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PREVIEW

Teams on edge as F1 reset faces litmus test in Australia

F1 has simultaneously overhauled chassis and power unit regulations for the first time in decades



A crew member walks past images of drivers as teams prepare for the Australian Formula One Grand Prix at the Albert Park Circuit in Melbourne. (AFP)

Reuters
Melbourne

Formula One's new era starts at this weekend's season-opening Australian Grand Prix, where teams will leap into the unknown and grapple with sweeping technical changes under race conditions for the first time.

F1 has simultaneously overhauled chassis and power unit regulations for the first time in decades, posing a challenge for drivers and engineers alike while raising concerns about the quality of racing.

With near-parity between electrical and combustion engines and cars running on 100% advanced sustainable fuel, drivers gained some insight into the changes during winter testing. But all are in the dark about how the reset will play out when going wheel-to-wheel on race-day.

"I'm certainly more comfortable now than I was a couple of months ago, with how to drive these cars and how to try and get the most out of them," McLaren's Oscar Piastri told reporters. "But I think there's still the saying of, 'You

don't know what you don't know?" Australian Piastri said McLaren thought they had the cars worked out two months ago, only to find they had "a whole bunch of stuff" they did not understand during winter testing. With more power generated by electricity than last year's engines, there is more emphasis on drivers needing to be tactical with energy deployment and regeneration.

The old drag reduction system has been replaced by a new overtake mode giving extra power for overtaking. Four-times world champion Max Verstappen described the changes as "like Formula E on steroids" and "anti-racing".

Formula One chief executive Stefano Domenicali defended them and assured fans there will still be plenty of thrills. The changes may have different effects at different circuits, leaving all teams to learn on the fly, week by week. Piastri said Sunday's race at Albert Park would probably showcase the more "unnatural" parts of driving.

"You know, a lot more lift and coast, a lot more kind of just driving to maximise the power unit," he said. "You've got power units that are reducing in power down the straights at different points. And there's a lot of unknowns, a lot

of challenges in there." The new regulations raised hopes of a more open championship and the prospect of a disruptor team emerging to force change at the top. But pre-season testing in Bahrain hinted at a familiar top four, with Ferrari, Mercedes, Red Bull and McLaren all performing.

Audi team principal Jonathan Wheatley said the gap between the "best and the rest" might only widen. "I think it's going to be a very different year in terms of the competitiveness in the sport," he told Reuters. "We're already seeing the gap between the fastest teams and the slowest teams, but larger than it's been in the last few years."

Whatever the pecking order, F1 race tracks will be more crowded with the addition of the new Cadillac team although there may be more breathing room at Albert Park given Aston Martin's pre-season troubles.

Despite the technical guidance of Adrian Newey, who joined from Red Bull, the Honda-powered team completed few laps during winter testing and have reliability problems. The AMR26 cars will be in Australia - something of a relief for F1 management - but may only race for a few laps before retiring.

Piastri cool on prospects of breakthrough win at Australian GP



Melbourne: Oscar Piastri has moved to cool expectations of a drought-breaking win at his home Australian Grand Prix, insisting McLaren are not the dominant force that arrived at Albert Park 12 months ago. After seven race wins last season and a third-placing in the drivers championship, Piastri has generated huge buzz in his hometown Melbourne and is expected to draw record crowds for his bid to become the first home winner since the race joined Formula One in 1985.

McLaren qualified both cars at the front of the grid last year and Lando Norris won the season-opener on a wet track, but Piastri said he had "no idea" whether he could win this year as the team grapples with F1's biggest technical overhaul in decades.

"Based off testing, we seem like we're in the mix at the front," he said. "I certainly wouldn't be saying that we're favourite to be winning. The picture doesn't look quite as positive for us at the moment as it did 12 months ago. We're in the mix, but we need to find a bit more."

Piastri led last year's championship by 34 points before a mid-season slump opened the door for British teammate Norris to claim his maiden title. He said the disappointment of missing out had faded and he had little time

to dwell on the past due to the short off-season and the need to get up to speed with the technical changes.

He also said he felt no extra burden to perform at his home race, a year after finishing ninth following a skid into grass. "Obviously last year's race didn't end how I wanted, but you know, there's no extra pressure to try and make up for that or anything," he said. "We've got enough challenges to not be worrying about that."

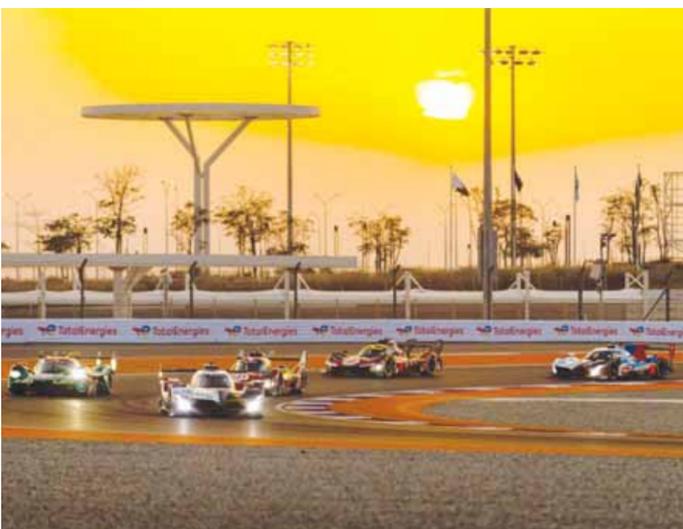
Defending champion Norris may again loom as his toughest adversary, even with pre-season buzz surrounding Mercedes and Ferrari following their positive winter testing. McLaren gave equal treatment to Piastri and Norris last year, although there were controversies involving the application of the team's so-called 'Papaya Rules'.

