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CYCLING | Page 2

Vingegaard targets Giro and Tour de France glory in 2026



FOOTBALL | Page 4

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TENNIS

Record seeker Djokovic faces 'New Two' roadblock at Australian Open

Page 3

MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah slips to third spot as Roma takes lead

A DRAMATIC DAKAR RALLY SHAKE-UP AS SPAIN'S ROMA ENDS 12-YEAR WAIT TO LEAD THE PACK

Reuters
Jeddah

Spaniard Nani Roma led compatriot Carlos Sainz in a Ford one-two at the top of the Dakar Rally car standings yesterday after a tough ninth stage in the Saudi Arabian desert for some frontrunners.

Dacia's previous leader and five times winner Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah slipped to third but still only one minute 10 seconds behind Roma, with Toyota's South African Henk Lategan fourth - and with a further five minutes to make up. "I had three punctures today, but I think everyone had problems," said Roma, who last led the Dakar 12 years ago when he won. "We are positive to be here."

Sainz said it had been hard to find the way at one point, with the cars taking a different route to the bikes and no longer having tracks to follow.

"It was tricky navigation but what can we do? I don't know which position we are in and how many minutes we have lost to the winner, we will see how we'll be. It's OK, no problem, we'll see tomorrow. We're absolutely ready



Dacia drivers Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah of Qatar and Fabian Lurquin of Belgium before the start of stage 9 of the Dakar Rally from Wadi Ad Dawasir to Bisha in Saudi Arabia yesterday. (Reuters)

for it," al-Attiyah said yesterday.

Lategan described it as a "little bit of a disaster of a day" after getting lost, suffering a puncture, broken windscreen and loss of power steering.

"I was driving with no power steering, extremely difficult in these cars because the wheels are

so big so you have to have massive power to even turn the wheels," he said.

"And then we had some more punctures, got lost and we hit that bush in Seb (Loeb)'s dust that broke the windscreen. So we had to stop and kick the windscreen out because I couldn't see from

inside the car, put some goggles on and carry on going."

The 410km stage from Wadi Ad Dawasir to the overnight bivouac, first half of a marathon stage, was won by 21-year-old Polish non-factory Toyota driver Eryk Goczal.

He finished seven minutes ahead of his uncle Michal, also



Ford Racing's Nani Roma is seen before the start of the stage 9 of the Dakar Rally yesterday. (Reuters)

with the Energylandia team, while father Marek was in 31st position.

Australian Toby Price, a double Dakar winner on motorcycles, was third on the stage for Toyota.

Sainz, 63, was handed a one minute 10-second penalty for speeding and finished the stage seventh but ahead of most of his rivals, including Roma in eighth.

The four times Dakar winner is now 57 seconds behind Roma, who also won on a motorcycle in 2004.

Sweden's Mattias Ekstrom, who had been second overall for Ford, lost a lot of time with a navigation error and dropped to fifth and

11 minutes and 19 seconds off the pace. Dacia's nine times world rally champion Loeb was sixth.

Spaniard Toshia Schareina won the stage in the motorcycle category for Honda, with KTM's Argentine rider Luciano Benavides losing the way and his overall lead to Australia's defending champion Daniel Sanders.

Sanders, also on a KTM, led Honda's American Ricky Brabec by six minutes and 24 seconds.

The race, which ends on Saturday on the Red Sea coast, is the first round of the World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC) season.

TABLE TENNIS

WTT Star Contender Doha 2026 Championship starts

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Just days after the conclusion of the first tournament in the Qatar International Table Tennis Series, the WTT Star Contender Doha 2026 Championship kicked off with a bang yesterday.

The WTT Star Contender Doha 2026, the second tournament in the 31st edition of the Qatar International Table Tennis Series, began at the Lusail Sports Hall. The Star Contender tournament is being held from January 13-18 with 170 players from around the world competing for a prize purse of \$300,000.

This tournament is part of a comprehensive series being hosted by Doha until the end of the month. It will be followed by the Junior Contender tournament from January 19-22, then the Junior Star Contender tournament from January 23-25 and will conclude with the Federer tournament from January 27-31.

The preliminary rounds of the tournament witnessed fierce competition from the very first day, as players vied for a place in the main draw amidst a highly competitive atmosphere.

In the men's singles competition, Saudi Arabia's Ali al-Khadravi lost to South Korea's Lim Jong-hoon 3-1 in a fierce battle match that went to extra time before the Korean player ultimately prevailed.

In another match, Iran's Navid Shams secured a thrilling 3-2 victory over Norway's Borgar Haug after a five-game marathon. Romania's Rares Sipos also triumphed, defeating Qatar's Nawaf al-Malki in straight sets.

Egypt's Mohamed El Beiali achieved a significant 3-2 win against Abdullah Abdulwahab, despite a strong performance from the Qatari against a formidable and experienced opponent.

In other matches, Czech Republic's Lubomir Jancarik defeated Hong Kong's Lam Siu-hang 3-1, and China's Yuan Lichen overcame Hong Kong's Ho Kwan Kit 3-2 in a marathon fourth set that ended 18-16.

