reach League Cup semis

AFP

Manchester, United Kingdom

Rayan Cherki's stunning strike put Manchester City on their way to the League Cup semi-finals with a 2-0 win over Brentford, while holders Newcastle beat Fulham 2-1 yesterday. City face the Magpies in the last four, while Chelsea will take on Arsenal or Crystal Palace.

Ahead of the hectic festive Premier League schedule, Pep Guardiola could afford to give Erling Haaland the night off as his side secured a sixth consecutive victory in all competitions.

Haaland was left on the bench among seven changes by Guardiola at the Etihad. "We have had a run of a lot of games for Erling for example and Ruben (Dias) and the other ones and they have to be ready," Guardiola said.

Abdulkodir Khusanov was one of those handed a rare start and the Uzbek defender was lucky just to see a yellow card for chopping down Kevin Schade when the German looked set to run through on goal. Guardiola was forced to field the in-form Phil Foden for longer than he hoped as the England international replaced the injured Oscar Bobb after just 20 minutes.

But it was Cherki who unlocked the Brentford rearguard action in

style 10 minutes before half-time. The Frenchman collected a corner cleared to the edge of the box, cut inside onto his right foot and unleashed an unstoppable effort into the top corner.

The home side's second was much more fortunate as Savinho's shot looped over Hakon Valdimarsson via a deflection off Kristoffer Ajer 20 minutes from time.

City won the League Cup four years in a row under Guardiola between 2018 and 2021. But this is the first time in five seasons they have progressed to the last four.

Newcastle are back in the semi-finals thanks to Lewis Miley's stoppage time header at St. James' Park. A dismal performance in los-

ing 1-0 to local rivals Sunderland on Sunday heaped the pressure on Eddie Howe's men to respond.

Yoane Wissa opened his Newcastle account on his first start after just 10 minutes but Sasa Lukic quickly levelled for the visitors. The tie appeared destined for penalties until Miley got a flick to Sandro Tonali's enticing delivery.

Newcastle ended a 70-year wait to win a domestic trophy when they won the League Cup last season and Howe is eager for more.

Chelsea booked their place in the two-legged semi-finals early next year with a 3-1 win at Cardiff on Tuesday. Arsenal host Palace in the final quarter-final tie next week.



Manchester City's Rayan Cherki (left) shoots during the League Cup quarter-final at the Etihad stadium in Manchester. (AFP)