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CHESS

Carlsen conquers Doha field, wins 20th world title

Bibisara Assaubayeva, the 21-year-old phenom from Kazakhstan, corners women's title glory

By Sports Reporter
Doha

In a high-tension atmosphere that crackled with the energy of a championship fight, world number one Magnus Carlsen of Norway once again ascended the mountaintop, defeating relentless Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan 2.5-1.5 to claim the 2025 FIDE World Blitz Championship title.

With this victory, the Norwegian maestro didn't just add another trophy to his cabinet; he secured his ninth world blitz title and reached a staggering milestone of 20 world championships across all formats.

Carlsen got richer by €70,000, his second such paycheck following his Rapid title win three days ago.

After dropping the first game to Abdusattorov, Carlsen bounced back to win Game 2 and Game 4. His 2.5-1.5 victory, capped by a final win with the Black pieces, earned him the championship. After a quick handshake with Abdusattorov, a delighted Carlsen got up from his chair, clasped his hands and broke into a rare but wide smile before facing the table to put the pieces back on the board.

For the fourth time in his legendary career, Carlsen stands alone as the undisputed king of both speed and strategy, wearing the 'double crown' of Rapid and Blitz champion simultaneously.



THE 20 WORLD TITLES

Chess star Magnus Carlsen has amassed a total of 20 World Championship titles:

- Classical:** 5 (2013, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021)
- Rapid:** 6 (2014, 2015, 2019, 2022, 2023, 2025)
- Blitz:** 9 (2009, 2014, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025)

In the semi-finals, Carlsen drew with Fabiano Caruana in the first two games before winning the third and fourth. Meanwhile, Abdusattorov defeated India's Arjun Erigaisi in the first and third games before drawing the third.

Reflecting on a hard-fought campaign, Abdusattorov did not hide his frustration after narrowly missing out on the title glory.

"I am disappointed, as I had hoped to win the title after entering the tournament as the fourth seed," the Uzbek star admitted. He pointed specifically to the high-tension moments against the eventual champion, noting that "during the tiebreaker against Carlsen, I tried to break the tie but was unable to do so in the crucial moves."

Despite the heartbreak on the board, Abdusattorov was full of praise for the host nation's delivery of the event. He described the tournament as 'exceptional in all organisational aspects' and extended his gratitude to the organisers, saying: "I thank the Qatar Chess Association for its efforts."

It was a stellar year for India's Erigaisi. Despite the narrow miss in the finals, Erigaisi's week in Doha remains a remarkable overall achievement highlighted by two Bronze medals.

Erigaisi has concluded 2025 as India's top-ranked player across all three formats - Classical, Rapid and Blitz.

On the global stage, the 22-year-old sits at World No 3 in Rapid and No 5 in both Classical and Blitz.

BIBISARA ASSAUBAYEVA'S MEMORABLE DAY IN QATAR
While Carlsen was cementing his legacy, a new chapter of greatness was being written in the women's bracket. Bibisara Assaubayeva, the 21-year-old phenom from Kazakh-



Winner Magnus Carlsen of Norway, second-placed Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan, joint third-placed Fabiano Caruana of the US and India's Arjun Erigaisi during the prize distribution ceremony of the FIDE World Blitz Championship in Doha yesterday. **PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil**

khstan, reminded the world why she is considered the premier blitz specialist of her generation.

Facing off against the seasoned two-time champion Anna Muzychuk, Assaubayeva displayed nerves of steel, matching her opponent's every move before pulling away to a 2.5-1.5 victory.

The win earned her a third world blitz title and a €40,000 payday, but the real prize lay in the future: her performance officially punched her ticket to the 2026 FIDE Women's Candidates Tournament.

The final day of the 2025 championships will be remembered as a bridge between eras. On one board, an established icon reached the unreachable number of 20 world titles, and on another, a young star secured her place among the legends of the game.

As Carlsen walked away with his 20th crown and Assaubayeva set her sights on the Candidates, the chess world was left with a familiar realisation: the kings and queens of the board may change, but the path to glory still runs through the absolute best.



Blitz champion Bibisara Assaubayeva, the 21-year-old phenom from Kazakhstan, second-placed Anna Muzychuk of Ukraine and joint third-placed Eline Roebers of the Netherlands and Zhu Jiner of China pose at the closing ceremony.

ANALYSIS

The 'Pearl of the chess world': Qatar 2025 shines on the global stage



Qatar Chess Association president Mohamed al-Mudahka during his speech at the closing ceremony of the World Rapid & Blitz Chess Championships at Qatar University in Doha yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The lights have dimmed on one of the most electric displays of mental athletics this year as the World Rapid & Blitz Chess Championships reached a thrilling conclusion in Qatar.

While the final standings saw a familiar face atop the podium, the road to victory was anything but predictable for the reigning king of the board.

In a tournament defined by high-stakes drama and organisational precision, Norwegian superstar Magnus Carlsen cemented his legacy once again.

At 35 years old, Carlsen navigated a treacherous field of competitors to secure both the rapid and blitz titles, though he admitted the

feat was far from a "sure thing." Reflecting on his victory, Carlsen acknowledged the immense pressure of facing the world's elite, noting that he felt fortunate to emerge on top against a field that pushed him to his absolute limits.