China's Xu Yingbin continued his impressive run with a decisive 3-0 victory over



Players in action during the qualifying rounds of the WTT Star Contender Doha 2026 Championship at Lusail Sports Hall yesterday.



France's Florian Bourrassaud, while India's Ankur Bhattacharjee secured a comfortable 3-0 win against Singapore's Pang Yew En Koen.

Qatar's Yousif Abdalla suffered a 3-0 defeat to China's Hsu Hsien-Chia. In a thrilling encounter, Saudi Arabia's Abdulaziz Bushlaibi lost to India's Akash Pal 3-2, while the USA's Jinbao Ma triumphed over Lebanon's Michel Abi Nader 3-0.

In the women's singles, Qatar's promising young player, Alia al-Baz, was defeated 3-0 by India's Swastika Ghosh, while India's Yashaswini Ghorpade secured a 3-0 victory over Hong Kong's Lee Hui Man.

The Star Contender tournament features a

large number of top-tier players who shone in the Champions tournament, most notably Taiwan's Lin Yun-ju, the defending men's singles champion, along with world number one Lin Shidong, Japan's Tomokazu Harimoto and Brazil's Hugo Calderano.

In the women's singles draw, Zhu Yuling, who had a phenomenal WTT Champions Doha that culminated in her lifting the title, steps in as the event's No 2 seed.

A lot has been said of Zhu's success over the last year, but adding a WTT Star Contender title to a trophy cabinet that already boasts one from the United States Smash and WTT Champions Doha 2026 would be something else.

Also hanging around in Doha from last week are defending champion and Top Seed Kuai Man, Korea Republic's Shin Yubin and Adriana Diaz. One player inside the Top 10, Chen Yi, is set to make her 2026 Doha debut.

What makes the Star Contender event different to Champions is the Men's, Women's and Mixed Doubles events.

The Women's discipline is headed by another pair from Korea Republic in Ryu Hanna and Kim Nayeong. Their toughest challengers will come in the form of defending champions Satsuki Odo and Sakura Yokoi.

SPOTLIGHT

Al-Attiyah, Carrera top entry for Oman International Rally

The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) announced yesterday that 13 crews and competitors from 11 nations will compete in next week's Oman International Rally, the opening round of the 2026 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC).

There will also be a national status section for crews running at the rear of the field with four teams currently registered.

Based in the city of Sohar for a second successive year on January 22-24, the event again takes its slot as the season's opener with rounds to follow in Qatar, Jordan, Lebanon, Cyprus and Saudi Arabia.

Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah is the most successful driver in Middle East motor sporting history and the Qatari teams up with Spanish co-driver Candido Carrera at the head of the field, as he bids to start his campaign for a 21st regional rally title and a record-breaking ninth win in the Sultanate of Oman.

Al-Attiyah again wheels out a Skoda Fabia RS run by Autotek Motorsport.

His main rival will be the leading local driver and former regional champion Abdullah al-Rawahi. Now recovered from an injury sustained on a national event in Lebanon last year, al-Rawahi teams up with Jordanian co-driver Ata al-Hmoud and will be looking for a third victory on his home event in six years. He also drives a Skoda Fabia RS.

Further Rally 2 competition comes from the likes of Hamza Bakhshab, the son of the former regional champion Abdullah, with Irish co-driver Lorcan Moore in a Toyota GR Yaris and Qatari veteran and defending Master driver



champion Nasser Khalifa al-Atya with his teammate Ziad Chehab.

There are additional Rally 2 entries for Jordan's Sheikh Bader al-Fayez (Skoda), Qatar's Rashid al-Muhammadi (Peugeot) and Ihab al-Shorafa (Skoda).

Talented Qatari youngster Mohammed al-Marri will be flying QMMF Team colours in Rally 4 with his Peugeot 208 against Indian racer Payyaakkal Panikkaveetil (Ford), while Lebanon's Shadi al-Fakih will be looking for success in Rally 5 with a Renault Clio.

The battle for Rally 2 honours should be fought out between local driver Zakariya al-Aamri (Subaru) and Mitsubishi Lancers in the hands of Omani Jassim al-Muqahwi and Jordan's Shaker Jweihan.

Defending champion Abdullah al-Zubair is not competing.

Organised under the chairmanship of Brigadier Jamal Said al-Tai, vice-chairman Suleiman al-Rawahi, rally director Anwar al-Zadjali and Clerk of the Course Hani Shaban, the event has invaluable support from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Sohar Governorate office and Toyota Oman.

The official ceremonial start takes place at the Sohar Entertainment Centre on January 22.

CYCLING

Vingegaard eyes Giro, Tour de France glory

AFP
la Nucia, Spain

Danish cycling great Jonas Vingegaard will race the Tour de France and the Giro d'Italia this year as he bids to become the eighth rider to win the three Grand Tours.

The Visma-Lease a Bike rider unveiled his schedule yesterday at his team's media day in Nucia, on Spain's Costa Blanca.

The two-time Tour de France champion added the Vuelta a Espana trophy to his collection of titles last year. He will compete for the first time in the Giro from May 8-31, where he will be the overwhelming favourite in the absence of Slovenian Tadej Pogacar.