One involved the Australian letting Norris past after a botched pitstop by the team at Monza. Piastri said any issues from last season had been dealt with internally and the team had moved on.

"We're not going to be swapping each other around for no reason (when racing)," he said. "Again, if there's any issues or tense moments that arise, then we'll deal with it as a team, as we do and try to make some progress."

MOTORSPORT

Qatar 1812km postponed, WEC season to start at Imola



The 1812km had been scheduled for March 26-28 at the Lusail International Circuit.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The opening round of the World Endurance Championship (WEC), the Qatar 1812km, was on Tuesday postponed "in light of the current and evolving geopolitical situation in the Middle East," the organisers announced.

The 1812km had been scheduled for March 26-28 at the Lusail International Circuit. The endurance season will now begin with the Six Hours of Imola in Italy from April 17 to 19, the statement said. The eight-round season includes the 24-hour race at Le Mans in June.

In a statement organisers said: "FIA WEC management has been in constant dialogue with the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) in light of the current and evolving geopolitical situation in the Middle East. With the safety and security of competitors, personnel and fans of the utmost importance, the decision has been taken to delay the event that had been due to take place on 26-28 March. Following further discussions with our

colleagues at Lusail International Circuit (LIC), where the race is held, a new date for the Qatar 1812km during the second half of the campaign will be finalised and communicated in due course. The first round of the season will consequently now be the 6 Hours of Imola in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy on 17-19 April."

Abdulahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai, President, Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation and Lusail International Circuit, said: "Following in-depth discussions with the FIA World Endurance Championship and all relevant stakeholders, the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation and Lusail International Circuit respect and support FIA WEC's decision to postpone the Qatar 1812km race. We thank our fans, teams and partners for their understanding and continued support, and look forward to welcoming everyone back to Lusail International Circuit."

Mohammed Ben Sulayem, President, Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), said: "The safety and wellbeing of our community will always be the FIA's first priority, and I thank our Member Club the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Fed-

eration, Lusail International Circuit, the ACO and our championship colleagues for the measured and collaborative approach that has led to this decision. As the opening event of the FIA World Endurance Championship, the Qatar 1812km holds a special place for many fans, drivers and teams alike, and we will work closely with all involved to reschedule the race for later in the 2026 season. The FIA continues to monitor developments across the region and our thoughts remain with all those affected by these recent events as we hope for calm, safety and a return to stability."

Frédéric Lequien, CEO, FIA World Endurance Championship, said: "The Qatar 1812km is an integral part of the FIA WEC calendar, and I offer my sincere thanks to Lusail International Circuit and the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation for their close collaboration. We have all been working hand-in-hand since Saturday morning to find the best solution for staging the event, and while we still need a few more days to finalise the exact revised date, I can confirm it will be during the second half of the 2026 season. We will provide more information as soon as it is available."

MATCH REPORT

Opener Allen fires New Zealand into World Cup final

BLACK CAPS STAR HITS FASTEST T20 WORLD CUP CENTURY

Reuters
Kolkata

Finn Allen plundered the fastest century in Twenty20 World Cup history to lead New Zealand into the final with a nine-wicket demolition of South Africa at the Eden Gardens yesterday.

South Africa, previously unbeaten in the tournament, recovered from a precarious 77-5 to post a competitive 169-8 after Marco Jansen led their recovery with a belligerent 55 not out.

Allen smashed an unbeaten 100 off 33 balls, however, and shared a 117-run opening stand with Tim Seifert (58) as New Zealand romped to their target in only 12.5 overs.

Allen, who hit eight sixes, finished the match with his 10th four to bring up the fastest hundred in a T20 international between two full-member nations.

"I'd say it's pretty up there," player of the match Allen said.

"Obviously, we wanted to try and put them on the back foot early.

"I think it's easy for me when Timmy's going like that.

"I can kind of just watch and then hit it when it's in my area and then just try and give him the strike."

New Zealand skipper Mitch Santner said yesterday: "Yeah it was nice. When you see how good South Africa are, to put on a performance like that in a crunch game is pretty pleasing. I guess every time you show up and lose a game you're learning from it. I guess today was just about trying to keep pressure on throughout, and when you take wickets consistently it's a challenge to keep going with the bat."

South Africa went into the match on the back of seven wins in a row including a seven-wicket thumping of New Zealand in a group match.

The presence of two left-



New Zealand's Finn Allen in action during the T20 World Cup 2026 semi-final against South Africa at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday. (Reuters)

handed batters in South Africa's top three prompted New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner to bring on off-spinner Cole McConchie as early as the second over and the move immediately paid off.

Quinton de Kock (10) was snared at mid-on and Ryan Rickelton slashed the ball to backward point off the next delivery.

New Zealand were denied a third powerplay strike when Rachin Ravindra spilled Aiden Markram (18) at midwicket with the South Africa captain on three.

Ravindra made amends in his first over, however, as Markram was adjudged out even though fielder Daryl Mitchell himself was uncertain he had completed

a clean catch in the deep. More drama followed in Ravindra's next over when Glenn Phillips dropped David Miller, but five balls later Mitchell held on at long-off to remove him.

Jimmy Neesham dismissed the dangerous Dewald Brevis (34) to reduce South Africa to 77-5 in the 11th over but the Proteas fought back as Jansen combined with Tristan Stubbs (29) in a rapid 73-run stand. Allen and Seifert looked in a hurry to finish the job from the start, amassing 84 runs in the six powerplay overs to take control of the match.