Mohammed al-Mudahka, President of the Qatar Chess Association (QCA), described the closing atmosphere as nothing short of distinguished.

He highlighted the "excitement and volatility" of the five-day marathon, pointing out that several top-ranked favourites were knocked out of contention during a ruthless final round.

Al-Mudahka was particularly pleased with the resilience shown by the men's semi-finalists, who survived a gauntlet of draws and point-draws to fight for the crown until the very last second.

Beyond the elite competition, the tournament served as a vital proving ground for local talent.

Al-Mudahka praised the Qatari national team members for their gutsy performances, noting that the experience gained by competing against world-class masters would be a cornerstone for the country's future development.

Dvorkovich echoed this sentiment, concluding that "chess has a home in Qatar," and famously referred to the host nation as "the pearl of the chess world."

The event, which drew a massive turnout of over 400 players representing 70 different nations, was hailed as a monumental success by FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich.

Speaking on the significance of the venue, Dvorkovich remarked: "We are very pleased to be here

in Doha, Qatar. This is a beautiful place with a rich and successful chess history, and players really love this place, which is why they have all come here to show their best qualities."

Dvorkovich further emphasised the unique position the tournament holds in the international sporting landscape.

"The World Rapid & Blitz Championships traditionally mark an exciting end to the year," he stated, adding that he viewed the 2025 edition as a "true chess festival."

Looking toward the horizon of the sport, the FIDE president said: "From the FIDE side, I can only say that we expect a real fight and a lot of fun for spectators. Moving forward, we will see more and more faster formats in chess, which is going to be great excitement for all players and fans!"

ANNOUNCEMENT

Injured Archer in England T20 World Cup squad

Wicketkeeper-batter Smith left out after difficult Ashes series

AFP
London

Fast bowler Jofra Archer was included in England's provisional T20 World Cup squad announced yesterday, despite suffering a left side strain that ruled him out of the final two Ashes Tests, but there was no place for wicketkeeper Jamie Smith.

Archer's fellow quick Josh Tongue has been called up to the T20 squad for the first time in a 15-man party to be captained by Harry Brook for the tournament in India and Sri Lanka beginning on February 7.

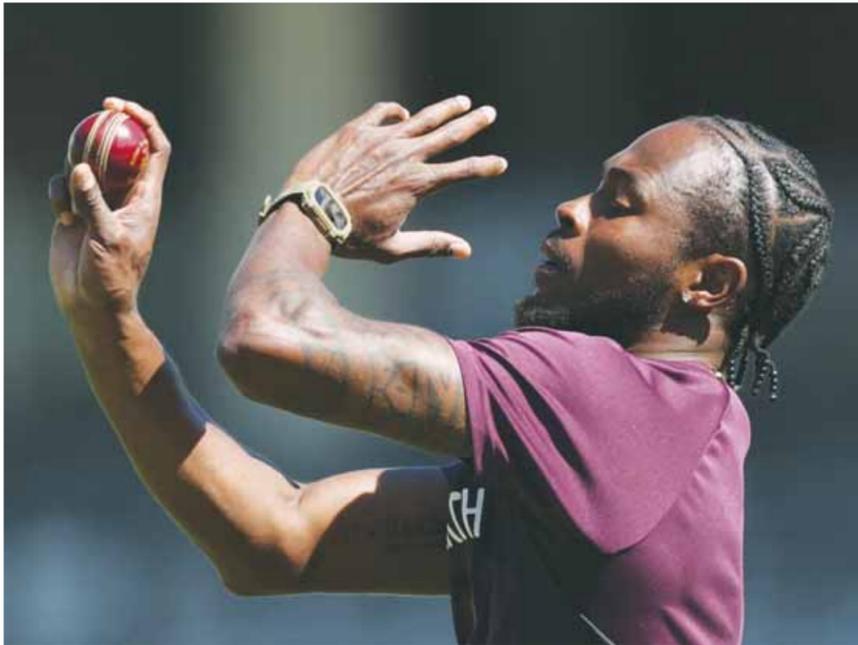
Archer will sit out the warm-up tour to Sri Lanka next month to continue his rehabilitation following the injury he sustained during the third Ashes Test in Adelaide earlier this month.

Brydon Carse will replace Archer in Sri Lanka for three one-day internationals and three Twenty20 internationals beginning on January 22.

There was no place, however, in the T20 World Cup squad for Smith who has endured a torrid Ashes tour of Australia, for all that is an unusual starting point in deciding selection for a white-ball tournament in the sub-continent.

The Surrey wicketkeeper-batsman smashed 60 from 26 balls in his last T20 appearance against the West Indies in June, but was rested due to his heavy all-format workload from the subsequent series against South Africa and Ireland.

But following four Tests in Australia where he has averaged a lowly 19.85 with the bat and endured several struggles behind the stumps, he has been left out entirely, with the experienced Jos Buttler and



England pacer Jofra Archer will play no further part in the Ashes in Australia after being diagnosed with a side strain. (Reuters)

Phil Salt providing England with keeping options for 2024 T20 World Cup semi-finalists England. Tongue, by contrast, has never played white-ball cricket but has enhanced his reputation with impressive Ashes displays in Adelaide and Melbourne, where a England's four-wicket win still left them 3-1 down heading into a series finale at Sydney starting Saturday.