Vingegaard will then race the Tour de France from July 4-26. He won the Tour

in 2022 and 2023 but will start this time as an outsider against two-time defending champion Pogacar.

"I have been thinking about riding the Giro for a while now," said the 29-year-old.

"It's one of the biggest races on the calendar and it's also one I have never done before. I really want to experience it, and now feels like the perfect moment. Winning the Vuelta last fall only gives me more motivation to go all-in for victory in Italy as well. I would love to add the pink jersey to my collection."

The Dane will begin his season on February 16 at the UAE Tour before also racing the Tour of Catalonia from March 23-29.

"Over the past five years, my build-up to the Tour has been largely the same. This time we have chosen something new," he said. "The organisation has de-

signed a great course for the Giro. Perhaps not as demanding as in recent years, which makes combining the Giro and the Tour a favourable option for us."

Vingegaard will attempt to repeat Pogacar's feat of 2024, when the Slovenian won both the Giro d'Italia and the Tour de France. At the Giro, won in 2025 by his former teammate Simon Yates, who announced his retirement last week, Vingegaard will have another objective: to become just the eighth rider to have won all three Grand Tours in his career.

Great rival Pogacar has won the Tour de France four times and the Giro once, but finished third during his only participation in Spain in 2019.

Bernard Hinault, Eddy Merckx, Jacques Anquetil, Felice Gimondi, Alberto Contador, Vincenzo Nibali and Chris Froome are the seven riders to have won all three Grand Tours.



Jonas Vingegaard, who represents Visma-Lease a Bike, yesterday at his team's media day in Nucia, on Spain's Costa Blanca. (@vismaleaseabike)

SPOTLIGHT

LIV Golf stay firm after Koepka's shock departure

PGA Tour is opening a limited-time window for 'returning' players

Reuters
Jeddah

LIV Golf responded to Brooks Koepka's reinstatement to the PGA Tour yesterday with a statement that trumpeted its "unchanged" vision to grow the sport of golf.

LIV's statement also said its desire for "an open ecosystem" in the sport applied to all players, "not just a limited few."

The response came after it was revealed that the PGA Tour is opening a limited-time window for players who defected to LIV to come back, called the Returning Player Program.

Only players who have won a Players Championship, Masters Tournament, PGA Championship, US Open or Open Championship between 2022-25 are eligible to return; only Koepka, Bryson DeChambeau, Jon Rahm of Spain and Cameron Smith of Australia fit those criteria.

A five-time major champion, Koepka decided to leave the LIV circuit with its worldwide footprint last month, wanting to be closer to his family in the US.

While CEO Brian Rolapp's letter to players promised the PGA Tour would gather "the world's best players to compete on the PGA Tour week in and week out," LIV Golf attempted to hold firm.

"From the outset, LIV Golf has championed an open ecosystem and freedom, for all," the statement said.

"Not just for a limited few.



Brooks Koepka (left) celebrates an LIV Golf win with his caddie in 2024. A five-time major champion, Koepka has quit the LIV circuit.



One that supports players' rights to compete across various platforms, reinforcing the belief that the growth of the game is best served when the game's best players are empowered to seek the most competitive environments around the world.

"LIV Golf's vision remained unchanged - to grow the game of golf globally - and that vision gains momentum across the broader golf landscape, the capacity to deliver on it continues to strengthen by expanding pathways and opportunity beyond any single institution or interest.

"As the world's golf league, LIV Golf continues to offer the best professional golfers the most competitive, challenging and lucrative environment in which to pursue greatness on a global scale.

"Long LIV Golf"

Also yesterday, LIV Golf announced the rebranding of the Iron Heads GC franchise to "Korean Golf Club", leaning into the symbolism and identity of South Korea.

The new team logos feature a white tiger and a Rose of Sharon, prominent symbols in Korean culture.

The former Iron Heads GC was captained by Kevin Na and also featured Danny Lee of New Zealand, Yubin Jang of South Korea and Jinichiro Kozuma of Japan in 2025. Na, Lee and Jang were born in South Korea.

LIV Golf team rosters for 2026 have not been formally revealed. Koepka was previously the captain of Smash GC.

CRICKET

Australia captain Healy says she will retire after upcoming India series



Reuters
Melbourne

Alyssa Healy, a mainstay of Australia's dominant women's cricket team for 15 years and latterly its captain, has announced that she will retire from the game after the upcoming multi-format series against India.

The 35-year-old wicketkeeper-batter was part of two one-day international World Cup triumphs and six successful T20 World Cup campaigns before taking over as skipper after the retirement of Meg Lanning in late 2023.

"It's with mixed emotions that the upcoming India series will be my last for Australia," she said in a statement yesterday.

"I'm still passionate about playing for Australia, but I've somewhat lost that competitive edge that's kept me driven since the start, so the time feels right to call it a day.

"I'll genuinely miss my teammates, singing the team song and walking out to open the batting for Australia."

