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**SPOTLIGHT**

# Qatar Football Festival ticket sales begin today at 9pm

The centrepiece Finalissima will feature an epic showdown between Spain and Argentina on March 27

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**icket sales for the Qatar Football Festival, including Finalissima, will begin today at 9pm, Doha time, at [www.roadtoqatar.qa](http://www.roadtoqatar.qa).

Fans from across the globe are set to experience a star-studded football extravaganza, taking place between March 26-31 in Qatar, that will feature Spain, Argentina, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Serbia in six high-profile matches.

The centrepiece Finalissima will feature an epic showdown between European champions Spain and South American and World champions Argentina at the Lusail Stadium on March 27. This is the first time that Qatar is hosting this prestigious international fixture, reaffirming its position as a global sports capital, as the country continues to gain recognition for its renowned legacy of hosting mega-sporting events.

The much-anticipated fixture will see the return of reigning world champions and Conmebol Copa America 2024 winners Argentina to the iconic Lusail Stadium – where they lifted the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 title – this time to face the UEFA EURO 2024 champions, Spain. Fans attending the Finalissima will witness a once-in-a-lifetime generational showdown, with Argentina's legendary Messi set to face Spain's rising star Lamine Yamal.

The Qatar Football Festival will also bring together hosts Qatar, Serbia, as well as continental giants Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in a series of thrilling matches, offering participating nations valuable preparation to measure their readiness and assess their capabilities ahead of the FIFA World Cup 2026.

Fans can purchase up to four tickets for each match and will receive confirmation via their registered email. All fans attending a match will need their own ticket, including infants.

All tickets will be digital and will be made available on the Road To Qatar official ticketing app closer to the match date. Tickets are non-refundable.

Tickets include accessible seating options for



A star-studded football extravaganza will take place between March 26-31 in Qatar, that will feature Spain, Argentina, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Serbia in six high-profile matches.

disabled fans. Disabled fans wishing to request accessible seats can do so by sending an e-mail to [accessibility.tickets@sc.qa](mailto:accessibility.tickets@sc.qa). Throughout the festival, fans will also be treated to a variety of entertainment and cultural activities.

Fans are requested to purchase tickets only through [www.roadtoqatar.qa](http://www.roadtoqatar.qa) – the official ticket platform for Qatar Football Festival. Tickets purchased from any other unauthorised resale platforms are subject to cancellation.

All three venues are connected by the Doha Metro, allowing fans to utilise Qatar's state-of-

the-art public transport network.

For international fans, exclusive travel packages, including a round-trip flight, accommodation and a match ticket (CAT 1 or 2), are available through Qatar Airways and Visit Qatar, the marketing and promotional arm of Qatar Tourism. For more information, visit <https://www.qatarairways.com/footballfestival>.

For tickets and more information on the Qatar Football Festival, visit [www.roadtoqatar.qa](http://www.roadtoqatar.qa) and follow @roadtoqatar on all major social media platforms.

**TICKET PRICES**

Event	Stadium	Match	CAT 1	CAT 2	CAT 3	Accessibility Ticket
Finalissima 2026	Lusail	Spain vs Argentina	1,200	600	200	200
	Lusail	Qatar vs Saudi Arabia	400	200	50	50
International Matches	Lusail	Egypt vs Spain	400	200	50	50
	Ahmed bin Ali	Saudi Arabia vs Serbia	400	200	50	50
	Jassim bin Hamad	Egypt vs Saudi Arabia	100	50	-	50
	Jassim bin Hamad	Saudi Arabia vs Serbia	100	50	-	50

All prices are in Qatari Riyals (QAR)

**Match Schedule**

Saudi Arabia	v	Egypt	Ahmed bin Ali Stadium, Thursday 26 March
Qatar	v	Serbia	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, Thursday 26 March
Spain	FINALISSIMA QATAR 2026	Argentina	Lusail Stadium, Friday 27 March
Egypt	v	Spain	Lusail Stadium, Monday 30 March
Saudi Arabia	v	Serbia	Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, Monday 30 March
Qatar	v	Argentina	Lusail Stadium, Tuesday 31 March

Match tickets will go on sale from 25 February 2026 at [roadtoqatar.qa](http://roadtoqatar.qa).  
Exclusive travel packages for international fans are available in partnership with Visit Qatar, the official marketing and promotional arm of Qatar Tourism, and Qatar Airways.

**FOCUS**

## Lopetegui eyes redemption with Qatar at World Cup

**D**espite his extensive experience in international football with Spain, **Julen Lopetegui** has never coached at a FIFA World Cup. He came close to leading La Roja in Russia in 2018, only for fate to deny him that moment at the final hurdle. Now, the opportunity returns – this time in the colours of Qatar. Standing once again on the brink of the world's biggest tournament, Lopetegui will aim to prove that postponed dreams can still find their stage at the FIFA World Cup 2026, which will be staged in United States, Canada and Mexico this summer.