And the 28-year-old was the top wicket-taker in last season's Hundred competition, taking 14 wickets in just six games. Test-match opening batsman Zak Crawley re-

turns to the ODI squad for the first time since December 2023.

Brook will lead his first World Cup campaign as white-ball captain, with England facing Bangladesh, West Indies, Italy and Nepal in Group C, with both managing director Rob Key and coach Brendon McCullum looking for an impressive showing after they came in for criticism following the Test team's tame Ashes series loss.

England T20 squad for World Cup and Sri Lanka tour: Harry Brook (capt), Rehan Ahmed,

Jofra Archer, Tom Banton, Jacob Bethell, Jos Buttler (wkt), Sam Curran, Liam Dawson, Ben Duckett, Will Jacks, Jamie Overton, Adil Rashid, Phil Salt, Josh Tongue, Luke Wood, Brydon Carse (Sri Lanka tour only)

England ODI squad for Sri Lanka tour: Harry Brook (capt), Rehan Ahmed, Tom Banton, Jacob Bethell, Jos Buttler (wkt), Brydon Carse, Zak Crawley, Sam Curran, Liam Dawson, Ben Duckett, Will Jacks, Jamie Overton, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Luke Wood.

FOCUS

Bethell looks to cement place as England number three batsman

Reuters
Melbourne

Jacob Bethell was not supposed to be England's headline act in the fourth Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground but he looked like a player who belonged when the tourists made their nervous chase for victory against Australia.

Replacing the dropped Ollie Pope at number three, 22-year-old Bethell had appeared on a hiding to nothing in Melbourne on a difficult pitch in front of a record crowd of 94,000.

His debut Ashes innings on Boxing Day, the biggest occasion in Australia's cricket calendar, was no fairytale, producing one run from five balls and a caught-behind dismissal off Australia's fifth-choice seamer Michael Neser.

His second innings, however, gave a glimpse of why England have such high hopes for the left-hander.

Bethell delivered a composed 40 off 46 balls to help prevent an Ashes whitewash and claim England's first Test win in Australia in 15 years.

"I was pretty nervous," he said.

"Not so much with the number of people, just the occasion. I've played in India where it feels like there's 160,000 watching."

Bethell was speaking of his stint in the Indian Premier League (IPL) where he played two games for Royal Challengers Bangalore.

While the IPL helped him get used to big crowds, it also meant

missing out on more first class cricket, including a one-off test against Zimbabwe in May.

Having shown great promise with three fifties during his debut test tour of New Zealand a year ago, Bethell was not selected for England until the fifth test of the home series against India and managed only single-figure scores.

He hardly needed to tap into his limited experience at test level on day two in Melbourne, though, with England facing a white ball-style chase of 175 runs.

On his second ball he lofted Jhye Richardson high over the slips cordon for a streaky four to get off the mark and had his second four off Scott Boland a few balls later when he stepped forward to drive him to the long-on fence.

Bethell looked in full control of the situation but his hopes of a maiden Ashes fifty were crushed by a sharp catch in the covers by Usman Khawaja and he marched off hugely disappointed.

Tailender Brydon Carse took the number three spot for the second innings in Melbourne but Bethell, who came out at four, would like it back for the fifth and final test in Sydney starting on January 4.

"I like number three. You come in when the ball is new and in some scenarios the ball's going all over the shop," he said.

"But in other scenarios it presents opportunities to score when bowlers are trying to take wickets and the field is attacking, there's loads of gaps.

"It's a double-edged sword, but I'm enjoying it."



Bhutan spinner takes eight wickets to set new T20 record

A left-arm spinner from Bhutan has become the first bowler to take eight wickets in a Twenty20 international.

Sonam Yeshey, 22, took 8-7 in his four overs during the third men's T20 international at home to Myanmar, who were all out for 45 replying to 127-9.

Yeshey went ahead of Syazrul Idrus, who took 7-8 for Malaysia against China in 2023, and Ali Dawood, who had 7-19 for Bahrain against Bhutan earlier this year, on the all-time T20 international best bowling list.

Yeshey made his T20 international debut in 2022 against Malaysia when he had figures of 3-16 and has gone on to take 37 wickets in 34 matches. In domestic and franchise T20 cricket there has never been an eight-wicket haul.

Colin Ackermann took 7-18 for Leicestershire Foxes against Birmingham Bears in England's T20 Blast in 2019.

Taskin Ahmed grabbed 7-19 for Durbar Rajshahi against Dhaka Capitals in the Bangladesh Premier League this year.

The best bowling figures in a women's T20 international are 7-0 by Indonesia's Rohmalia against Mongolia in 2024.

Pakistan's Afridi out of Big Bash League with knee injury

Pakistan fast bowler Shaheen Shah Afridi has picked up a knee injury in Australia's Big Bash League and will return home for rehabilitation ahead of the Twenty20 World Cup starting in February, his team Brisbane Heat said yesterday.

