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# GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

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MOTORSPORT

# Norris hungrier than ever to defend Formula 1 world title

Mercedes and Red Bull are seen as the frontrunners ahead of the season-opening Australian GP



McLaren's Oscar Piastri with Lando Norris ahead of the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP  
Melbourne

Lando Norris said his tense world title triumph last year made him hungrier than ever to win another, with the McLaren ace having no concerns about being the hunted rather than the hunter.

The fresh-faced Briton held off teammate Oscar Piastri and Red Bull's Max Verstappen in a thrilling three-way fight that went all the way to the season finale in Abu Dhabi. It made him McLaren's first world champion since Lewis Hamilton secured the first of his seven titles in 2008, with the success also sealing the constructors' crown.

Mercedes and Red Bull are seen as the narrow frontrunners ahead of the season-opening Australian Grand Prix this weekend, but Norris is not worried. "I don't think we're starting on the back foot. You know, even if you're second, third or fourth quickest, I don't think that's on the back foot," he said. "I think that's still a very good position to start. And I think in previous years, where it's been harder to improve over the course of a season, we've certainly proved that you could. And I continue to believe that. It's a long, very long season."

The 26-year-old began his championship-winning year with victory at Melbourne, crossing the line ahead of Verstappen and Mercedes' George Russell. He had to wait another seven Grand Prix to top the podium again, as Piastri took control before the championship morphed into a three-man battle.

"I guess one of the big learning things from last year is to not get too frustrated with one bad

## Alonso and Stroll fear 'permanent nerve damage' from vibrating Aston Martin

Melbourne: Aston Martin chief Adrian Newey revealed Fernando Alonso and Lance Stroll fear permanent nerve damage from extreme vibration in their cars and are unlikely to complete the Australian Grand Prix.

The Newey-designed car suffered issues through torrid pre-season testing, including an unreliable Honda power unit and a lack of spare parts. They were the slowest car with the fewest laps, completing a total of just 128 over three days in Bahrain - the equivalent of what many teams did in one day.

Matters have not improved as they prepare for the season-opening race in Melbourne this weekend.

Newey revealed both drivers were suffering such severe vibration through the steering wheel that they would only be able to complete 25 and 15 laps respectively. "That vibration into the chassis is causing a few reliability problems, mirrors falling off, tail lights falling off, all that sort of thing, which we are having to address," he said.

"But the much more significant problem with that is that vibration is transmitted ultimately into the driver's fingers. Fernando is of the feeling that he can't do more than 25 laps consecutively before he will risk permanent nerve damage into his hands. Lance is of the opinion that

he can't do more than 15 laps before that threshold. I think there is no point in not being open and honest in this meeting," added Newey, considered the greatest designer the sport has seen. We are going to have to be very heavily restricted on how many laps we do in the race until we get on top of the source of the vibration and improve the vibration at source."

There was speculation before the Australian Grand Prix that the team may not even compete, but it arrived as planned. Aston Martin had entered 2026 with high expectations given the arrival of Newey, who was also appointed team principal.

race, two bad races, bad beginning of a year. It can always come back as long as you keep working hard," said Norris.

With his championship on the line, Norris has done more training during the off-season than ever before, conscious that he is now the driver with a target on his back. But the extra pressure has only spurred him on.

"I'm still just as hungry," he said, with win-

ning the title making him want to experience the euphoria again. "You get that feeling the same as when you win one race, you want another one. For me, it was the same feeling with the championship - that one is amazing, but then you definitely want to achieve two. But honestly, when you get on track you're not either (the hunted or the hunter)," he added. "You certainly don't think 'I'm the hunted now', and something changes."

SPOTLIGHT

## Verstappen says new Red Bull car gave him 'goosebumps'

AFP  
Melbourne

Four-time world champion Max Verstappen said yesterday he does not know how the opening Grand Prix of the season will play out under sweeping new regulations, but he "got goosebumps" when he first saw the new Red Bull car.

The Dutchman was overwhelmed at pre-season testing in Bahrain by this year's rule changes, which have led to a complete overhaul of chassis and engines for every team. Drivers will have to better manage their batteries on each lap, a task he called "anti-racing".