Allen plundered 22 runs from a Corbin Bosch over in a scintillating display of power-hitting

and it was not until the 10th over that Kagiso Rabada beat Seifert's swipe across the line and sent the balls flying.

New Zealand were cruising by then, however, and Ravindra joined Allen to complete the chase in dominant style.

Defending champions India take on twice champions England in the second semi-final in Mumbai today.

BRIEF SCORES

New Zealand 173 for 1 (Allen 100*, Seifert 58, Ravindra 13*, Rabada 1-28) **beat South Africa 169 for 8** (Jansen 55*, Brevis 34, McConchie 2-9, Ravindra 2-29) **by nine wickets**

INDIA ARE FAVOURITES, BUT ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN: BROOK

Mumbai, India: Harry Brook conceded yesterday that India were favourites to win the T20 World Cup on home soil, but warned them that England's "perfect performance" was "just around the corner". The previous two winners of the T20 World Cup - India won in 2024, England in 2022 - will go head-to-head in a blockbuster semi-final at Mumbai's famed Wankhede stadium today. The match will be played in a cauldron-like atmosphere - temperatures are forecast to be in the mid-30s Celsius with a capacity crowd of 35,000 India fans raising the roof. Hundreds of millions more will follow on TV and streaming sites across the cricket-obsessed nation.

Asked if it gets any better than that, Brook said: "It's up there for sure.

"It's a dream come true for most of us to play in a World Cup semi-final against the home nation on a very iconic ground," the England captain told reporters at the Wankhede stadium, minutes before his side's final training session ahead of the semi-final.

"We're obviously going into the game very confident. We're playing some good cricket.

"We haven't quite played that perfect performance, but I feel like it's just around the corner. "Hopefully it's tomorrow night and we go out there and we just play with freedom, play brave

and look to take it to them as much as we can."

It is the third T20 World Cup in a row that England will have played India in the semi-finals and each time the winners went on to lift the trophy. In 2022, England crushed India by 10 wickets in Adelaide and went on to beat Pakistan in the Melbourne final. Two years ago India won in Guyana by a similarly dominant 68 runs before downing South Africa in Barbados.

"I do believe that India were favourites from the start of the competition, as they should be on their home soil, with home crowds and knowing the venues better than anyone else," said Brook. "But T20 is such a fickle game, anything can happen." England experienced a hostile crowd at the Wankhede in their first match of the tournament when they beat Nepal in a final-ball thriller. We've won tight games, which in World Cups proved to be very important," said Brook.

England were shaky in the group phase but came through the Super Eights with brilliantly executed wins over Sri Lanka, Pakistan and New Zealand when all three games could easily have been lost. "We've won games which we probably shouldn't have won, and it just feels like we've never really been out of any game so far," said Brook. "It holds you in good stead in these world competitions."

ANNOUNCEMENT

Pakistan drop Babar for Bangladesh ODI series

AFP
Islamabad, Pakistan

Pakistan dropped batting great Babar Azam yesterday for next week's one-day international series in Bangladesh, bringing in six uncapped players with an eye on next year's World Cup.

Opener Saim Ayub, spin all-rounders Shadab Khan and Mohammad Nawaz, and pace bowler Naseem Shah were also dropped from the 15-man squad for the three-match series, to be played in Dhaka on March 11, 13 and 15.

The shake-up follows Pakistan's failure to reach the semi-finals of the T20 World Cup currently being played in India and Sri Lanka.

Azam scored only 91 runs in the T20 World Cup, but has amassed 6,501 runs in 140 ODIs with 20

centuries. Batsman Fakhar Zaman was ruled out with a hamstring injury suffered at the World Cup.

Pace spearhead Shaheen Shah Afridi will captain the squad, the Pakistan Cricket Board said.

Abdul Samad, Maaz Sadaqat, Muhammad Ghazi Ghorri, Saad Masood, Sahibzada Farhan and Shamyul Hussain are the six who have not played an ODI.

The 50-over World Cup will be hosted by South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia in October next year.

SQUAD

Shaheen Shah Afridi (captain), Abdul Samad, Abrar Ahmed, Faheem Ashraf, Faisal Akram, Haris Rauf, Hussain Talat, Maaz Sadaqat, Mohammad Rizwan, Mohammad Wasim, Muhammad Ghazi Ghorri, Saad Masood, Sahibzada Farhan, Salman Ali Agha, Shamyul Hussain

PREVIEW

Defending champions India eye special show to conquer 'street-smart' England

AFP
Mumbai, India

India will need a "special performance" to beat a "street-smart" England in their T20 World Cup semi-final in Mumbai, bowling coach Morne Morkel warned yesterday.

Sanju Samson's sparkling 97 not out enabled India to chase down 196 against the West Indies in a winner-takes-all clash on Sunday in Kolkata.

Morne said India would again need someone "to put their hand up" against Harry Brook's side today night to keep the nation's dream of a home World Cup win alive.

Morkel agreed India had not put together a flawless display in the tournament yet, but said that did not matter.

"We haven't really spoken about the perfect game," Morne told reporters at Mumbai's Wankhede stadium after India's final training session before today's big clash.

"It's not about how you get to the semi-finals. It's about the next two games, how we're going to play there.

"I think the quality of this team has been shown that on the day somebody will put their hand up.

"Then hopefully, especially tomorrow night, we can put that special performance in."

It is the third T20 World Cup in a row that India will play England in the semi-finals.