Afridi, 25, suffered a knee cartilage injury fielding during Saturday's win over Adelaide Strikers, Heat said in a statement.

"After consulting with the Pakistan Cricket Board's medical staff during the past 24 hours, it was agreed that Afridi would... return home for further treatment," it added.

Afridi, making his debut in the Australian franchise-based T20 league, took two wickets in four appearances for Heat.

"The BBL was everything I had heard it would be - lots of good, skilful cricket. I have enjoyed the challenge," Afridi said in a statement shared by the team.

Pakistan will begin their T20 World Cup campaign on February 7 with a group stage game against Netherlands in Colombo.

SPOTLIGHT

DeChambeau on LIV Golf extension: 'You never know'

Reuters
New York

In the wake of Brooks Koepka's early departure from LIV Golf, it's only natural that all eyes would turn to see if LIV's most popular star, Bryson DeChambeau, would similarly jump ship with one year left on his contract or sign an extension early.

If you're waiting for a clear answer, you'll have to keep waiting.

"It's confidential. I'm not going to share too much, but the conversations are in process," DeChambeau told social media outlet Flushing It Golf in a long-ranging interview.

DeChambeau left the door open on his future at LIV Golf, while the American also offered praise and positivity for his experience with the Saudi-backed league.

"We have to get to a place where both parties have a good understanding of one another," DeChambeau said of his readiness to sign an extension on a contract that expires after the 2026 season.

"It is getting to a place that makes sense for both sides. And, I think that can happen, but you never know. Life throws curve balls."

Koepka's deceptive pitch came in the form of an announcement by LIV Golf on Dec. 23 that the two sides had "amicably and mutually agreed" to part ways. With a reported year remaining on his LIV contract, Koepka said he wanted to prioritise spending more time with family.

"That was quite a shock to a lot of people," DeChambeau said.

"There was always rumblings, but ultimately, it was a shock when I saw it today... People make decisions for whatever their needs and wants are, and ultimately, you have to respect it and move on, and it feels like it was a mutual understanding and that's great."

DeChambeau did express excitement for his successful Crushers GC team and his pas-



USA's Bryson DeChambeau of Crushers GC plays a shot at the 8th tee during the second round of the LIV Golf Korea at Jack Nicklaus Golf Club in Incheon on May 3, 2025. (AFP)

sion for the potential growth of team golf. DeChambeau - who is among the LIV team captains that own 25% of their franchises - said his Crushers team has cleared \$20mn in revenue.

After expressing optimism at June's US Open about renegotiating his LIV Golf deal before the end of the year, DeChambeau hesitated to say whether an extension could be done before LIV Golf's first event of the new season in February at Riyadh.

"I don't know about before Riyadh, there's a lot of things to go through," he said.

"You know, it's a scenario that is very unique. With Brooks leaving, it definitely throws in some unique things. I've said it all along, I want to do this, I want to grow team golf across the globe. But it has to be right. And there's a lot of things that have to be done in order for it to be right, you know?"

"...It's going to be interesting to see what happens."

ATLETICO MADRID LEGEND COLLAR DIES AT 91: CLUB

Atletico Madrid on Monday announced the death at 91 of club legend Enrique Collar, who captained the team to a league title and three cup successes in the 1960s. "The red and white family loses a symbol who gave everything to take Atletico Madrid to the pinnacle of national and continental football," the club said in a statement.

The left winger scored 105 goals in 470 appearances for Atletico between 1953 and 1969 and captained the side for 10 years in the 1960s, making him the club's longest-serving skipper. He was on the scoresheet as Atletico defeated eternal rivals Real Madrid at the Bernabeu in the 1960 cup final, before winning further cups in 1961 and 1965.

His leadership also saw the Spanish capital's less fashionable team claim the 1965/66 league title in a decade where Real dominated the top flight. Collar also won the 1962 European Cup Winners' Cup and earned 16 caps for Spain, playing at the 1962 World Cup in Chile. He retired in 1970 after a season at Valencia.

SPOTLIGHT

The race to find Formula 1's first-ever woman champion

ITALIAN LELLA LOMBARDI WAS THE LAST WOMAN TO COMPETE IN AN F1 GRAND PRIX IN 1976

AFP
Nottingham, United Kingdom

Adozen girls whizzed around an English karting track, part of a pioneering drive to draw women into motorsports and maybe even race to the top in male-dominated Formula 1.

A special test day in October in Nottingham aimed to address a major gender gap in F1, one of the flashiest of sports.

Italian Lella Lombardi was the last woman to compete in an F1 Grand Prix in 1976, and the absence of women on the circuit is linked to young girls' limited exposure to motorsports, according to gender parity organisations.

More Than Equal, a non-profit that supports women drivers, said girls start karting two years later than boys on average. Seven-time F1 champion Lewis Hamilton, for example, got into the format aged just eight.

"These are the first steps that a girl could take," Cameron Biggs, coaching and academy pathway manager at Motorsport UK, told AFP.

"We're really trying to join the dots between grassroots and elite." The enthusiasm was palpable among the youngsters, who were mostly new to karting.

Some attended the taster day, supported by makeup company Charlotte Tilbury, after watching F1 while others were encouraged by their parents.