**ARCHITECT OF SPAIN'S REVIVAL**  
It is impossible to discuss Spain's resurgence over the past decade without mentioning Lopetegui. He was the architect who reshaped the tactical identity of Spain's national teams across several age groups, leaving his imprint on an entire generation of players.

Lopetegui began his journey with the Spanish Football Federation as a talent developer and youth coach. Between 2010 and 2014, he guided Spain's U-19, U-20 and U-21 teams, where his coaching philosophy began to flourish. During that period, he led Spain's U-19 and U-21 sides to UEFA European Championship glory, in 2012 and 2013 respectively.

When he succeeded Vicente del Bosque as head coach of the senior national team in 2016, expectations were high. Lopetegui responded by overseeing a remarkable 20-match unbeaten run of 14 wins and six draws. Under his leadership, Spain rediscovered their authority following UEFA EURO 2016 and stormed through qualification for the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia with attacking flair and defensive solidity. Although he was ultimately unable to lead



the team at the finals in Russia, many regarded that squad – in identity, style and spirit – as unmistakably his, even as Spain exited in the round of 16 against the host nation.

**DEMANDING CHALLENGE WITH QATAR**  
Following his appointment as Qatar head coach, Lopetegui told FIFA: "It was the right moment in my career for me to take on the responsibility of leading this na-

tional team and heading up the country's football project for at least the next two years to come."

That long-term project was precisely what convinced the Qatar Football Association to place their trust in the Basque coach. The national team required a builder – a coach capable of nurturing talent and integrating it into a competitive system able to challenge the world's elite in North America.

The task has not been straightforward. Qatar were forced into the fourth round of Asian qualifying after a turbulent campaign, and their early group-stage exit at the recent FIFA Arab Cup served as a warning for the broader footballing landscape. Yet Lopetegui understands that football rarely follows the script. The ambition of shining on the world stage carries a unique power. "The prospect of playing at the World Cup is what really spurs us on," he said.

**QATAR'S ROAD TO 2026**

Qatar began the second round of Asian qualifying strongly, topping their group on 16 points with five wins and one draw, creating optimism that the road to North America would be smooth. However, the third round presented a sterner test. Drawn in a group alongside Iran, Uzbekistan and the United Arab Emirates, Qatar faced fierce competition.

A 3-1 home defeat to the UAE and a draw with North Korea set the tone for an inconsistent campaign. Although victories over Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan offered hope, heavy defeats, including a 4-1 loss to Iran and a 5-0 setback against the UAE, saw Qatar finish fourth on 13 points, behind the two direct qualifiers.

Appointed in early May 2025, Lopetegui

guided Qatar into the decisive fourth round knowing there was no room for error. Drawn alongside the UAE and Oman, his side drew 0-0 with the latter before facing a crucial encounter against the UAE in Doha on October 14, 2025.

On that night, Qatar rediscovered the spirit that had once made them Asian champions. Lopetegui's tactical management proved decisive as Boualem Khoukhi and Pedro Miguel headed home in a 2-1 victory that secured Qatar's place at the World Cup for the first time via qualification.

**A FIRST WORLD CUP EXPERIENCE**

For Lopetegui, the 2026 tournament represents a unique chapter – his first World Cup as a head coach. It also comes amid scrutiny following recent inconsistencies in Qatar's results. The World Cup, however, is a competition like no other. Qatar will be determined to erase memories of their disappointing showing on home soil four years ago and secure their first-ever victory at the global finals.

The draw has placed them in Group B alongside Switzerland, Canada and the winner of European Play-off Path 1 – a group that offers genuine opportunity for Al Annabi to make history and reach the knockout stage. Lopetegui's experience, his hunger to prove himself and a squad featuring notable talent offer Qatar renewed belief, despite recent doubts.

History suggests that great coaches often thrive under pressure. Lopetegui, watched by the world, will seek to demonstrate that Qatar's qualification was no accident, and that his absence from the bench in Russia was merely a postponement of a World Cup story still waiting to be fully told. (fifa.com)

## MATCH REPORT

# Brilliant Brook 100 puts England into semi-finals

A GLORIOUS CENTURY BY THE ENGLAND CAPTAIN SPOILS PAKISTAN PLANS IN KANDY

AFP  
Kandy, Sri Lanka

**C**aptain Harry Brook scored his first T20 international century to take England into the World Cup semi-finals with a nervy two-wicket win against Pakistan in the Super Eights in Kandy.

Brook, promoted to number three for the first time in a T20 international, scored exactly 100 off 51 deliveries as England chased down their target of 165 with five balls to spare, despite a late wobble. After England restricted Pakistan to 164-9, Brook came in second ball of the innings with the score 0-1 after Phil Salt's golden duck, caught behind off Shaheen Shah Afridi.

Wickets tumbled in the power play but Brook stood firm.