Both previous times the winners



England's captain Harry Brook (left) yesterday interacts with head coach Brendon McCullum during a training session on the eve of their World Cup semi-final against India at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai. (AFP)

went on to lift the trophy. In 2022, England crushed India by 10 wickets in Adelaide and beat Pakistan in the Melbourne final.

Two years ago India won in Guyana by a similarly dominant 68 runs before downing South Africa in Barbados. This time, though, India will have the backing of 35,000 fiercely partisan fans in Mumbai.

"It's a big occasion tomorrow night here, a semi-final, a great stadium to play a great game of cricket," said Morkel.

"So hopefully the boys can rock

up tomorrow and just be calm and execute those skills." India are leaving nothing to chance in their preparations.

Training on Tuesday night was delayed by an hour so it did not coincide with a lunar eclipse, which is considered unlucky in India.

"I was told about the lunar eclipse and the session was pushed backwards," admitted Morkel.

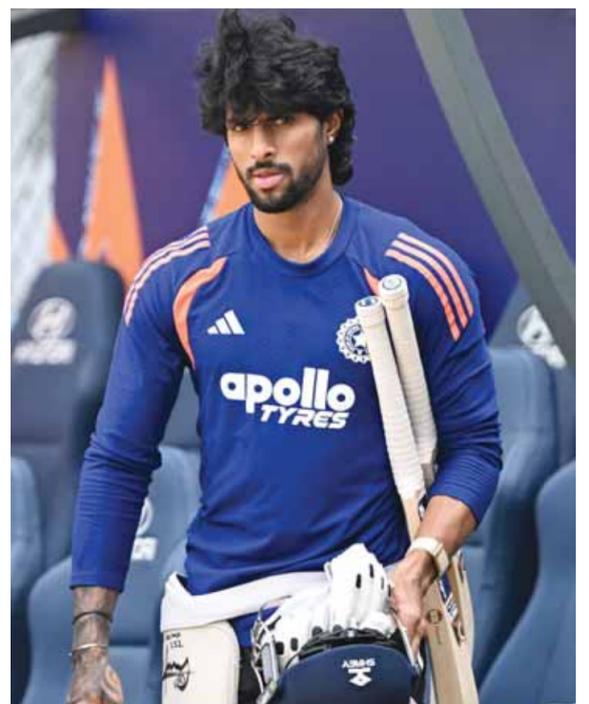
"I think the most important thing to focus on was the quality the guys put in at training, which was great to see."

India hosted the T20 World Cup in 2016 and lost in a Mumbai semi-final to eventual champions the West Indies.

India are wary of the threat posed by England, who were shaky in the group phase but powered through the Super Eights with wins over Sri Lanka, Pakistan and New Zealand.

"They're a team that's street smart. Obviously there's a lot of quality in their side," said Morkel.

"Their batting is deep, which makes them a very dangerous side.



India's Tilak Varma attends a training session ahead of the World Cup's semi-final against England. (AFP)

With the ball, they've got a lot of attacking options. "The way they approach a T20 game, fearless, trying to take the game on, will give you opportunities. Tomorrow

is going to be a good shoot-out between two aggressive teams."

New Zealand yesterday crushed South Africa in the first semi-final by nine wickets yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

Tennis world rocked by Middle East war as Indian Wells begins

AFP
Indian Wells, United States

With top players stranded in the Middle East by war and a tournament scrapped due to falling drone shrapnel, the glamorous globe-trotting world of tennis has not been spared the “brutal” reality of recent events, stars said at Indian Wells on Tuesday.

Dozens of international tennis players are gathering this week on the opposite side of the world in the California desert for the prestigious annual men’s and women’s tournaments.

Currently absent are the likes of Daniil Medvedev and Andrey Rublev, who have been trying to leave Dubai since Saturday, with thousands of flights from the Middle East canceled due to Iranian missiles and drones.

British star Jack Draper told reporters in Indian Wells that he had been in Dubai last week and “managed to get away almost probably one of the last flights out.”

“I just hope the players and all the staff

within the ATP are able to make it here, or the main thing is that they’re safe. “It’s obviously a very concerning situation for all involved, and I hope they can make it here.”

At least two tournaments in the United Arab Emirates were canceled after play was interrupted due to drone strikes on nearby refineries, with falling debris from the interception of a drone causing a fire in an oil field.

Simultaneously a major tennis tournament in Acapulco, Mexico starring the likes of Alexander Zverev went ahead last week even as the recent killing of a drug lord triggered deadly violence across the country.

“It’s brutal to think about some of that,” said American star Ben Shelton, who like many players at Indian Wells has friends “stuck” in the Middle East. “We talk about it all the time... it is something that’s on all of our minds,” he told a press conference.

The US and Israel on Saturday launched strikes on Tehran that killed supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other senior Iranian figures, followed by days of air and missile raids.

Iran’s armed forces responded with aerial

attacks on Israel, US embassies and military bases and on its Arab neighbors around the Gulf.

A small number of players at the Dubai ATP 500 were unable to leave, as the men’s and women’s global tours shift to California for the Masters and WTA 1000 in Indian Wells.

ATP, the men’s tour’s governing body, did not immediately respond to AFP request for comment after a Russian media report said Medvedev and Rublev had eventually been able to leave the Middle East via Oman.

“The health, safety and well-being of our players, staff and tournament personnel is our priority... We are in direct communication with those affected,” the ATP had said in an earlier statement on social media.

Men’s world number two Jannik Sinner on Tuesday said he hopes “that everyone is safe and they can come here to play or also to go home.”

“There are certain scenarios we cannot control, so I tried of course to be focused, but you also realize that there are much more important things in life than playing tennis,” he added.