None seemed put off by F1's breakneck speed, the thrumming engines and the prospect of driving a vehicle years before they are old enough to have a driver's licence.

"On the second time, I came first and I'm very proud," beamed



British driver Skye Parker (also inset) takes part in a test training session at the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya in Montmeló, Barcelona province, on December 16. In the United Kingdom, often described as the cradle of Formula 1, efforts are being made at every level of motorsport to tackle gender inequality on the track and bring more girls into the paddock. (AFP)

11-year-old Megan. "I watch Formula 1 quite often, and so I kind of know how to get around the track," said Erin, also 11.

F1 PARADOX

F1's official website boasts a global fanbase of 827mn people - a 63 percent increase since 2018. But there is a paradox: F1 is one of the world's few non-gender-segregated sports yet one of the most male-dominated.

"We know that the pathway for female drivers hasn't successfully got a woman into Formula One competitively in the last 50 years," More Than Equal's head of driver

development Lauren Forrow told AFP. That means that girls are "not thriving within" the current system, she said.

The organisation has pledged to "make history" by training a woman not just to compete but to win.

"We know that this is a real challenge and that it's never been done before," CEO Tom Stanton told AFP.

More Than Equal lists limited access to motorsports at an early age, cultural and structural biases, sponsorship gaps and a lack of role models at the top as barriers obstructing women's entry into F1.



More Than Equal's CEO Tom Stanton (right) and head of driver development Lauren Forrow pose during a test training session at the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya in Montmeló, Barcelona province, on December 16. (AFP)

"Formula 1 world champion", having started karting aged six and now loving the "feeling of excitement" she gets on the track.

On a wet December day, the assured teenager did laps in a Formula 4 car on Spain's Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya. It has a challenging layout and is used by More Than Equal to hone the skills of female drivers.

F4, for junior drivers, is an essential stepping stone for drivers on their way to the top.

Parker's personalised pink-and-green helmet distinguished her from other drivers as she drove for 45 minute stretches, concluding each session with a technical debrief.

Parker told AFP there are more women than before, but noted "boys definitely outnumber us".

"It is quite sad that there is nobody to look up to female-wise in Formula One," she said. On top of

obstacles unique to women, F1 is an "incredibly expensive" sport to pursue, Forrow said.

In Nottingham, Marcus McKenzie stood on the sidelines, using a headpiece to instruct his eight-year-old daughter Georgia as she rocketed around the karting track - at 25 miles (40 kilometres) per hour, somewhat slower than the average speeds of 220 miles per hour characteristic of a Grand Prix.

The single father conceded that the cost of the sport made things difficult, but he is hoping to secure sponsorship for Georgia and her 11-year-old brother who is also passionate about F1.

But money was far from the minds of the youngsters, who were exhilarated as they stepped off the track. "Don't be shy to do it. Just be brave and have fun," was eight-year-old Thea's message to other girls her age.

Japan footballer 'King Kazu' signs for new team at 58

Japanese football legend **Kazuyoshi Miura** said his passion for playing the game was as strong as ever after signing for a third-division team at the age of 58 yesterday. Miura, known as "King Kazu", will join Japan's Fukushima United on loan until June for what will be his 41st season as a professional footballer.



Fukushima, who finished 10th in the 20-team third division last season. "To all the Fukushima United players, coaching staff, fans, sponsors and people in the local area, I promise that I will play with everything I have to make a contribution," he said.

Miura made his professional debut in 1986 for Brazilian team Santos and he has also played for teams in Italy, Croatia, Australia and Portugal. He helped put football in Japan on the map when the professional J. League was launched in 1993. He made his Japan debut in 1990 but was famously left out of the squad for their first World Cup finals appearance in 1998, despite scoring 55 goals in 89 games for the national side.

fourth-tier Atletico Suzuka, making seven appearances as the team were relegated to Japan's regional leagues after finishing second-bottom of the table and losing a playoff.

His move to Fukushima sees him return to the J. League - the top three divisions of Japanese football - for the first time in five years. Miura said he was ready to "take on a new challenge" with

FOCUS

Fury offers condolences to victims of Joshua car crash

AFP
London

Tyson Fury has passed on his condolences after a car crash in Nigeria which killed two of Anthony Joshua's team members and left his fellow former world heavyweight boxing champion injured.

Joshua was involved in the smash, which happened on Monday morning on a main road linking Lagos and Ibadan in the southwest of the country.

His promoter said the boxer's "close friends and team members" Sina Ghami and Latif Ayodele were killed and Joshua himself was taken to hospital "for checks and treatment".

Fury, who has been linked with reversing his retirement to face Joshua in a 'Battle of Britain' mega-fight in 2026, wrote on his Instagram page: "This is so sad. May God give them a good bed in heaven."

Minutes earlier, the self-styled 'Gypsy King' revived talk of a ring return by posting a photograph on social media of himself and one of his sons and nephews wearing T-shirts which read: "I'm back."

Joshua, a British national of Nigerian heritage, called out Fury following a sixth-round knockout win over YouTuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul in a Netflix-backed bout in Miami earlier this month.