He lifted his side from a precarious 35-3 to 155-6 when he was dismissed, having scored the second fastest century in T20 World Cup history and the first by a team captain. Brook hit four sixes and 10 fours, surpassing his previous best T20 international score of 81 not out against Pakistan in Karachi four years ago.

He went to the landmark in style, powering Afridi for a six and four to complete his century off 50 balls before being bowled by the left-arm quick next ball.

Brook explained that the decision for him to move up the order from five had been prompted by coach Brendon "Baz" McCullum.

"Baz said that this morning, what do you think about going number three? Pakistan's your

team. I was just like, let's do it," said Brook.

"We wanted to try and maximise the power play a little bit more and everybody knows that I like to try and take the game on and I was going to do that from ball one.

"Thankfully it came off and I managed to get us a decent start," Brook added.

Afridi, returning to the side, took 4-30 also removing Jos Buttler for two and Jacob Bethell for eight in the power play.

Brook added 45 for the fifth wicket with Sam Curran (16) and even a burst of two wickets from Usman Tariq did not perturb the England skipper who batted with guts and resolve.

Will Jacks helped his skipper towards victory with a brilliant stand of 52, scoring 28 off 23 balls.

#### Nawaz gets two pickets

Spinner Mohammad Nawaz dismissed Jacks and Jamie Overton in the penultimate over to induce some late nerves, but Jofra Archer hit the first ball of the final over for the winning four.

The defeat leaves Pakistan needing to beat Sri Lanka on Saturday and hope other results go their way to reach the last four after their first match in the Super Eights against New Zealand was washed out.

"The way Harry Brook batted was outstanding. He completely took the game away from us," said Pakistan captain Salman Ali Agha yesterday.

"We just have to wait and see how the other results go. We'll be hoping they go our way, and then we know we'll have to win against



England's captain Harry Brook plays a shot as Pakistan's wicketkeeper Usman Khan fields during the 2026 ICC T20 World Cup Super Eights match at the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy yesterday. (AFP)

Sri Lanka." New Zealand face Sri Lanka today in Colombo.

Spinner Liam Dawson took 3-24 earlier and was ably supported by Overton (2-26) and Archer (2-32) to restrict Pakistan to 164-9.

Opener Sahibzada Farhan continued his good form with a 45-ball 63, with two sixes and seven fours, his third half-century of the tournament. Archer dismissed Saim Ayub for seven in the third over

while Dawson picked up Salman Agha for five in the next. Farhan and Babar Azam added 46 for the third wicket. Farhan completed his fifty off 37 balls before pacere Overton trapped him lbw.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**England 166 for 8** (Brook 100, Afridi 4-30) **beat Pakistan 164 for 9** (Farhan 63, Dawson 3-24) **by two wickets**  
**Man of the Match:** Harry Brook

## FOCUS

## New Zealand ready for Sri Lanka's spin challenge

AFP  
Colombo

**N**ew Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner said yesterday adapting to slow-turning pitches in Colombo would be key for their crucial T20 World Cup clash against co-hosts Sri Lanka.

The Black Caps need a win in their second Super Eights match in Group 2 today at the R Premadasa Stadium after their first match against Pakistan was washed out at the same venue.

Santner's team have been in the Sri Lankan capital for a week after finishing their group stage in India.

"I guess that's the challenge when you play a tournament in two countries - we played in Chennai and Ahmedabad on flat pitches and here we have to play a bit differently," Santner told reporters.

"But I think you pick a squad of 15, knowing that you could potentially be in both countries on slightly slower wickets, on some flat ones as well."

Santner, a left-arm spinner, said: "So I think we have the spin kind of options covered as well, which is nice, but it's just going out there and adjusting as fast



as you can." Sri Lanka come into the contest in a must-win situation after they suffered a huge loss to England in their Super Eights opener in Kandy.

But Santner said Sri Lanka are always a tough nut to crack in their own den.

"Sri Lanka are a very strong side at home and they dominate

conditions here," said Santner. "They are missing a couple of players but there's quality in that line-up.

"We are lucky that we have played them a lot in recent years and there are no secrets."

New Zealand have one point from the rained-off match, while Sri Lanka stay bottom among four

teams in the Super Eights group. A defeat for New Zealand will dent their chances of making the semi-finals.

"Any game in the Super Eight is sort of knock out," said Santner. "We know that it is the same for Sri Lanka. We want to put out a good show tomorrow and walk out with a win."