Healy made her Australia debut in 2010 and scored 3,563 runs with seven centuries in one-day

internationals and 3,054 with a single hundred in Twenty20s for her country, as well as making 275 dismissals behind the stumps.

As a mark of her status in Australia, Healy was never defined by her relationship with her uncle, Australia wicketkeeping great Ian, nor her husband, Test paceman Mitchell Starc.

Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese led the tributes after her announcement.

"Alyssa Healy is a true legend of Australian cricket. As a batter, keeper and captain she has been one of the brightest stars in a golden era," he said in a statement.

"Yet Alyssa's impact and example off the field has been every bit as important. She has helped drive and grow women's cricket and inspired a new generation along the way."

Healy had already announced her retirement from T20 internationals and will play her last matches for Australia in three ODIs and a single Test against India in February and March.

Women's cricket has come on in leaps and bounds during Healy's career but, despite having missed only two for Australia since her debut in January 2011, her final match will be only her 11th Test.

Devon Malcolm gets OBE



Former cricketer Devon Malcolm poses with their medal after being appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) following an investiture ceremony at Windsor Castle in Windsor yesterday. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Malcolm played in 40 Test matches and 10 One Day Internationals for the England cricket team. The 62-year-old played at county level for Northamptonshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire and took 128 Test wickets for England during the 1990s. He was also recognised in the King's Birthday Honours for promoting diversity in cricket. The ex-fast bowler once said of his career: "Eventually the love of cricket took me... all the way to international level." (AFP)

FOCUS

Bangladesh not playing in India for World Cup

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh's cricket board said yesterday it had repeated its refusal to travel to India for next month's T20 World Cup during talks with the ICC governing body.

With ties tense between the two countries, Bangladesh wants the International Cricket Council to shift their World Cup games from India to co-hosts Sri Lanka, citing security concerns.

The World Cup begins on February 7 and Bangladesh are scheduled to play their four group matches in India.

The row erupted on January 3, when India forced Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman to quit the Indian Premier League (IPL).

Mustafizur, who has played in the IPL for other teams in previous editions, was snapped up at auction in December by Kolkata for more than \$1mn. His sacking sparked fury in Dhaka.



The Bangladesh Cricket Board office building is seen inside the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur, Dhaka. (en.prothomalo.com)

Yesterday, during a video conference with the ICC, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) said it had "reiterated its request for the ICC to consider relocating Bangladesh's matches outside India".

Political relations between India and Bangladesh soured

after a mass uprising in Dhaka in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a close ally of New Delhi.

India's foreign ministry last month condemned what it called "unremitting hostility against minorities" in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's interim leader, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, has accused India of exaggerating the scale of the violence.

"The BCB reaffirmed its position regarding the decision not to travel to India, citing security concerns," the BCB said in a statement.

"While the ICC highlighted that the tournament itinerary has already been announced and requested the BCB to reconsider its stance, the Board's position remains unchanged," the statement added.

The ICC have not commented.

The BCB said discussions with the ICC continue to "explore possible solutions", it added, but that it "remains committed to safeguarding the well-being of its players, officials and staff".

Bangladesh, led by Litton Das, are placed ninth in the ICC T20 rankings.

They have played all the nine editions of the tournament, but have never qualified for the semi-finals.

TENNIS

Record seeker Djokovic faces ‘New Two’ roadblock

Tournament director confirms Djokovic, who is aiming for 25th Grand Slam title, participation

Reuters
Sydney

Novak Djokovic returns to Melbourne Park looking to roll back the apparently inexorable tide of the “Sincaraz” era and produce an Australian Open triumph that would establish him as the most successful Grand Slam champion of all time.

The Serbian clinched his 24th major title at the US Open in late 2023, but Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz have since dominated the Grand Slams with a brand of fast-paced tennis that has blown their rivals off the court.

Djokovic, who will be 39 in May, is not impervious to the physical toll two decades on the tour has taken on his body, but only the most foolhardy observer has ever written off one of the mentally toughest players to play the game.

To move out of a tie with Margaret Court on 24 Grand Slam singles titles in the Australian’s own back yard, though, he looks likely to need to beat one or both of the “New Two” at the business end of the tournament.

Last year, the last survivor of the “Big Three” beat Alcaraz in the quarter-finals only to retire from his semi-final against Alex Zverev with a hamstring tear.

He reached the semi-finals of all four majors in 2025, losing to Sinner in Paris and at Wimbledon, as well as Alcaraz in New York.

“I lost three out of four slams in semis against these guys, so they’re just too good, playing on a really high level,” he said after his loss at Flushing Meadows.

“Best-of-five makes it very, very difficult for me to play them. Particularly if it’s like the end stages of a Grand Slam.”

‘ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION’
Djokovic pulled out of the warm-



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a forehand during a training session against Czech Republic's Jiri Lehecka in preparation for the Australian Open in Melbourne. (AFP)

up tournament in Adelaide in January but Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley moved quickly to douse any question over the 38-year-old turning up in Melbourne.

“He’ll be here to play 100%,” Tiley said at the weekend.

“Just out of the abundance of caution, he just wanted to make sure he’s 100% ready. He’s won this event 10 times. He wants to go for that record, and this is the place that he has the best chance of doing it.”