But Monday's accident will likely further delay a long anticipated bout between former Olympic champion Joshua and Fury, with Paul saying Monday in an X post: "Life is much more important than boxing. I am praying for the lost lives, AJ and anyone impacted by today's unfortunate accident."

Pictures circulating online showed a shirtless Joshua - a British national of Nigerian heritage - surrounded by what appeared to be broken window glass on the seats around him.

"He is in a stable condition and will remain there for observation," said a statement from his promoter. "Our deepest condolences and prayers are with the families and friends of all those affected - and we ask that their privacy is respected at this incredibly difficult time."

Police said the accident occurred around 11:00 am local time (1000 GMT) in the town of Makun, along the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway.

Nigeria's Federal Road Safe-

ty Corps (FRSC) said the Lexus Joshua was in "was suspected to be travelling beyond the legally prescribed speed limit on the corridor, lost control during an overtaking manoeuvre and crashed into a stationary truck... by the side of the road".

However, a witness who gave his name as Kunle told AFP: "The truck was not stationary when the accident happened."

Joshua's family hails from the southwest Nigerian city and he is known to visit there when he is in the country. Ayodele, also known as Latz, was a personal trainer of Joshua, while Ghami acted as strength and conditioning coach for the 36-year-old.

Former world champion Wladimir Klitschko, stopped in the 11th round by Joshua at Wembley Stadium in 2017, wrote on X: "I'm deeply saddened to hear about AJ and his close-knit group of friends."

"Having had the pleasure of engaging in an unforgettable battle with AJ, I've always regarded him as a true class act who commands my utmost respect."

"My heart goes out to him, and I wish him and his loved ones all the best during this difficult time."

TENNIS

Kasatkina ready for Brisbane after mental health reset

Reuters
Brisbane

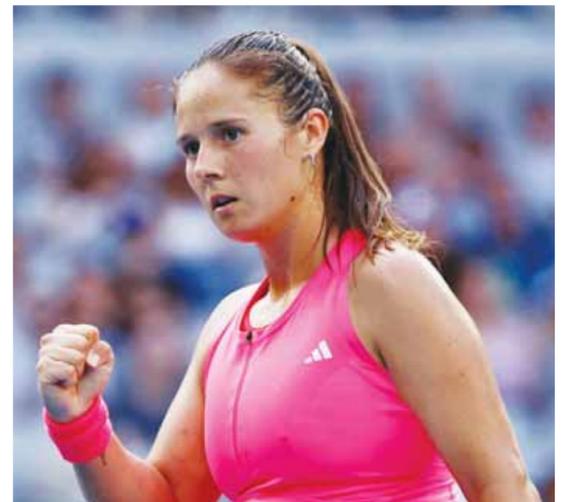
Australia's **Daria Kasatkina** said she feels mentally recharged ahead of her return to tennis at the Brisbane International after taking a six-week mental health break.

Russian-born Kasatkina, who switched nationality in March, shut her season down in October citing the mental strain of a heavy tour schedule and emotional stress from her battle to gain full Australian competition eligibility.

"For us tennis players, it is very difficult to accept that you need a break," she told Australian Associated Press yesterday.

"We have tournament after tournament and we have to defend the points from the previous season which is an additional anxiety. I just felt that if I pushed for longer I would have got in a deeper hole."

Kasatkina, who has not returned to Russia in over two years after coming out as gay and speaking out against the war in Ukraine, said it took her some



time to be at ease away from tennis. "The first three weeks was a disaster," she said.

"It was really difficult. I just wasn't enjoying it. I found myself being super unhappy and in a really dark place."

"After six weeks I feel like I am finally recharged."

"I needed to do this to understand there are certain limits you can push through and then you have to give yourself space to stay a sane person."

The Brisbane International, one of the tune-up events for the Australian Open Grand Slam, begins on Sunday.

SURFING TIME



Norway's Casper Ruud (left) and Malene Helgo stand on a surfboard during a visit to the URBNSURF wave park in Sydney yesterday, ahead of the United Cup starting on January 3. (AFP)

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Draw with Tunisia sends Tanzania into pre-quarters

Nigeria complete perfect group campaign with 3-1 win over Uganda

AFP
Rabat

Tanzania reached the knockout stage of the Africa Cup of Nations for the first time, 45 years after their maiden appearance, by coming from behind to draw 1-1 with fellow qualifiers Tunisia in Rabat.

Ismael Gharbi converted a penalty just before half-time for Tunisia and Feisal Salum levelled early in the second half in the Moroccan capital.

Tanzania have been trying since 1980 to advance beyond the group stage, and have still to win a match in four appearances. They squeezed into the round of 16 after two draws and one loss.

Tunisia finished second in Group C with four points, five less than table-toppers Nigeria. Tanzania pipped Angola on goals scored for one of four places reserved for third-placed teams.

Raphael Onyedika scored twice as already qualified Nigeria overcame 10-man Uganda 3-1 in the other Group C match to maintain a 100 percent record after the group stage. Only Tunisia know their next opponents. They will face Mali in Rabat on Saturday in the round of 16. Who Nigeria and Tanzania meet has yet to be decided.

Argentina-born Tanzania coach Miguel Gamondi gave an AFCON debut to 33-year-old goalkeeper Hussein Masaranga, one of three changes to the team that drew with Uganda in their previous match.