### Australia to play Test in Cape Town for first time since 'Sandpaper-gate'

**Melbourne:** Australia's Test team will return to Cape Town for the first time since the 2018 'Sandpaper-gate' ball-tampering scandal when they meet South Africa in the final fixture of a three-match series from October 27. Though having played white-ball games in South Africa, Australia have not toured the nation for a Test series since the scandal that broke out at Newlands which resulted in long bans for Steve Smith, David Warner and Cameron Bancroft. Warner has retired from international cricket and Bancroft has not played a test in over six years but top-order batter Smith remains a key player in the Test setup. Smith was captain of Australia

when TV cameras picked up Bancroft rubbing sandpaper on the ball on day three of the third test at Newlands, triggering a Cricket Australia investigation. Smith was later stripped of the captaincy and banned from leadership roles in Australian cricket for two years. Warner, deemed the main architect of the tampering plot by Cricket Australia, was given a life ban from leadership roles, though that was lifted in 2024. South Africa won the match at Newlands by 322 runs and the series 3-1. Australia will play the Proteas in three ODI matches in September before the test series starts in Durban on October 9. The second test is in Gqeberha from October 18.



Australia's Cameron Bancroft talks to the umpire during the third Test in South Africa in 2018. (AFP)

## PREVIEW

## Young spinner Wellalage says Sri Lanka can rescue World Cup campaign

AFP  
Colombo

**C**o-hosts Sri Lanka can win both their remaining Super Eight matches to rescue their faltering T20 World Cup campaign, starting with New Zealand, said spinner Dunith Wellalage yesterday.

They must beat New Zealand in the Super Eights clash in Colombo today or they will be out before their final match against Pakistan.

Sri Lanka were left on the brink after being blasted out for 95 against England to lose by 51 runs a day after New Zealand and Pakistan took a point each from a washout.

"We have got to now win both these games," left-arm spinner Wellalage told reporters. "We know how important a home World Cup is. The fans have turned up in numbers and we have always believed that we can make it to the semi-finals.

"The last two games haven't gone to our plan but we are looking forward to the must-win clash tomorrow."

The 23-year-old Wellalage has stood up for Sri Lanka in the absence of senior bowlers Matheesha Pathirana, Wanindu Hasaranga and Eshan Malinga because of injury.

Wellalage bowled in the power play against England and finished with three wickets including captain Harry Brook.

"It was a challenge bowling during the power plays and the key was for me to deny the batsmen boundaries," he said. "I had to be clever with my lengths and when I did that the batters had to take a few chances. I relished the new challenge."

Sri Lanka have struggled in global tournaments since winning the T20 World Cup in 2014. They hosted New Zealand in late 2024 winning Test and ODI series and drawing a T20 series 1-1.

"We have played New Zealand a lot in recent years and we know that we can beat them in these conditions. "We are still in with a chance to make it to the semis and winning tomorrow will be important."



TENNIS

# Medvedev through, suggests ranking system rethink

BUBLIK BEAT LUCKY LOSER STRUFF 6-3, 6-4 TO REACH NEXT ROUND

AFP  
Dubai

Daniil Medvedev beat Shang Juncheng on Tuesday to reach the last 16 of the Dubai Open but implored tour organisers to limit ranking points to only the most prestigious events to reduce player workload.

A week after beating the Chinese world number 262 in Doha, Medvedev again faced Shang and won 6-1, 6-3 in his opening match in the 500-level event in the UAE.

After the victory, Medvedev said he would like to see more mandatory events in the calendar, but for ranking points only to be attributed to Masters-level events and Grand Slams in order to convince players to enter less tournaments. "I would think the players would agree, from what I'm hearing, to making... even more mandatory tournaments," the 11th-ranked Russian told reporters.

"I would say make four Grand Slams, I don't know, 11 Masters, and that's it. The other tournaments (500- and 250-level events), maybe make them without points or something."

The 2021 US Open winner said that the chase for points to climb the rankings and reach the ATP Finals - reserved for the top eight in the world - causes players to increase their workload, sometimes to the detriment of their bodies.

"What happens is last year, Holger (Rune) got injured in Stockholm (250 event), everybody was like, 'Yeah, but you don't have to play it! If he wants to be in Turin (for the ATP Finals), he has to, even if it's not a mandatory tournament,'" Medvedev said.

"Last year, I played in seven tournaments in a row. Did I have to? No. I played bad in the beginning of the year, maybe I can get 100 points here, 200 points here,



Russia's Daniil Medvedev in action during his Dubai Open match against China's Shang Juncheng in Dubai yesterday. (Reuters)

be higher seeded next year. "If there would be no points there, at least it is an easier decision. But it's not going to happen."

Elsewhere in Dubai, second seed Alexander Bublik beat lucky loser Jan-Lennard Struff 6-3, 6-4 to reach the second round.

"I think I played a solid match," said Bublik, who lost in the Dubai final two years ago. "I mean, it's never easy to face Jan. I am trail-

ing a bit in the head-to-head, but I knew what I had to do. I knew what shots I have to execute to get more chances to win easily, and I think I did well in more important moments."

Bublik is enjoying a career-high ranking of No10, but insisted he prefers to focus on his game, knowing the two factors are not mutually exclusive. "It's just a number and if you play well, you

are going to have a better ranking," he said. "If you start losing matches, the ranking is going to go down very quickly if everyone else plays well. So, for me, it's more about keeping my game and enjoying the moment."