Indeed, Tiley said, it was highly unlikely to be Djokovic’s last Aus-

tralian Open either, tallying with the player’s own ambition to defend his Olympic title in Los Angeles in 2028. Djokovic’s battered body might have other plans, though, and his chances of going deep will probably rely on him staying healthy into the second week at Melbourne Park.

He managed ATP titles in Geneva and Athens last year to take his tally to 101 but his best efforts at the longer Masters events were a Miami final and a semi in Shanghai.

It will be his 21st appearance in the main draw at the Austral-

ian Open, a run that started as a qualifier in 2005 when he was thumped by eventual champion Marat Safin.

Melbourne’s large community of fans with Serbian heritage will ensure he has plenty of support at a tournament where he has otherwise been more admired than loved.

There is no doubting he will go down as one of the tournament’s great champions, however, especially as his 10 triumphs came in the “Big Three” era when Rafa Nadal and Roger Federer were also at their peak.

Alcaraz eyes Australian Open crown to complete career Slam

World number one **Carlos Alcaraz** arrives in Melbourne with only one mission in mind - claim a first Australian Open title to become the youngest man to complete the career Grand Slam. The 22-year-old already owns titles at Roland Garros, Wimbledon and the US Open, and victory at Melbourne Park would see him eclipse Don Budge, who wrapped up the career Slam two days before his 23rd birthday by winning the 1938 French Open.

“I would rather win my first Australian Open than retain my French Open and US Open titles next year,” Alcaraz, who turns 23 on May 5, said in November. A first Melbourne triumph would be the Spaniard’s seventh Grand Slam crown overall, making him the first men’s player to do so before his 23rd birthday. Yet for all Alcaraz’s global success, Australia has been a curious blank on his resume. His run to the quarter-finals in each of the past two seasons is the furthest he has advanced. This year’s campaign carries an added layer of intrigue following his abrupt split with long-time coach Juan Carlos Ferrero, the former world number one who guided Alcaraz from teenager to multiple Grand Slam champion over seven years. The breakup has been tennis’s biggest talking point in the new season, with neither party elaborating on the reasons behind it. Whether Alcaraz will be affected without Ferrero in his corner is one of the tournament’s central questions.

He enjoyed the best season of his career in 2025, winning two Grand Slam titles and reclaiming the world number one ranking, but Melbourne will be the first proper test of his new setup under intense pressure. Ferrero helped shape Alcaraz’s strategy to deal with arch-rival Jannik Sinner, who took his Wimbledon crown in 2025. The pair had a two-week training camp focusing on how to break down the Italian before Alcaraz beat him in the US Open final in four sets.

Despite that result, defending Australian Open champion Sinner is the favourite at Melbourne Park, rated slightly ahead of Alcaraz by bookmakers. Alcaraz’s improved serve and variation in his game proved key to overcoming Sinner at the U.S. Open but the Italian will have made his own adjustments for the new season. Apart from Sinner, it is hard to imagine any other players capable of stopping Alcaraz.

Novak Djokovic knocked him out of last year’s quarter-finals but the 38-year-old Serb was no match in their last meeting, losing in three sets in the US Open semi-finals. Conquering Melbourne would see Alcaraz cross his last frontier in men’s tennis while setting the stage for a first tilt at the coveted calendar Grand Slam.



FOCUS

Italy’s Sinner seeks ‘three-peat’ to maintain Melbourne supremacy

Reuters
Bengaluru

Jannik Sinner returns to the Australian Open targeting a third straight title as the Italian seeks to impose a level of supremacy reminiscent of Novak Djokovic’s stranglehold on the year’s opening Grand Slam.

The 24-year-old will arrive at Melbourne Park under vastly different circumstances from 12 months ago when his successful title defence was partly overshadowed by a doping controversy which saw him serve a three-month ban.

With that storm firmly behind him, Sinner steps onto the blue courts unencumbered and with his focus sharpened after an outstanding 2025 in which he was only seriously challenged by world number one Carlos Alcaraz.

“I feel to be a better player than last year,” Sinner said after beating Alcaraz to win the season-ending ATP Finals with his 58th match victory of a curtailed campaign.

“Honestly, amazing season. Many, many wins, and not many losses. All the losses I had, I tried to see the positive things and tried to evolve as a player.

“I felt like this happened in a very good way.”

Sinner now sets his sights on a third straight Melbourne crown - a feat last achieved in the men’s game during the second of Djokovic’s “three-peats” from 2019 to 2021 - and few would bet against him pushing his overall major tally to five.

That pursuit continues to be built on a game as relentless as it is precise, a metronomic rhythm from the baseline powered by near-robotic consistency and heavy groundstrokes that grind opponents into submission.

Although anchored in consistency and control, Sinner has worked to add a dash of magic - the kind of spontaneity best embodied by Alcaraz - and his pursuit will add intrigue to a rivalry that has become the defining duel



Italy's Jannik Sinner serves under the watchful eye of coach Simone Vagnozzi (right) during a training session in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

of men’s tennis. “It’s evolved in a positive way, especially the serving,” Sinner said at the ATP Finals of his game. “From the back of the court, it’s a bit more unpredictable. I still have margins where I can play better at times.