But with plenty of data collected he is optimistic ahead of the season-opening race in Melbourne this weekend. "It has felt like a long build up to this point and it is exciting to finally get out racing again," said Verstappen, who won six of the last nine Grands Prix in 2025 but narrowly failed to retain his world championship crown.

"In Bahrain, seeing the car with our own power unit getting in so many laps was very impressive. We've been driving the car in the simulator for such a long time, so when it was finally time to come back and see the car ready to go, I did get goosebumps."

Red Bull have dispensed with Honda engines and are competing this season for the first time with their own factory-built power units. Team chief Laurent Mekies said it had been "one of the biggest challenges to face in our sport". "But it's a challenge we've embraced together. This weekend is the biggest step on that journey so far," he added.

Verstappen said he did not "know how it is all going to play out" in Melbourne, a race he won in 2023. "But we have been learning a lot and working on optimising the car as best we can. Obviously, this track has many great memories for me, especially driving my first ever F1 race here," he added. "But this year will be a particularly exciting challenge and I'm looking forward to seeing how it goes."

Verstappen is partnered at Red Bull this year by French driver Isack Hadjar, promoted to the number two seat after a successful rookie season with Racing Bulls. "The preparation over the winter has been intense, but Albert Park is an incredible circuit and I feel ready," said Hadjar.

"The goal for this weekend is to build confidence with the new regulations under race conditions, work closely with the team and extract everything we can from the car from the very first session to set ourselves up for the season."



Red Bull's Max Verstappen speaks to the media ahead of the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

FOCUS

# Hamilton vows 'no holding back' in his 20th Formula One season



AFP  
Melbourne

Lewis Hamilton vowed there will be "no holding back" as he bids to improve on a bitterly disappointing debut year with Ferrari in what will be his 20th season on the grid.

The 41-year-old Briton, who has won a record 105 Grand Prix, will line up this weekend where it all began for him in Melbourne with McLaren in 2007 for what will be his 381st race. The seven-time world

champion failed to muster a single podium last year for the first time in his legendary career as he struggled to adapt to his new surroundings with the Scuderia.

But he is entering the new season in a positive frame of mind, taking to Instagram this week to reflect on his long career in the sport. "Twenty seasons as an F1 driver. It's hard to even grasp the reality of that number," he said. "It started with a dream. A dream some called ridiculous and said would never amount to anything. Despite that, the dream never changed, and I never stopped chasing it. There will always be people who

doubt you, people who try to block you, but you can't ever stop fighting," he added.

"I'm forever grateful for the lessons, the quiet moments, the chaos, and the many people who helped me chase and achieve my dreams. I'm grateful for the doubters and for the ones who tried to knock me down, too. I'm still here, 20 years on, still standing, still hungry, still focused on the dream. No holding back."

Every car on the grid this year has undergone radical alterations since the end of last season following dramatic regulation changes to chassis, engines and aerody-

namics. It makes the season-opening race in Melbourne one of the most anticipated in years, given the uncertainty of what to expect. Pre-season testing at Barcelona and Bahrain suggested that the big four - McLaren, Ferrari, Red Bull and Mercedes - would again dominate. Ferrari team chief Fred Vasseur said they gathered "a great deal of useful information" in Bahrain and were confident of a better year ahead.

"Conditions at testing are never really representative and Melbourne will be the first real opportunity to assess how competitive we are," he said.

## FOCUS

# Hosts India reach final after England fail in epic chase

BETHELL'S BRILLIANT CENTURY GOES IN VAIN AS INDIA SET UP A FINAL SHOWDOWN WITH NZ

AFP  
Mumbai

India clung on to beat England by seven runs in a thrilling T20 World Cup semi-final in Mumbai yesterday, despite Jacob Bethell's superb 105 that put Harry Brook's side within a whisker of pulling off a record chase.

After Sanju Samson's scintillating 89 laid the platform for India to pile up a massive 253-7, England finished agonisingly short on 246-7 after a brilliant effort masterminded by Bethell.

Phil Salt (5), Brook (7) and Jos Buttler (25) fell early to leave England 64-3. But Bethell, aided by partnerships of 77 with Will Jacks (35) and 50 with Sam Curran (18), kept England in the hunt.

The left-hander hit seven sixes and eight fours in his 48-ball thrash before his run out in the final over finally allowed India to celebrate in front of 35,000 jubilant fans in Mumbai's Wankhede stadium.