Former world number three Stefanos Tsitsipas was eliminated in straight sets by Ugo Humbert, while Jiri Lehecka won 4-6, 6-4, 6-2 against Luca Nardi.

AL THUMAMA RAMADAN TOURNAMENT

## Al Sha'ab secure 2-1 win over Al Dafna

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Strong defensive performances marked matches in the third edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament on Monday night at Al Furjan Stadium in Al Thumama. The tournament is being held in cooperation with the Qatar Sports for All Federation.

Only three goals were scored across three matches, reflecting the disciplined approach adopted by the participating teams in the competition for players aged 10 to 14 (born between 2012 and 2016). Al Sha'ab secured a 2-1 victory over Al Dafna in the opening match of the day. Saif al-Darwish delivered a standout performance for Al Shaab and was named Man of the Match.

The second fixture ended in a goalless draw between Palestine and Al Waab. Zakaria al-Najjar of Palestine received the Man of the Match award for his efforts.

Another goalless draw followed in the third match, as Al Shahania and Medical Care shared the points. Jassim Ali al-Saadi of Medical Care was named Man of the Match.

Tournament director Youssef Abdul Nour presented the individual awards following the matches. The third edition features 13 teams divided into two groups. Group A includes Doha, Turki Bin Abdullah, Al Wajba, Al Zaeem, Al Rayyan and Al Thumama. Group B comprises Al Dafna, Al Shaab, Al Waab, Medical Care, Palestine, Al Shaqab and Al Shahaniya. Three matches are being played daily as the tournament progresses.



## RADUCANU IN NO HURRY TO FIND NEW COACH

Emma Raducanu insists she is in no rush to find a new coach as the former US Open champion looks to revert to a "more aggressive style of play".

The British tennis player has got through several coaches in a relatively short career, with Francisco Roig the latest to leave the role after the Spaniard spent six months working with Raducanu.

The 23-year-old was outspoken after a second-round loss to Anastasia Potapova at the Australian Open, saying she wanted to be playing "in a way more similar to when I was younger". In Raducanu's next tournament in Romania she reached her first final since the stunning US Open triumph in 2021 and she insisted she

remains happy working with hitting partner Alexis Canter, a 27-year-old former British player who reached a career-high ranking of 779 last year.

"Right now I wouldn't say I'm actively looking for a coach," Raducanu told the Guardian. "I have Alexis in my corner. He knows me as a person. He knows me as a player and I've actually had some success with him in the past year. So it's going well."

"I know the drills that I need to be doing... just repetition of doing those key fundamentals. I think I want to go back to that and a more aggressive style of playing."

Raducanu's run to the final in Cluj-Napoca - where she won just two games against Sorana

Cirstea - came at the cost of contracting a virus she struggled to shake off while losing in the first round of two tournaments in the Middle East.

"I had really long effects for the last three weeks," she said. "I've been trying to clear them. So the Middle East trip was very difficult for me."

"I'm getting ready for Indian Wells and just trying to get back to full health. And I still have a bit of time, so I'm just looking forward to doing my best to be ready for that."

Despite her recent setbacks, Raducanu remains 25th in the world rankings heading into the WTA tournament in Indian Wells, California, starting on March 4.

## Olympic champ Yoka rows back on nationality switch

France's 2016 Olympic boxing champion Tony Yoka denied yesterday he was switching allegiance to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the country of his father's birth, as he had suggested he was doing hours earlier. "There is no question of me changing my sporting nationality," the 33-year-old heavyweight said in a video posted on Instagram. Yoka went to the DRC a few days ago before posting on X his ambition to represent the country in 2028. "I am proud to shine a light on the Democratic Republic of Congo in the eyes of the world," he wrote late on Monday accompanied by a photograph of his Congolese boxing licence. "Also to be able to honour my word and pay homage to the minister (for Sport in the DRC) Didier Budimbu who has instilled confidence in me for this adventure." Yoka, who has a professional record of 15 victories and three defeats, shared a post by Budimbu, who said the boxer is "targeting Olympic gold for the DRC". Budimbu added Yoka will "carry the Congolese flag into the ring with a national license" and "train tomorrow's elite in a dedicated academy" as well as promote the country's brand.

BOXING

# Mayweather to fight Pacquiao in Las Vegas in September

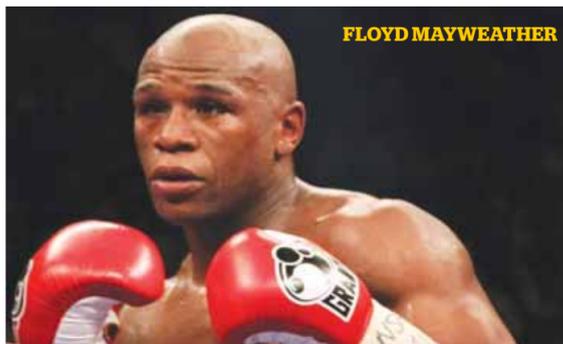
AFP  
Los Angeles

Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao will meet in a long-awaited rematch of the highest-grossing clash in boxing history this September at the Sphere in Las Vegas, Netflix announced.