“It’s also difficult because you have to give a lot of credit to your opponent. Carlos is an incredible

player. You have to push yourself over the limits.”

The “Sincaraz” rivalry has already lit up most of the biggest tennis tournaments but Melbourne remains the missing piece, and all signs point to that changing this year with the Australian Open set for a blockbuster title showdown.

Australian Open launches \$6.7mn ‘Bracket Challenge’

Tennis fans in Australia could win \$10mn (\$6.71mn) by correctly predicting every match winner at the Australian Open, tournament organisers said yesterday. Dubbed the “Bracket Challenge”, organisers are offering the massive payout to anyone who can flawlessly forecast all 127 matches in either the men’s or women’s singles draw before the tournament begins on Sunday. “This is a game of skill, not

chance,” Tennis Australia’s Chief Commercial Officer Cedric Cornells said in a statement. “The AO Bracket Challenge is about rewarding tennis knowledge and creating an exciting new way for fans to engage with the tournament.” Participants must submit their complete bracket predictions after the singles draws are published on Thursday. The competition is open only to

Australian residents this year and the window for gazing into the crystal ball closes one hour before the first match on Sunday, with each person limited to one entry per draw. Consolation prizes are also on offer for those falling short of perfection, with the highest-scoring brackets in each draw set to win \$10,000. The Australian Open runs from January 18-February 1 at Melbourne Park.

FOOTBALL

Man United reach deal to appoint Carrick as interim boss: reports

AFP
London

Manchester United have reached an agreement in principle to appoint Michael Carrick as interim manager until the end of the season, reports said yesterday.

The former midfielder was pictured arriving at the club’s Carrington training ground, with his appointment likely to be confirmed later in the day.

Carrick previously had an unbeaten three-game stint as caretaker boss at Old Trafford in 2021.

The 44-year-old, who won 12 major trophies in his 12-year

playing career at United, was appointed manager of Middlesbrough in October 2022.

Carrick guided Middlesbrough to the Championship play-offs in his first season in charge but was dismissed in June after the club finished 10th in the second tier.

United had also been in discussions with former player and boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer about a potential return to the club.

The Red Devils dismissed Ruben Amorim last week after a dismal 14-month stint under the Portuguese coach.

Caretaker boss Darren Fletcher oversaw a 2-2 draw against lowly Burnley in the Premier League and a 2-1 defeat to Brighton in the FA Cup. United’s exit from both

domestic cup competitions at the first hurdle, plus a lack of European football, means they will play only 40 matches this season - their lowest number since the 1914/1915 campaign.

The 20-time English champions are seventh in the Premier League, but just three points outside the top four and one point behind fifth-placed Brentford.

A top-four finish would guarantee a return to the lucrative Champions League and top five is likely to be enough thanks to the strong performance of English sides in European competition so far this season. United host local rivals Manchester City on Saturday in what is likely to be Carrick’s first game in charge.

Alpine F1 team part company with dropped Doohan

Jack Doohan and the Renault-owned Alpine Formula One team have agreed to end the dropped Australian driver’s contract, leaving him free to pursue opportunities elsewhere, they said yesterday.

Doohan started last season in a race seat alongside Frenchman Pierre Gasly but lasted only six races before he was replaced by Argentine Franco Colapinto. The 22-year-old son of five-time motorcycling world champion Mick had remained contracted as a reserve driver for the team.



“BWT Alpine Formula One team confirms it has reached a mutual agreement with Jack Doohan to not continue his driving services with the team for the 2026...

world championship season and allow him to pursue other career opportunities,” the team said in a statement.

“The team would like to thank Jack for his commitment and professionalism to the team for the past four years, both on and off the track, and wishes him all the best for the future.”

Colapinto, 22, failed to score a point for Alpine in 18 races last season - the only driver on the grid apart from Doohan to draw a blank - but has been confirmed for 2026 alongside Gasly.

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Morocco's Regragui slams refereeing conspiracy theorists

'IT'S ALWAYS A SHAME TO GO DOWN THIS PATH'



Morocco coach Walid Regragui during a training session in Rabat yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Rabat

Morocco coach Walid Regragui has poured cold water on conspiracy theorists who suggest referees have been favouring the home team at the Africa Cup of Nations.

Some broadcast pundits and supporters online have bemoaned a perceived leniency towards Morocco from the tournament officials. Regragui dismissed the claims out of hand.

"It's always a shame to go down this path," he told a press conference yesterday as Morocco prepared to take on Nigeria in their semi-final in Rabat today.

"They want to make people believe that matches are always won this way. Let's not kid ourselves, it's always been the case on the African continent to sow doubts and controversies.

"You journalists need to do your job," he added.

"A penalty can be given one way in one match and not in another. A handball is called in one match and not in another. I watch a lot of matches because we have many players in Europe, and the controversies are the same everywhere, in Africa or in Europe."

Regragui said he believed referees at the tournament were seeking to do their best, but also gave example of incidents in matches where he felt the whistle did not favour Morocco.