Tunisia coach Sami Trabelsi dropped another 33-year-old, captain Ferjani Sassi, to the bench, but the midfielder came on early in the second half to win his 100th cap.



Tanzania's coach Xavi celebrates after the Africa Cup of Nations Group C match against Tunisia at Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat yesterday. (Reuters)

Audacious goal attempt

Ismael Gharbi struck the post for Tunisia early on. He then saw an audacious long-range effort land on the roof of the netting to the relief of poorly positioned Masaranga.

Tunisia had a slight edge in possession and went ahead on 43 minutes when the Congolese referee awarded a penalty after reviewing a goalmouth incident on the pitchside VAR monitor.

Big-screen replays showed Ibrahim Hamad fouling Hazem Mastouri. The spot kick was converted by Gharbi.

The lead did not last long, as Feisal Salum levelled two minutes into the second half. He fired goalwards from beyond the D and the ball sneaked into the corner past Aymen Dahmen.

In Fes, Nigeria went ahead on 28 minutes through a well constructed move that exploited space in the Ugandan defence.

A clever pass from Bruno Onyemaechi set up Fisayo Dele-Bashiru to deliver a low cross that Onuachu struck into the net despite being surrounded by three opponents. Uganda suffered a huge blow on 56 minutes when goalkeeper Salim

Magoala was red-carded for handling outside the area. Magoala had replaced 40-year-old captain Denis Onyango for the second half.

Legason Alionz came on, the third goalkeeper used by Uganda with the match less than an hour old. He was beaten twice within eight minutes by Raphael Onyedika as Nigeria surged to a three-goal lead.

Onyedika twice found the bottom right corner with shots. Samuel Chukwueze, on loan to Fulham from AC Milan, set the midfielder up to score on both occasions.

FOCUS

Ivory Coast coach Fae backs switching AFCON to every four years

AFP
Marrakesh

Ivory Coast coach Emerse Fae has backed the decision to play the Africa Cup of Nations every four years instead of two, saying that the change could benefit the development of football on the continent.

"It can be a good thing if alongside that we do what we need to do for the development of African football," he told AFP.

The Cup of Nations has almost always been held at two-year intervals since the first edition in 1957 but Confederation of African Football president Patrice Motsepe announced the change on the eve of the ongoing tournament in Morocco.

Motsepe said that the tournament would go ahead every four years after the next two editions planned for 2027 and 2028, a decision that has been heavily criticised by some on the continent who see it as bowing to pressure from leading European clubs and FIFA.

He said an annual African Nations League - along the lines of the UEFA Nations League - would instead be introduced to boost the coffers of national federations.

"We are lucky in Africa now to have better infrastructure, better structured teams, better players, most of whom play for

the best teams in Europe," added Fae, who led the Elephants to the AFCON title in 2024.

"Holding the AFCON every four years would mean having a major tournament every two years with the World Cup too, but there needs to be another major competition in Africa like the planned Nations League.

"That would allow us to have games between teams like Morocco and Senegal every year, or Ivory Coast against Tunisia and Algeria against Mali.

"And I don't think that would penalise the smaller nations because I don't know that them losing games 5-0 or 6-0 really raises the level of African football.

"If they play against other teams of their level with the aim of being promoted, I think everyone will be a winner."

Meanwhile Fae admitted retaining the AFCON crown at the ongoing edition in Morocco is a hard task for his team.

Ivory Coast are already through to the last 16 before playing their final group game today against Gabon.

"There are eight or nine teams with squads that can win it, and I feel like teams play differently against us because we are the reigning champions," Fae admitted.

"That makes things even harder, but we are motivated to go all the way and we are confident too."



Ivory Coast's head coach Emerse Fae in Marrakesh. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Goalkeeper Zidane fast becoming Algeria favourite

Reuters
Aagdir

Algeria will be looking to make it a perfect Africa Cup of Nations group phase when they face Equatorial Guinea today, particularly if they keep another clean sheet as goalkeeper Luca Zidane shines in Morocco.

The two-time African champions started their campaign with a 3-0 win over Sudan followed by a 1-0 victory against Burkina Faso to secure top spot in Group E in which Zidane made crucial saves to keep Vladimir Petkovic's side in the game.

Algeria kept one clean sheet in their previous six games at AFCON, where they were eliminated in the group stage in 2021 and 2023 respectively after being crowned African champions in the 2019 edition in Egypt.

However, since Luca Zidane, son of French World Cup-winning great Zinedine, switched international allegiance in September after playing for France as a junior, Algeria have kept two clean sheets in three games with him in all competitions.

The 27-year-old Granada goal-



Algeria's goalkeeper Luca Zidane dives to stop the ball during the Africa Cup of Nations Group E match against Burkina Faso at Moulay Hassan Stadium in Rabat Sunday. (AFP)

keeper has adapted quickly since becoming first choice, Petkovic remarked.

"Zidane contributed significantly to both victories. He began to integrate and gain experience in a short period of time," the coach said yesterday.

Despite only being with the team since October, Zidane has not been shy about instructing his new teammates, defender Rayan

Ait-Nouri said.