The bout between two of boxing's biggest names - who famously fought a blockbuster clash in 2015, and are now both in their late forties - comes days after Mayweather announced he is coming out of retirement.

It will be broadcast live September 19 on Netflix, as the global streaming platform increasingly moves into live sports with glitzy one-off events. "Floyd and I gave the world what remains the biggest fight in boxing history. The fans have waited long enough - they deserve this rematch," said Pacquiao, 47, in a joint statement.

Mayweather beat fellow welterweight Pacquiao in their money-spinning 2015 "Fight of the Century," which generated a record 4.6 million pay-per-view buys but



FLOYD MAYWEATHER



MANNY PACQUIAO

largely failed to live up to the hype. Mayweather is believed to have earned an estimated \$300mn from the unanimous points victory over the Filipino icon, which remains the most lucrative fight in history and generated more than \$600mn revenue. Former multi-weight world champion Mayweather retired from boxing in 2017, unbeaten in 50 bouts, though he has continued to fight in exhibitions since, including an upcoming clash this spring with Mike Tyson.

Pacquiao, also a multiple world

champion, retired for a four-year period from 2021 in which he unsuccessfully ran for the Philippine presidency. He came out of retirement last year. Rumors of a Mayweather-Pacquiao rematch have circulated for years, and speculation soared following Mayweather's announcement last week that he would return to the professional arena this year. "I already fought and beat Manny once. This time will be the same result," said Mayweather, in the statement.

"I want Floyd to live with the

one loss on his professional record and always remember who gave it to him," said Pacquiao. The clash will be the first-ever professional boxing match to take place at Sphere, a venue primarily used for concerts and films which opened in 2023 and features an immersive 160,000-square-foot wraparound screen on its curved interior walls. It will be shown globally on Netflix, which boasts some 325mn subscribers. The streamer has recently increased its sports offerings, with a super middleweight clash be-

tween Terence Crawford and Saul "Canelo" Alvarez in Las Vegas last September viewed by 41mn people. It also aired divisive fights pitting YouTuber-turned-boxer Jake Paul against a 58-year-old Tyson in November 2024, and versus Anthony Joshua last December.

Both were criticized for proving to be lackluster contests, but drew enormous global attention. Nicknamed "Money", former multi-weight world champion Mayweather was once the world's highest-paid athlete. His last pro-

fessional bout took place in 2017 against UFC star Conor McGregor. The 48-year-old American has long been a controversial figure, often criticized for an overly defensive style, and accused by some of dodging the most dangerous opponents simply to embellish his record. Mayweather has also spent time in prison for one of a string of domestic violence incidents.

Pacquiao known at home as "The National Fist" and more broadly as "PacMan", is an eight-division world champion. He is beloved in the Philippines for his rags-to-riches story, having dropped out of high school at 14, selling donuts on the roadside and working as a grocery stacker.

Pacquiao, having already served as a Philippines senator from 2016, retired for a four-year period from 2021 in which he tried and failed to win the country's top political office. The diminutive southpaw came out of retirement last year. He was held to a draw by Mario Barrios, putting his professional record at 62-8-3. "As always, I dedicate this fight to my fellow Filipinos around the world and to bringing glory to the Philippines," said Pacquiao.

## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Sorloth's hat-trick helps Atletico past Brugge into last 16

Simeone's side secure 4-1 win to progress 7-4 on aggregate



Atletico Madrid's Alexander Sorloth (centre) scores against Club Brugge at Metropolitano Stadium in Madrid (AFP)

AFP  
Madrid

Alexander Sorloth's hat-trick fired Atletico Madrid into the Champions League last 16 with an emphatic 4-1 win over Club Brugge yesterday, progressing 7-4 on aggregate from the play-off round.

Brugge could not keep the Norwegian target man at bay as he settled an entertaining tie with a display of lethal finishing at the Metropolitano stadium.

After Joel Ordonez had cancelled out Sorloth's opener, Johnny Cardoso smashed Atletico in front and Sorloth added two more goals late on to seal his team's victory.

Diego Simeone's Atletico, who have never won the competition, took a few minutes to get going in the early exchanges and David Hancko blocked Hugo Vetlesen's effort well as the visitors attempted to capitalise. However, the Spaniards took the lead when goalkeeper Jan Oblak went route one from the back, finding Sorloth in a good position.