He cited two incidents from their impressive 2-0 win over Cameroon in their quarter-final on Friday to illustrate his argument.

"One of their defenders puts his foot on Abde (Ezzalzouli)'s ankle, and if VAR reviews the play, it's a penalty," he said.

"The goalkeeper comes out to challenge (Ismael) Saibari and puts both hands in his head, that's



Nigeria's forward Akor Adams controls the ball during a training session in Rabat yesterday. (AFP)

a penalty. But neither were given." Regragui said he had told his players to ignore any refereeing controversy.

"The only way to win is on the pitch, by winning our matches. You've never heard me talk about the refereeing after a match," he said.

"We take responsibility, we move forward, and we work hard. That's the goal. We need to support the referees, the players, and stop always feeling like we're being wronged.

"We hope the referee will be fair to both teams tomorrow, as he has been since the start of the competition," the coach added.

Nigeria, who lost the 2024 Cup of Nations final to hosts Ivory Coast, are looking for a fourth continental title to follow those won in 1980, 1994 and 2013.

It remains a big ask given the challenge of beating 2022 World Cup semi-finalists Morocco in front of almost 70,000 of their

supporters in Rabat, as well as the fact that either Senegal or Mohamed Salah's Egypt would then lie in wait in the final.

But Nigeria have arguably been the most impressive side these last three weeks in Morocco, scoring a tournament-high 14 goals in five matches. Osimhen has four goals, including the opener in Saturday's 2-0 quarter-final victory against Algeria in Marrakesh in which he also set up the clincher for Akor Adams.

A player who starred on the run to the final two years ago despite scoring just once is now at his prolific best for Eric Chelle's team. But it remains to be seen how they cope against Morocco without suspended skipper Wilfred Ndidi in midfield - Raphael Onyedika of Club Brugge is a likely replacement.

"We are a group and there are some very good players who are waiting for the chance to show something," said Chelle.

FOCUS

Egypt coach Hassan hails quality of Africa Cup of Nations

Reuters
Tangiers, Morocco

Egypt coach Hossam Hassan hailed the quality on display at the Africa Cup of Nations as his side readied to play in today's semi-final, calling the month-long event in Morocco a "ferocious tournament".

The 59-year-old former striker should know better than most, winning three tournaments as a player and making the last of his seven tournament appearances at the age of 39.

He is now coaching at the event for the first time, taking Egypt to the last four as they search for their first title since 2010.

"The standard of African football has increased markedly with the quality of players in each team being very impressive," he said yesterday.

"There have been so many teams here with world class players, not only the experienced players but also youngsters, who have match-winning ability and an incredible skill set."

Egypt have won the tournament a record seven times, but they start as underdogs for the semi-final against Senegal in Tangiers.

"Every side has its weaknesses, and we have studied Senegal in depth as we have planned for this game. We are sure they will be analysing our approach, too, so this could be decided on the small details," Hassan predicted.

Hassan has come in for some



Egypt coach Hossam Hassan during the press conference yesterday. (Reuters)

criticism after Egypt needed extra time to overcome Benin in the round of 16. They were then on the back foot for most of the quarter-final against Ivory Coast.

"I don't give a damn about that," Hassan told reporters at the pre-match conference on Tuesday.

"There are those who have confidence in what we are trying to achieve and those who are sceptical. I pay it no attention."

Much has been made of this possibly being a last chance for 33-year-old Liverpool striker Mohamed Salah to win a trophy with the national team.

Egypt teammate Mahmoud Trezeguet, like Salah, has lost in two previous Cup of Nations finals, but he has no doubt that Salah still has the quality to finish the job.

"Salah is, for me, the best player out there," Trezeguet said.



Senegal's Yehvann Diouf with teammates during a training session in Tangier, Morocco, yesterday. (Reuters)

Liverpool's Robertson blasts Szoboszlai for 'unacceptable' back-heel

London: Liverpool defender Andrew Robertson slammed Dominik Szoboszlai's mistake in the FA Cup win over Barnsley as "unacceptable", admitting his side still have room for improvement despite their recent unbeaten run. Szoboszlai was guilty of a careless blunder when his miscued back-heel inside his own penalty area allowed Barnsley's Adam Phillips to score in Monday's third round tie at Anfield. Liverpool were leading by two goals at the time of Szoboszlai's miscued pass and went on to clinch a 4-1 win against their third-tier opponents.

Szoboszlai had scored a superb long-range opener earlier in the game, but Liverpool boss Arne Slot said he would speak to the Hungarian about what he called a "weird" decision. Robertson was equally frustrated by Szoboszlai's needlessly casual error, which led Barnsley manager Conor Hourihane to accuse Szoboszlai of disrespect.

"The frustrating thing is Dom does this unbelievable 60-yard sprint to start with, he's getting the clap off The Kop and I don't know if that maybe went to his head," Robertson said. "We can joke about it now but it's unacceptable to lose a goal like that. Dom obviously knows that. He's been magnificent for us this season and he was again really good. "He just had a lapse of concentration, and we can't afford too many of them in the six-yard box."