Alcaraz ready to extend unbeaten run

World number one Carlos Alcaraz believes controlling his emotions has been the secret of his unbeaten start to 2026 as he chases a third title of the year at Indian Wells. The 22-year-old Spanish star made history in Melbourne last month with victory at the Australian Open, becoming the youngest man ever to complete a career Grand Slam.

He followed that up by pocketing the Qatar Open and arrives in California on the back of 12 straight wins since the turn of the year. Alcaraz, who is targeting a third Indian Wells title after wins in 2023 and 2024, says he is not dwelling on Novak Djokovic’s record 41-match winning streak from 2011. “Obviously I know that 41, Novak holds the record,” Alcaraz told reporters on Tuesday.

“You don’t realize how difficult it is until you’re chasing that. When you’re on 12 wins, it’s like (winning) four or five more tournaments, the biggest tournaments in the world. You realize...how impressive it is.”

Alcaraz, who has already amassed seven Grand Slam titles, puts his recent success down to learning to keep his temperament in check.

“I think on the court I just I control my emotions even better,” Alcaraz said. “I would say that was the key of, you know, the good level of tennis that I have been playing lately...I just control myself, and in a calm place I can find the solutions and I can go through.”

“When I was getting mad or when I was playing bad or whatever, I just found the right way again, because I was calm.”

OPINION

Sabalenka, Swiatek disagree on five-set Slam proposal

‘I think it would change a lot. I don’t think it would change anything for good’

AFP
Indian Wells, United States

World number one Aryna Sabalenka on Tuesday voiced her support for a proposal to make women’s matches best-of-five sets during the later stages of Grand Slam tournaments.

Speaking ahead of this week’s ATP-WTA tournament in Indian Wells, the hard-hitting Sabalenka said she believed switching to five sets would benefit her game.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” the four-time Grand Slam singles champion said when asked about the idea, which was floated by incoming US Tennis Association chief Craig Tiley at the Australian Open earlier this year.

“I feel like I would have probably more Grand Slams,” Sabalenka added.

“Physically I’m really strong, and I’m pretty confident that my body can handle that. So let’s do it.”

Tiley, the former head of the Australian Open who last week was named as the new USTA chief, told the *New York Times* in an interview last month that switching to five sets from the quarter-finals onwards at Grand Slams should be discussed.

“All the research shows interest grows as the match goes on,” Tiley said. “As a sport, we need to evolve.”

But while Sabalenka backed the move, other women players were more circumspect.

“I mean, it probably would favor me, because I’m physically up there with the best, but I mean, I probably wouldn’t want to see that happen,” reigning French Open champion Coco Gauff told reporters.



Aryna Sabalenka and Iga Swiatek (below) speak to the media on the eve of the Indian Wells Open. (AFP)



“And if it were to happen, I would prefer it to be the whole tournament, not just the quarters.

I think changing the format in the middle of the tournament defeats the purpose of the playing field.”

Six-time Grand Slam champion and former world number one Iga Swiatek was firmly against the idea, and questioned the suggestion it would boost audiences.

“I think honestly it’s a weird approach in the world where everything is becoming faster, you know,” Swiatek said.

“So I don’t know if the audience honestly would like that.”

“Also, I don’t know if we would be able to keep the quality for five sets. Well, that’s a fact, like, men are more physically strong and they can handle it for sure better.”

Swiatek said the physical demands would also force players to adjust their schedules, potentially leading to them playing fewer tournaments.

“We have never practiced in a way to prepare for that, so we would need to change, I think, our whole calendar, because the Grand Slams would be so tough that I don’t think we would have honestly time to prepare for any other tournaments,” she said. “I think it would change a lot. I don’t think it would change anything for good.”

World number five Jessica Pegula echoed Swiatek’s remarks, stating while five sets were well within the physical capabilities of women, a switch could be counter-productive.

“I think we have amazing female athletes that honestly I think we could do that,” the American said. “I don’t think it’s the fact that we can’t; I just don’t necessarily think that we should.”

“On that aspect, I don’t even know how you would schedule tournaments. We’d have to add weeks. We can’t even get through the schedule now. So I’m not really sure for like a fan experience how that would really work.”

FOCUS

Donald to captain Europe again at 2027 Ryder Cup

AFP
London

Julian Guyer Luke Donald will captain Europe again at the 2027 Ryder Cup at Adare Manor in Ireland as he bids to become the first man to lead a side to three consecutive wins in the competition, officials announced Wednesday.

The 48-year-old Englishman, a former world number one, previously led Europe to victory in the biennial tournament in Rome in 2023 and then at Bethpage Black in New York last year with a dramatic 15-13 win. “The last two Ryder Cups have meant a lot to me and my family,” said Donald in a European Tour statement. “I didn’t imagine this third time would come,” he added ahead of what will be the centenary Ryder Cup. “Celebrating on that Sunday night in New York after a pressure packed week in a tough environment, I thought maybe my job was done - but maybe there is a little more story to tell...”

“It’s a real privilege and I am certainly looking forward to another home Ryder Cup.”

Donald was a playing member of the victorious European team at the 2006 Ryder Cup, held at the K Club in County Kildare. “The Irish golf fans are some of the best in the world,” he said, with the 2027 event set to run from September 17-19. “They are so passionate about the game, so hospitable and so down to earth.” Tiger Woods, whose tally of 15 major champi-

onships is second only to the 18 won by compatriot Jack Nicklaus, is reportedly in line to captain the United States team at Adare Manor. Ryder Cup Europe chief executive Guy Kinnings said the “meticulous “ Donald, renowned for the care with which he selects pairings, was the right choice to lead Europe once more.