The powerful striker held off his marker and beat goalkeeper Simon Mignolet, who handled the shot poorly and might have kept it out. Julian Alvarez headed wide as Atletico, ascendant, looked for a second. The Rojiblancos twice lost the lead in Belgium last week against Ivan Leko's side and it happened again a few minutes before half-time.

Ordonez nodded home from on the goal-line after Brandon Mechele flicked on a corner

into his path. Brugge almost took the lead before the break but Oblak made a superb save to claw out Vetlesen's header. Instead Atletico went ahead shortly after the restart, with Cardoso hammering home from the edge of the box after the ball was cleared into his path.

Atletico nervously held the lead, aware of the visitors' threat, until Sorloth gave them some breathing room with his second of the night. Ademola Lookman and Antoine Griezmann exchanged slick passes and the former cut the ball back for Sorloth to dispatch.

The forward rounded off an excellent night by volleying home Matteo Ruggeri's cross with three minutes to go. Sorloth, who netted twice against Espanyol on Saturday in La Liga, has 10 goals in 2026 to date, even though he is often rotated in and out of Simeone's team

## PREVIEW

## Enrique urges PSG to go for victory against Monaco



Paris Saint-Germain's coach Luis Enrique (centre) talks to his players during a training session in Poissy, in the western outskirts of Paris. (AFP)

Agencies  
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique said his side will focus on winning rather than protecting their lead when they host AS Monaco in the second leg of their UEFA Champions League knockout phase play-off at the Parc des Princes tonight.

PSG hold a slender advantage from the first leg, having won 3-2 last week. But Enrique stressed that the mindset must remain proactive on a night when one team's European campaign will come to an end.

"One team is going into it eliminated (as it stands), and one team will be eliminated at full time," he said. "We'll need to manage the game's big moments. That will be difficult, but we want to keep going in the Champions League."

Monaco are expected to press from the outset as they attempt to overturn the deficit, and Enrique acknowledged his players must be prepared for difficult spells.

"It'll be tricky because Monaco will be starting the game a goal down, so we need to know that there'll be tough moments," he said. "The best way of doing that is to play as we normally do, to try to hold onto the ball and to press in the same way when we don't have the ball. We're out not to defend a result but to win a game."

Forward Desire Doue underlined the squad's readiness, say-

ing: "We trained well this morning, and we're ready to put in a big performance. Champions League matches are always difficult as they can come down to a single goal, but we know that we'll have the support of our fans."

The tie remains finely balanced after a dramatic first leg at the Stade Louis II. Attacking too much against a technically strong Monaco side could expose his team to costly counterattacks. Coach Sébastien Pocognoli's Monaco has 13 goals in the past six games. Although two of those have been defeats, the attack is looking much sharper. PSG's defense looks weaker than last season — conceding against Monaco after just 55 seconds — and is not helped by uncertainty over the goalkeeper.

In the first leg, Folarin Balogun scored twice inside 18 minutes to give Monaco a flying start, while PSG suffered further setbacks as Vitorino missed a penalty and Ousmane Dembélé went off injured.

Doue sparked the turnaround, pulling one back and setting up Achraf Hakimi for the equaliser before halftime. Monaco were reduced to 10 men when Aleksandr Golovin was sent off early in the second half, and Doue struck again on 67 minutes to seal a 3-2 comeback. Enrique has called on his side to approach the return leg "like it's the first leg" as PSG seek to finish the job on home soil.

PSG will be without star forward Ousmane Dembele. The Ballon d'Or winner came off with a calf injury last Tuesday.

### Mexico president says there are 'all guarantees' for 2026 World Cup

Mexico City: Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum said there are "all the guarantees" for the 2026 FIFA World Cup to be held in the country, after the capture and death of Mexico's most-wanted cartel leader triggered roadblocks, arson and security clashes, notably in Jalisco state.

Asked if the top international football tournament, which is expected to draw crowds of fans from around the world to matches in Mexico City, Monterrey and Jalisco's capital Guadalajara, would pose a risk to visitors, Sheinbaum said there was "no risk." A spokesperson for FIFA told Reuters that the organisation was closely monitoring the situation and was in close contact with the authorities.

"We will continue to follow the actions and directions from the different government agencies, aimed at maintaining public safety and restoring normalcy, and we reiterate our close collaboration with federal, state, and local authorities," they said.

Local Mexican leagues postponed some matches that had been scheduled for Sunday, the day cartel members coordinated a series of violent attacks across the country in the aftermath of an

operation to capture cartel leader Nemesio Oseguera, known as "El Mencho," which resulted in his death. Sheinbaum told a morning press conference that the situation was continuing to normalise, noting that several new roadblocks appeared overnight but said security forces were working to safeguard public security.

Sheinbaum has largely followed the political map of her predecessor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who prioritised alleviating poverty and other root causes of violence, adopting a slogan of "hugs not bullets."