Arteta urges Arsenal to learn from League Cup pain ahead of Chelsea semi

Mikel Arteta has urged Arsenal to learn from the pain of last season's League Cup semi-final exit as they prepare to face Chelsea on the road to Wembley. The Premier League leaders lost 4-0 on aggregate against Newcastle over two legs in the last four in 2024/25 as they ended a fifth straight season without major silverware. Arteta's side travel to London rivals Chelsea in the semi-final first leg today, with holders Newcastle taking on Manchester City in the other last four clash.

"We've been really consistent again in the competition, and now we have to knock another big team out to be in the final," Arteta told his pre-match press conference yesterday.

"That's the mission. Hopefully we learn from last year because it was painful, especially the manner that the games went and the amount of chances that we made not to go through, but hopefully this year we are better and especially more efficient."

City won multiple League Cups

during Arteta's stint as an assistant to Pep Guardiola at the Etihad Stadium, using it as a springboard for bigger trophies. Arteta was asked whether winning Arsenal's first silverware since the 2020 FA Cup would ease the pressure on him for the rest of the season.

"When you get to this stage in the competition, you get to the final and you get over the line and win it, it brings energy, it brings belief and the sense that everybody is very important and playing a part of that," he said. "I think it's some-

thing when you get there and win it, everybody remembers and if not, nobody does. So once you get there, get the job done."

Arteta will pit his wits against new Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior, whom he faced on the pitch in the 2014 FA Cup final, when he captained Arsenal to victory against Hull.

"I've seen a few pictures of that, so, that's the beauty of football, two very different careers, but at the end, facing each other," he said.

COMMENT

Try to be Mourinho and I'll fail: new Real Madrid coach Arbeloa

AFP
Madrid

New Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa insisted yesterday he would be himself at the helm of the Spanish giants rather than trying to imitate Jose Mourinho.

Arbeloa, who in his playing days at Madrid was an ally of his then coach Mourinho, has drawn comparisons to the Portuguese veteran for his approach to management.

The 42-year-old former defender was appointed to replace Xabi Alonso on Monday after Real Madrid lost the Spanish Super Cup final against rivals Barcelona on Sunday.

"I have not spoken to Jose yet. For me it was a privilege and an honour to be coached by Jose Mourinho," Arbeloa told a news conference.

"I have a great relationship with him... and obviously he was someone who influenced me a lot,

I carry him within me. (However) I am going to be Alvaro Arbeloa, because while it's true I am not afraid of failing, and have never been, I'm sure that if I tried to be Jose Mourinho, I would fail spectacularly."

Mourinho, currently coaching Benfica, led Real Madrid between 2010 and 2013, winning one La Liga title.

During that era he battled against Pep Guardiola's dominant Barcelona when the fierce rivalry between the Catalans and Real Madrid was at its most bitter.

Barca currently lead Madrid by four points at the top of La Liga and Arbeloa's job is to revert the situation, although his first match in charge is at Albacete in the Copa del Rey last 16 on Wednesday.

Arbeloa, who was coaching Madrid's reserve side and previously working with the club's youth teams before he was promoted, said success is the most important thing for the record 15-time European champions.

"This club is winning, winning,



Real Madrid's new coach Alvaro Arbeloa gives a press conference in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

and winning again. That demand on ourselves, showing the DNA of what brought us here, that has filled our trophy cabinets (is what I want)," continued Arbeloa.

"When I was a player I received those values from the players in the dressing room, and for me that

is the most important thing... to be able to excite the fans we have all over the world and try to leave those cabinets even more full.

"That is my work, that is my obsession and what I will be living every day."

Madrid did not announce how

long Arbeloa's contract as first-team coach would be. "What I can tell you is that I've been here for 20 years, at home, and I will be at Real Madrid as long as they want me here," added Arbeloa.

"This is my home, that's how I feel and that's how it will always be."

Striker Kylian Mbappe was absent as Arbeloa took charge of his first training session on Tuesday before the visit to face second-tier Albacete.

Mbappe made his comeback from a knee sprain as a late substitute in the Spanish Super Cup final defeat by Barcelona on Sunday, but is likely to keep working on his recovery until next Tuesday's Champions League match against his former side Monaco.

A Real Madrid source told AFP it was "logical" that Mbappe was absent from training, given his knee issue.

Former coach Alonso had admitted it was a calculated risk to involve Madrid's top goalscorer in

the match against Barca in Saudi Arabia. Arbeloa said he had a close relationship with Alonso, a former team-mate for Madrid and the Spanish national team.

"Everyone here knows the bond that connects me to him, the friendship that connects me to him, how much I value him, how much I love him, and I know that's mutual, has been mutual and will continue to be mutual," said Arbeloa.

Alonso, replaced after less than eight months at the helm, said on social media he was leaving the club having done the best he could.

"Things didn't go as I would have liked," wrote the Basque coach on Instagram yesterday.

"Coaching Real Madrid was an honour and a responsibility. I'm grateful to the club, the players and above all the fans for their confidence and support.

"I leave respectfully, with gratitude, and the pride of having done the best I could."