“He has faced a lot of challenges as captain throughout his two terms, and he has handled all of them with his usual calm, poise and authority and above all with respect,” Kinnings said.

“He is meticulous in everything he does when it comes to planning and preparation, but Luke would be the first to acknowledge that as good a job as he has done, this is a new challenge for him and the team.

“He will be as motivated and as committed as ever to help them achieve more success.”

The Ryder Cup, named in honour of its founder Samuel Ryder, an English businessman and golf enthusiast, was first staged in 1927. Since golfers from continental Europe were added to the previous British and Irish team in 1979, Europe have won 13 matches, while retaining the Ryder Cup once with a tie, and the United States nine editions.

Last year, Donald’s men had to stave off a final-day surge by the United States in singles after dominating the opening two days’ foursomes and four-ball matches to lead by 11.5 points to 4.5. It was the first time either team had won away from home since Europe’s ‘Miracle at Medinah’ triumph in 2012.

Van Aert suspects ‘sabotage’ after return race scuppered by puncture

Belgian rider Wout Van Aert claimed he suspects “sabotage” after his return to racing at the Samyn Classic was hit by a late puncture. Van Aert made his return in the one-day event in Belgium on Tuesday after suffering a fractured ankle in a cyclo-cross race in January. But he met more misfortune as his hopes of a comeback win were ended by a puncture with 10km remaining of the race. “Suddenly, there were a lot of shards of glass on the road. It wasn’t deliberately aimed at me,” Van Aert told Sporza after the race in which he eventually finished 60th. He said the riders had already ridden that part of the course five or six times earlier in the race without any problems, so the glass “couldn’t have ended up there by accident.” “Anyway, I tried to give chase, but you know you’re not going to ride faster than a peloton on your own... It smells like sabotage.” Van Aert will be back in action on Saturday at the Strade Bianche in Italy, a race he won in 2020.

GOLF

Henley weighs in on Players as a fifth major

Reuters
Los Angeles

As he prepared to defend his championship at the Arnold Palmer Invitational this week, Russell Henley weighed in on whether next week’s The Players Championship should be recognized as golf’s fifth major.

“I think it’s a major. It’s our home tournament. I don’t know the statistics on like what they say, like best field in golf or whatever, but, I mean, it is,” Henley told reporters Tuesday in Bay Hill, Fla.

“And the history with that tournament? I mean, I’ve always considered that a major in my mind. It’s just such a tricky golf course and it rewards great shots, typically. It visually is very intimidat-

ing. I feel like if you have a good week there you’ve done a lot of really good things.”

Henley, 36, who collected his fifth PGA Tour title with the win last year at Bay Hill Club and Lodge, is still looking for his first win in a grand slam tournament.

Last year, he followed up his dramatic one-stroke win over Collin Morikawa in the Arnold Palmer Invitational with a tie for 30th at The Players at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida.

“You look at the past champions (of The Players) and nobody is really, it hasn’t really favored any one player. People typically don’t win it back-to-back, unless you’re Scottie (Scheffler, 2023-24),” Henley said.

“But it’s a tournament I always look forward to, I love the chal-

lenge of it, and it’s one of, yeah, I consider it a major.” Henley was asked how high he would rank a victory at The Players among the other majors.

Henley, 36, who collected his fifth PGA Tour title with the win last year at Bay Hill Club and Lodge, is still looking for his first win in a grand slam tournament.

“I mean, winning there, when you win on a golf course like that, with that kind of history, I mean it proves you can do it anywhere, I think, for sure,” he said.

“Those closing holes are really tough, I would imagine, when you’re carrying a lead.”

Returning to this week’s task at hand, Henley reflected on the clutch play that earned him the

champion’s red cardigan at Bay Hill last year. He chipped in for eagle at the par-5 16th hole and closed with two pars for his first win since the 2022 World Wide Technology Classic.

“Once that chip went in on 16, I knew the tournament was far from over, I only had a one-shot lead, and I had two really difficult holes to play, so I knew I had a lot of work cut out for me,” he said.

“I knew Collin was playing great and I knew he would play great under pressure like he always does. Just a lot of different ups and downs of emotions and really proud of myself for just hanging tough all day and seeing it all the way through.”

Henley is trying to become the first back-to-back winner of the Arnold Palmer Invitational since Matt Every in 2014 and 2015.



PREMIER LEAGUE

Slot frustrated as Liverpool concede late in Wolves shock

Liverpool beaten for the first time in five games in all competitions

AFP
Wolverhampton, United Kingdom

Arne Slot admitted Liverpool must solve their habit of conceding late goals to save their troubled season after Tuesday's embarrassing 2-1 defeat at bottom of the table Wolves.

Slot's side fell behind to Rodrigo Gomes' strike with 12 minutes left at Molineux before Mohamed Salah's equaliser looked to have rescued a point for the Reds.

Liverpool's Achilles heel of surrendering goals in the final seconds came back to haunt them once again as Andre's shot deflected over wrong-footed keeper Alisson Becker. Liverpool have lost five games thanks to 90th minute goals in the Premier League this season, the most of any side in a single campaign in the competition's history. Slot urged his players to solve their late-game meltdowns in time to salvage one of the most disappointing campaigns in Liverpool's illustrious history.

"We hardly conceded a chance, created not so much but more than they did, but the result is again a 2-1 loss," said Slot, who spent around £450m (\$601m) on new signings before this season. "We are losing far too many football games and dropping points. Was it again in extra (added) time that we conceded? The three times we lost in the last 22 games were all in extra time."