"Luca is a fantastic person. He integrated quickly into the group, he's very talkative on the pitch, and he gives us great support. He's a player and a person who fits the team perfectly," Ait-Nouri added.

Another clean sheet should not be too difficult against an Equatorial Guinea side who have been eliminated from the tournament having scored once in two games.

COMMENT

Infantino defends FIFA World Cup ticket prices, cites 'crazy' demand

AFP
Dubai

FIFA President Gianni Infantino yesterday defended controversial ticket prices for the 2026 World Cup, revealing that organisers had received a record 150 million requests for tickets in the past two weeks.

Speaking at the World Sports Summit in Dubai, Infantino stressed that all revenues from next year's tournament in the United States, Mexico and Canada would be pumped back into football around the world.

Infantino's comments were his first public remarks since the ticketing furore erupted earlier this month, with fan groups branding ticket prices as "extortionate" and "astronomical".

FIFA later responded to the criticism by announcing that a sliver of tickets on sale would be priced at \$60. "In the last few days, you've probably seen there is a lot of debate about ticketing



and ticket prices," Infantino told the Dubai conference.

"We have six, seven million tickets on sale and we started two weeks ago. I can tell you in two weeks, 15 days, we received 150 million ticket requests. This shows how powerful the World Cup is."

Infantino said the majority of ticket requests had come from the United States, followed

by requests from Germany and Britain. "If you think that in 100 years of history of the World Cup, FIFA has sold 44 million tickets in total, so in two weeks for the next World Cup, we could have filled 300 years of World Cups," Infantino said. "This is absolutely crazy."

"And what is important, what is crucial is that the revenues that are generated from this are going back to the game all over the world and FIFA is the only organisation in the world... that finances football in the entire world.

"Without FIFA there will be no football in 150 countries in the world. There is football thanks to these revenues that we generate from the World Cup which we reinvest all over the world."

Fan group Football Supporters Europe (FSE) had been among the most prominent critics of FIFA's pricing strategy for 2026.

The group said earlier this month tickets would cost almost five times more than tickets for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Qatar's Al Ahli to meet Iran's Sepahan in pre-quarter-finals

Qatar's Al Ahli will face Sepahan of Iran in the pre-quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League (ACL) Two following the conclusion of the knockout stage draw yesterday. The draw set the path for the 16 remaining teams, with all eight rounds of 16 ties offering intriguing contests as the sides chase a first-ever title in the competition. Al Ahli progressed as Group B winners after finishing top with 10 points from two wins and four draws. Their opponents Sepahan qualified as Group C runners-up, having recorded two wins, one draw and one defeat in the group stage. Group A winners Al Wasl of the United Arab Emirates were drawn against Group D runners-up Al Zawraa SC of Iraq. Al Wasl went through the group stage unbeaten with four wins and two draws, while Al Zawraa advanced with three wins and three losses. Group C winners Al Hussein of Jordan were paired with Islamic Republic of Iran's Esteghlal. Al Hussein posted three wins and one defeat in the group stage, while Esteghlal qualified

after winning twice. Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr Club, who topped Group D with a perfect record, were drawn to face Arkadag. Al Nassr scored 22 goals and conceded just two across six group matches, while Arkadag netted five goals and conceded six. Elsewhere, Australia's Macarthur will take on Thailand's Bangkok United. Macarthur finished top of Group E with four wins and a draw, while Bangkok United secured second place in Group G with 10 points. Japan's Gamba Osaka, who advanced from Group F with a flawless group-stage campaign, will meet Korea Republic's Pohang Steelers. Indonesia's Persib Bandung, winners of a highly competitive Group G, were drawn against Thailand's Ratchaburi. The round of 16 is scheduled to be played in February 2026 (West: 10-11, 17-18; East: 11-12, 18-19), followed by the Quarter-finals in March (West: 3-4, 10-11; East: 4-5, 11-12) and Semi-finals in April (West: 7 and 14; East: 8 and 15). The tournament will culminate in a single-leg West-meets-East Final on May 16, 2026.

Liverpool specialist coach exits after set-piece struggles

Liverpool set-piece coach Aaron Briggs has left the club with immediate effect following the Premier League champions' poor performance in that area, it was announced yesterday. Santiago Bueno's goal for relegation-threatened Wolves on Saturday was the 12th time in 18 league matches Liverpool had conceded from a corner, free-kick or throw-in. No team in Europe's top five leagues has conceded more this season, with Arne Slot's men scoring just three goals from set-pieces this term. It is understood Briggs, a former Manchester City analyst who became an exclusive set-piece coach in September, and Liverpool reached an agreement over his departure from

Anfield. "Having joined the club in July 2024 - initially in the role of individual development coach - Briggs contributed to our Premier League title success last season as a member of Arne Slot's backroom staff," said a Liverpool statement. "He leaves with the appreciation and best wishes of everyone at the club." Only 18th-placed West Ham (10) have conceded more than Liverpool's seven goals from corners in this season's Premier League. The Reds' three goals conceded from throw-ins is the joint-most in the league alongside Newcastle. According to football statisticians Opta, Liverpool are averaging 2.4 goals scored per 100 set-pieces.