India will face New Zealand in Sunday's final in Ahmedabad as they attempt to become the first team to retain the trophy and the first to win it on home soil.

"It's an unbelievable feeling, going to Ahmedabad for the final, a special feeling for the boys," said India captain Suryakumar Yadav, who paid tribute to England.

"They were always in the game, always in the chase. I was very nervous, I'm glad someone didn't check my heart rate," he said, before looking forward to the final.

"In India, going for the title, there will be pressure, there will be nerves but the boys will be excited as well," Suryakumar added.

England captain Brook praised the way his side went about attacking a daunting target.

"All of our lads should be really proud of the way we played tonight and throughout this com-



India's players celebrate after Jacob Bethell of England is run out in the final over of the World Cup semi-final at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. (AFP)

petition," said Brook. The hosts, having been asked to bat by Brook, earlier flayed England's attack to all parts of the ground, hitting 19 sixes and 18 fours. Samson, who scored 97 not out in the previous match against the West Indies, signalled his intent with a four and six off Jofra Archer's first over.

But he was given a life on 15 when Brook dropped a simple chance at mid-off off Archer.

It proved a costly mistake as, helped by some ill-disciplined bowling, Samson raced to his half-century off 26 balls with a huge six as Liam Dawson's first over was pummeled for 19 runs. "I'll hold my hands up and say that I made a big mistake there, dropping Samson," said Brook.

"As the old saying goes, catches win matches. At the end of the day, it cost us."

Ishan Kishan put on 97 from 48 balls with Samson for the second wicket before the left-hander holed out to Jacks off Adil Rashid in the 10th over to make it 117-2.

Samson powered on until Jacks returned to have him caught by Salt in the deep in the 14th over at which point India were 160-3.

"It feels really great," said Samson after being named player of the match. "I kind of knew that I

got some form going from the last game, so I thought I need to continue. Even 250 looked chaseable here and England played really well. All credit goes to how they batted and we really had a great semi-final."

Shivam Dube continued the onslaught with 43 off 25 balls with four sixes before being run out by Brook's direct hit.

Hardik Pandya hit 27 off 12 balls

late on and Tilak Varma 21 off seven to take India past the 250 mark.

Jacks was the pick of the England bowlers with 2-40 but the wayward Archer was plundered, taking 1-61 off his four overs.

**BRIEF SCORES: India 253 for 7** (Samson 89, Dube 43, Jacks 2-40) **beat England 246 for 7** (Bethell 105, Jacks 35, Pandya 2-38) **by seven runs.**

## SPOTLIGHT

## NZ confidence high for final: Allen

AFP  
Kolkata

Semi-final hero Finn Allen said New Zealand's thumping demi-final win over South Africa was a "huge confidence booster" ahead of going for their maiden T20 World Cup title in Sunday's final.

Opener Allen hit the fastest-ever T20 World Cup century, off 33 balls, to give his side a crushing nine-wicket win over South Africa and set up a final against India or England in Ahmedabad on Sunday. Allen blasted 10 fours and eight sixes as New Zealand raced to their victory target of 170 with 7.1 overs to spare at Kolkata's Eden Gardens.

It was a bruising defeat for 2024 runners-up South Africa, who had been unbeaten in the tournament.

"They fight hard, they come hard at us, they've got good tall, fast bowlers and it makes it challenging for us," Allen said of Aiden Markram's South Africa.

"Their boys hit the ball hard, so to get one over them is a huge confidence booster for us going into Sunday. They've been the in-form team the whole tournament."

The Auckland-born Allen rose



to the occasion in the knockout match after ordinary outings in the tournament apart from his unbeaten 84 against the UAE in a group fixture. Allen said his heroes in India would have kept his parents and the nation awake to cheer the team.

"I'm sure my parents are up watching the whole game. Hopefully they're proud. But I think as a nation, I think hopefully everyone gets behind us and rallies around us for Sunday," said Allen.

The final will begin at around 2.30am on Monday morning in New Zealand. "Obviously, difficult time for people to watch back home but I'm sure people were keeping tabs on the game and hopefully they can get up and have a Monday off at work and watch the final."