Liverpool were beaten for the first time in five games in all competitions, opening the door for sixth-placed Chelsea to move above them with a win against Aston Villa. Out of sync for much of a difficult season, Slot bemoaned Liverpool's careless defending and poor finishing in a game that exposed their flaws at both ends of the pitch.

"Bad result, far from good first half, better second half. Second half, there was a bit more urgency, getting closer to scoring a goal, then conceding with the first moment they arrived around our box," Slot said. "We immediately struck back, first off the post, then with Mo, then we were twice close to making a winner. In the end, we conceded a deflected shot, which was not even a chance."

Liverpool are the first reigning champions



Liverpool's Curtis Jones (left) and Dominik Szoboszlai look dejected after their loss to Wolverhampton Wanderers in the Premier League at Molineux Stadium. (Reuters)

to lose to the Premier League's bottom club since Chelsea were beaten by Crystal Palace in 2017. It is the latest chastening loss in a turbulent season for Liverpool, who sit in fifth place after a dismal defence of the title they won last term.

The Anfield outfit are far from certain to qualify for next season's Champions League and questions are mounting about Slot's future. The Dutchman, the toast of Anfield less than a year ago, has presided over a long run of lacklustre performances with little of the flair and excitement the club's fans expect.

Liverpool have a chance for immediate revenge over Wolves when they return to the west midlands for an FA Cup fifth round tie

tomorrow. "Yeah, which is a good thing and a nice thing because we have something to prove on Friday," Slot said.

One of many Reds stars well below their best, Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk conceded his team had only themselves to blame. Van Dijk was caught out during the build-up to Wolves' opener and missed a golden opportunity to put Liverpool 2-1 up before Andre's winner.

"I think it's down to ourselves. It was slow, we were predictable, sloppy in possession and wrong decision-making," he said. "We didn't concede chances but if you perform like that then a result like this can be a result of that and that's a fact. It was disappointing."

SPOTLIGHT

Wolves' hope of great escape still flickers

Reuters
London

Wolverhampton Wanderers fans will be scratching their heads wondering how a team who have beaten Liverpool and Aston Villa and drawn with Arsenal in their last three Premier League home games look certain for the drop.

Until a recent burst of form, Wolves were threatening to end up as statistically the worst Premier League team ever by earning less than the 11 points Derby County managed in 2007-08. But after a last-gasp 2-1 victory over Liverpool that sparked euphoric scenes at Molineux on Tuesday, the question of whether they could stage probably the greatest escape in English top-flight history does not sound so outlandish.

With eight games remaining, Wolves are 11 points behind 17th-placed Nottingham Forest but they look far from a set of players who have accepted their fate. Wolves are the first bottom-placed team to beat two top-five sides in a single season since West Bromwich Albion in 2017-18 and the first to do so in consecutive matches.

Their form over the last six games would put them in mid-table and with games to come



Wolverhampton Wanderers' Andre celebrates after scoring against Liverpool at the Molineux stadium on Tuesday. (AFP)

against relegation-threatened Burnley, West Ham United and Tottenham Hotspur, there is a flicker of hope that something remarkable could happen. "We know we are in a tough position," Rodrigo Gomes, who scored the first goal against Liverpool, said.

"It's very difficult but we need to keep believing. Now we need to work, game by game and not think 'if we win this game or this game,

we avoid relegation! Game by game, working like this every week then maybe - we will see."

Realistically, Wolves would need to at least double their present haul of 16 points to stand any chance and that would assume the teams immediately above them fall away. But they will take heart from previous Premier League relegation escapes.

In 2011-12, Wigan Athletic were second-bottom after 29 games, five adrift of safety, but ended up taking 21 points from their last nine matches to survive comfortably. In 2007-08, Fulham, who had won only two of their first 20 games, looked down as they were six points adrift of the safety zone with five games remaining. But Roy Hodgson's team won four of their last five to stay up on goal difference.

Two seasons before that Harry Redknapp's Portsmouth were eight points below the relegation line with eight games left, but collected 14 points in the run-in to finish 17th. Leicester City's epic Premier League title in 2015-16 was actually inspired by an incredible escape from relegation the previous season when they were rooted to the bottom after 30 games, as they had been for 140 days. But they won six of their last eight to stay up comfortably.

Wolves will have to do something similar but their run-in pits them against only two teams in the top half - Brentford and Fulham - and they have genuine momentum.

ROUND-UP

Ronaldo injured but should be fit for World Cup



Cristiano Ronaldo is expected to be sidelined for between two and four weeks due to hamstring tendon injury.

Portuguese veteran Cristiano Ronaldo has a hamstring tendon injury, his Saudi Arabian club Al-Nassr announced on Tuesday, but his participation in the 2026 World Cup does not appear to be in doubt. According to some media outlets, the 41-year-old captain of the Portuguese national team is expected to be sidelined for between two and four weeks, meaning he should be up and running well before the World Cup kicks off in the United States, Mexico and Canada on June 11.

The former Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus player "has started a rehabilitation programme and his condition will be assessed day by day," Al-Nassr said. Ronaldo, who is in line to play in a record sixth World Cup, was injured during a match at Al-Fayha last month in the Saudi Pro League.

INTER REST STARTERS BUT GAIN CUP DRAW IN COMO
Como and Inter Milan drew 0-0 in a cagey Italian Cup semi-final first leg on Tuesday in which they managed just one shot on target between them.

Inter manager Cristian Chivu made 10 changes from the team that beat Genoa on Saturday to go 10 points clear in Serie A.