Asked whether the killing of Oseguera marked a break from that policy, Sheinbaum said this would never be the case. "The detention of a suspected criminal with an arrest warrant can generate this type of circumstance, but we are looking for peace, not war," she said. The arrests of other top cartel figures in Sinaloa state have in recent years also triggered cartel retaliation, including shootouts and vehicles set on fire. Mexico is set to host 13 of 104 World Cup matches. Four of these are set to be held in Guadalajara. It will also host some preliminary warm-up matches before the tournament opens on June 11.

## SPOTLIGHT

## UEFA can make fight against racism more than a slogan: Real Madrid's Arbeloa

AFP  
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa called on European football governing body UEFA to make their fight against racism into more than just a slogan after the alleged abuse of star Vinicius Junior.

UEFA provisionally suspended Benfica midfielder Gianluca Prestianni for today's Champions League play-off second leg against Real Madrid after Vinicius accused him of racial abuse in the first leg last week. If UEFA find Prestianni, who argued with the Brazilian while holding his shirt over his mouth, abused Vinicius at the end of their investigation into the incident he will be suspended for a minimum of 10 matches.

"We have a great opportunity to mark a turning point in the fight against racism," Arbeloa told reporters. "UEFA, which has always been and has led this fight against racism, now has the chance not to leave it at just a slogan, at just a nice banner before matches, and I hope that they seize this opportunity."

Vinicius scored a brilliant goal in the first leg, enabling Real Madrid to claim a 1-0 victory, before the alleged abuse led to the game being stopped for around 10 minutes. Arbeloa said he believed Vinicius will thrive on Wednesday at the Santiago Bernabeu as the record 15-time champions bid to reach the last 16.

"Vinicius Junior has always shown a lot of bravery and a lot of character," said Arbeloa. "That is always his response, it always has been and I think it always will be. He is a fighter and I'm sure tomorrow he will go out to fight and have a great game, and keep showing he's one of the best players on the planet."

Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois backed the 25-year-old winger, despite Prestianni and Benfica insisting there was no racial abuse. "Benfica are going to believe what their player says and we are 100 percent behind Vini, because Vini has fought thousands of battles on the pitch with defenders, there have been lots of clashes with players and he has never said something like this (happened)," Courtois told reporters.

"As (Prestianni) covered his mouth with his shirt, we can never know, and I think in the



Real Madrid's Spanish coach Alvaro Arbeloa speaks at a press conference on the eve of the UEFA Champions League knockout round play-off second leg match against Benfica in Madrid. (AFP)

end Benfica will defend their player. There's not much more we can do and then it's up to UEFA and the institutions to decide what they want to decide."

The Belgian stopper said he disagreed with Benfica coach Jose Mourinho's words after the game, with the veteran Portuguese manager attacking Vinicius for what he deemed a disrespectful celebration.

"At the end of the day Mourinho is Mourinho. As a coach you're always, I think, going to defend your club and what your player has told you," said Courtois. "The only thing that disappoints me a bit is using Vini's celebration. I don't think Vini did anything wrong there... I don't think we can justify alleged racism because of a celebration."

Vinicius has been abused by opposition supporters on numerous occasions since arriving at Real Madrid. Video footage showed some Benfica fans making monkey gestures at the attacker last week. "I think we have to be less stupid as a society," added Courtois.

Benfica have appealed against Prestianni's provisional one match ban to try and make him available to face Madrid. "Prestianni is being labelled a racist person, and I can assure you he is anything but racist," Benfica president Rui Costa told reporters.

The 20-year-old Argentine travelled to Madrid with his team-mates in case Benfica win their appeal. "UEFA has the decision in their hands, it made a decision, the club appealed, and we, as coaches, obviously have to prepare for every scenario, and that's one of them," said Joao Tralhao, one of Mourinho's assistants.

Former Real Madrid coach Mourinho will not be able to lead his team from the dug-out back at the Santiago Bernabeu because he was sent off for protesting towards the end of the first leg. "Obviously he is our leader, and a leader is always missed, his presence is always missed," added Tralhao, standing in for the Portuguese veteran. "However even though Jose Mourinho cannot be in the technical area, he is with us."

### Mbappe to miss Real Madrid Champions League clash against Benfica

Madrid: Real Madrid striker Kylian Mbappe will miss the Champions League play-off second leg against Benfica on Wednesday because of a knee injury, AFP reported yesterday.

The French superstar, Madrid's top scorer this season, has been playing through knee pain over the past few weeks but will not be involved at the Santiago Bernabeu according to the source, confirming a report in French newspaper L'Equipe.

Madrid hold a 1-0 lead over Benfica from the first leg in Lisbon last week, in a match which was disrupted by alleged racial abuse aimed at Los Blancos winger Vinicius Junior. Mbappe's coach Alvaro Arbeloa said earlier that the player was "prepared to play" in the second leg and that he "valued his commitment" in playing through pain, but it was later decided that the forward would not feature against Benfica.