Cesc Fabregas' Como largely dominated the match but squandered a series of promising positions. Winger Mergim Vojvoda missed at least three clear first-half chances while full-back Alex Valle spurned a good chance just after half-time. In the other semi-final, Lazio host Atalanta.

KOUNDE, BALDE OUT AHEAD OF BARCA'S NEWCASTLE TIE
Barcelona will be without defenders Jules Kounde and Alejandro Balde for their Champions League last 16 tie against Newcastle after they were diagnosed with hamstring injuries. Both players were taken off hurt during Barca's 3-0 Copa del Rey semi-final win over Atletico Madrid on Tuesday, with the Catalans ousted 4-3 on aggregate.

"The time of the recovery process (for Balde) will be four weeks," said Barcelona in a statement, without specifying how long Kounde will miss. Spanish media reported France international Kounde, 27, is likely to be sidelined for a similar length of time.

As well as the Champions League matches, the duo will also miss La Liga games against Athletic Bilbao, Sevilla and Rayo Vallecano. Barcelona are currently also without midfielder Frenkie de Jong, who also has a hamstring injury. The injury makes Kounde a doubt for France's friendlies against Brazil and Colombia in the

United States at the end of March, in the build up to this summer's World Cup. Balde is a Spain international but has been behind Marc Cucurella and Alex Grimaldo in coach Luis de la Fuente's pecking order.

GALATASARAY FANS BANNED FROM GAME AT LIVERPOOL

Galatasaray will not be able to sell tickets to their fans for this month's Champions League clash at Liverpool, after UEFA's Appeals Body confirmed the sanctions they received over their supporters throwing objects, lighting fireworks and causing disturbances during last week's trip to Juventus. Media reports said a man and his daughter were injured as a firework was thrown towards Juventus fans in Turin where the Italian club, down to 10 men, wiped out a three-goal deficit from a 5-2 loss in the first leg to force extra time in their Champions League playoff tie.

Turkish champions Galatasaray, who scored twice in extra time to qualify for the round of 16 with a 7-5 aggregate win, were also fined 40,000 euros (\$46,000) by UEFA's disciplinary committee for the fans' behaviour. Galatasaray's appeal against the punishment was rejected. Liverpool visit Galatasaray on Tuesday, with the second leg set for March 18.

MORE ASIAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE MATCHES POSTPONED INDEFINITELY

Next week's matches in Asian tournaments scheduled in the Middle East have been postponed until further notice due to the conflict in the region, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said.

The US and Israel's attack on Iran has affected countries throughout the Gulf, disrupting travel in some of the world's busiest transit hubs and forcing several sporting events to be cancelled. Western region clashes in the Asian Champions League Elite, Champions League Two and the third-tier Challenge League, scheduled for next week between Monday and Wednesday, have been postponed, the AFC said in a statement.

The AFC earlier postponed this week's Asian Champions League Elite round of 16 clashes in the Middle East, as Iran cancelled all sporting events and the Qatar Football Association suspended all matches in the country.

"The AFC's priority remains the safety and security of all stakeholders including players, teams, officials, partners and fans and we are steadfast in our commitment to ensuring a secure environment for all," the continental body said in a statement.

FOCUS

Atletico hammered but hold off Barca to reach Copa del Rey final



Atletico Madrid's coach Diego Simeone (centre) comforts Barcelona's forward Raphinha at the end of the Copa del Rey semi-final second leg match at Camp Nou Stadium. (AFP)

AFP
Barcelona

Atletico Madrid struggled through a 3-0 Copa del Rey semi-final second leg defeat at Barcelona on Tuesday but scraped into the final 4-3 on aggregate.

The Spanish champions almost produced a comeback for the ages after their 4-0 first leg defeat in early February, but fell just short at Camp Nou. Youngster Marc Bernal netted twice for the record 32-time winners and Raphinha scored a penalty as Barcelona tried in vain to claw back Diego Simeone's side's lead.

Atletico, who clung on desperately in the final stages, returned to the final for the first time since 2013.

They will face Real Sociedad or Athletic Bilbao, who meet in the second semi-final

second leg. "We are disappointed but we can be very proud about the performance we showed today," Barca coach Hansi Flick told reporters. "It was an amazing game from us and we created a lot of chances to score even more goals. In the end it didn't happen and we have to accept it."

Simeone insisted his team deserved to progress over the two legs. "We were close to getting back to the final (in recent years), and in this two-legged game we were better than Barcelona," said Simeone.

Barcelona came out flying and Fermin Lopez's long-range effort just over the bar set the tone, as Hansi Flick's team threw everything they had at a potential comeback. They were dealt an early setback when Jules Kounde went off injured in the opening stages.

Antoine Griezmann came close against his former side as Atletico threatened the counter-attack. Ferran Torres fired

wide and had a shot saved low at the near post by Atletico goalkeeper Juan Musso before Barcelona took the lead. Teenage star Lamine Yamal drilled across the face of goal for Bernal to finish from close range, with one 18-year-old setting up another.

Ademola Lookman headed narrowly off-target for Atletico and came to rue the miss as Barca doubled their advantage before the interval. Spain midfielder Pedri was tripped in the box by Marc Pubill and Raphinha sent Musso the wrong way from the spot.

Joao Cancelo almost grabbed the third but his shot was beaten away by Musso at full stretch, with Simeone's team on the ropes. Bernal set up a frantic finale when he volleyed home Cancelo's swirling cross to take Barca within one goal of the crumbling Rojiblancos. The Rojiblancos fended off Barca and booked their place in the Seville final on April 18.