Allen put on 117 with opening partner Tim Seifert, who made 58, to pummel the opposition attack that included high-quality pacemen Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi. Seifert was the early aggressor as he raced to 41 off 21 balls before Allen took over and finished with two fours, two sixes and a four to raise his hundred and seal victory. Allen said batting with Seifert makes life easy.

"He's in incredible form, he's an incredible player and I think he's just showing the world what he can do," said Allen.

"And I think that makes it easy for me to sit back and have the best seat in the house. So, yeah, it's good fun batting with Timmy."

New Zealand squeaked into the semi-finals on net run-rate ahead of Pakistan and lost to South Africa by seven wickets in the group stage. But Allen said a five-match T20 series in India that the visitors lost 4-1 ahead of the World Cup prepared them for the grind.

"I think it shows the importance of that India series that the boys played before the World Cup," he said. "Five games on all black soil (pitches) and I think it just shows that as a team we get up for the fight (in) those important fixtures."

## Fatherhood, sleep, World Cup final: Henry's whirlwind journey

New Zealand's Matt Henry played a doting father to his new-born son back home and returned to help his team reach the T20 World Cup final, all in a space of five days.

Pace spearhead Henry returned figures of 2-34 in New Zealand's crushing nine-wicket win over South Africa in the first semi-final in Kolkata on Wednesday.

Opener Finn Allen blasted the fastest-ever T20 World Cup hundred in 33 balls to lead his team into Sunday's final in Ahmedabad, where they will face India or England. Henry's bowling effort was special after he rejoined the team late on the eve of the match.

He took field less than 24 hours after he landed back in India after flying home for the birth of his second child after New Zealand's last Super Eights match against England on February 27.

"There was a lot of sleep happening on the way back to be honest," a smiling Henry told reporters. "So yeah just focusing on my family to get home, that was important for me, and then it worked out that I could get back for the semi-final so it's great to be here."

Henry and his wife Holly Carran have welcomed a baby boy. "They're doing great so yeah it was pretty special to be able to get home for that," said the

34-year-old Henry. "Obviously Holly's doing really well and Jack's really good as well and Annabelle's enjoying being a big sister so it's all good."

New Zealand have reached their second T20 World Cup final. They lost the title clash to Australia in 2021 in the United Arab Emirates.

"It's pretty special to be able to reach another final, the guys are really excited but for now just enjoy this (win)," said Henry. "I think the guys have been playing some really good cricket. "Finn was just unbelievable so we'll enjoy that and then we can move on and get ready for what's to come."

## Bangladesh recall Litton, Afif for Pakistan ODI series

Bangladesh yesterday recalled Litton Das and Afif Hossain to their 15-member squad for the three-match one-day international series against Pakistan starting next week.

Pacers Nahid Rana and Shoriful Islam also returned as the selection panel led by Gazi Ashraf Hossain made several changes to the squad that last played an ODI series against the West Indies in October. Jaker Ali, Shamim Hossain, Nurul Hasan and Nasum Ahmed were dropped, while Tanzeem Hasan Sakib and Hasan Mahmud were ruled out through injury. Litton last played an ODI in July against Sri Lanka

before missing the series against Afghanistan in the UAE and the West Indies at home. "There may be questions about Litton Das's recent ODI form, but he has been working closely with the coaches on his game," Ashraf Hossain said. "We... are considering him as an option to strengthen the middle order."

Afif has not played international cricket since December 2024, when he featured in ODIs and T20Is against the West Indies. Mehidy Hasan Miraz will captain the side, with leg-spinner Rishad Hossain and left-arm spinner Tanvir Islam providing spin options. All three matches will be played

at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur on the outskirts of Dhaka on March 11, 13 and 15. The Bangladesh Cricket Board said the Pakistan squad would arrive in Dhaka on March 8, dismissing media reports suggesting the tour had been called off due to the war in the Middle East.

**SQUAD:** Mehidy Hasan Miraz (captain), Soumya Sarkar, Saif Hassan, Tanzid Hasan, Najmul Hossain Shanto, Towhid Hridoy, Litton Das, Afif Hossain, Mahidul Islam, Rishad Hossain, Tanvir Islam, Mustafizur Rahman, Taskin Ahmed, Shoriful Islam, Nahid Rana.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

## Zadran replaces Rashid as Afghanistan T20I skipper for Sri Lanka series

AFP  
Kabul

Afghanistan replaced Rashid Khan with Ibrahim Zadran as skipper yesterday for the T20I series against Sri Lanka but are still monitoring the situation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to stage the matches.

Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) said Zadran's appointment is in alignment for future build-up. "In alignment with the ACB's long-term strategic vision and following recent changes in our team management, we have made the thoughtful decision to appoint Zadran as new T20I skipper," ACB said in a statement.

Hashmatullah Shahidi will continue to lead the team in the ODI series which follows the T20Is. The series begins with three Twenty20 internationals in Sharjah on March 13, 15 and 17 before the ODIs are played in Dubai on March 20, 22 and 25.

Afghanistan crashed out in the first round of the ongoing Twenty20 World Cup in India and Sri



Lanka after losing to South Africa and New Zealand.

As a fall out, fast bowler Fazal Haq Farooqi, all-rounder Gulbadin Naib, and wicketkeeper-batter Mohammad Ishaq have been left out from both the squads, the release said. Afghanistan's head coach Jonathan Trott also left the post after completing his tenure with another Englishman Richard Pybus taking over. ACB said it was constantly monitoring the

situation in the UAE before making a final decision.

"We are closely monitoring the ongoing situation in the region and a final decision will be made in a couple of days," ACB said.

"Should circumstances necessitate a change, the ACB will consider exploring alternative options for both the host country and the event schedule."

**T20I Squad:** Ibrahim Zadran (captain), Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Noor Rahman, Sediqullah Atal, Darwish Rasooli, Shahidullah Kamal, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Sharafuddin Ashraf, Rashid Khan, Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Zia Ur Rahman Sharifi, Fareed Ahmad Malik, Abdullah Ahmadzai

**ODI Squad:** Hashmatullah Shahidi (captain), Rahmat Shah, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Ikram Alikhil, Ibrahim Zadran, Sediqullah Atal, Darwish Rasooli, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Rashid Khan, Nangyal Kharoti, AM Ghazanfar, Zia Ur Rahman Sharifi, Fareed Ahmad Malik, Bilal Sami

TENNIS

# Alcaraz unbeaten run under threat at Indian Wells

'IT HAS BEEN A VERY HARD PRACTICE WEEK HERE FOR ME'

AFP  
Indian Wells, United States

Former champion Carlos Alcaraz aims to extend his perfect start to 2026 at Indian Wells while Jannik Sinner returns to the California desert seeking to fill a gap in his resume with his first title of the year.

The world's top two players headline a stellar men's field for the ATP and WTA Masters 1000 tournament, where Serbian superstar Novak Djokovic is chasing a record sixth title, which would see him break out of a tie with Swiss great Roger Federer for the most in tournament history.

Spain's Alcaraz, 22, made history last month when he lifted the Australian Open title to become the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam.

He won the Qatar Open to arrive Stateside riding a 12-match winning streak to start the year.

The top seed could face a tricky second-round opener against either former world number three Grigor Dimitrov or in-form left-hander Terence Atmane, with third-seeded Djokovic also looming in his half of the draw.

Sinner will play Czech qualifier Dalibor Svrčina, who beat Australian James Duckworth 6-2, 6-4 as first-round action got underway on Wednesday.

Italy's Matteo Berrettini booked a second-round meeting with fourth-seeded German Alexander Zverev, beating France's Adrian Mannarino 4-6, 7-5, 7-5.

Sinner missed Indian Wells last year serving a suspension for a positive test for banned anabolic steroid clostebol. He returned



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain plays a smash during a practice session ahead of Indian Wells Open in California. (AFP)

from that ban to win Wimbledon and the ATP Finals but fell to Djokovic in the Australian Open semi-finals and lost to Jakob Mensik in the quarters at Doha last month. Although he professed himself satisfied with his season

so far, Sinner said Tuesday he was trying to maximize his potential. "It has been a very hard practice week here for me," he said. "We spent many, many hours of practice. (I'm) very happy with how I'm

feeling on the court ... In the same time, we also try to improve a couple of things.

"I'm trying to be slightly more aggressive at times on the baseline, and then we see how it goes," added the Italian, who has won all of the other five Masters 1000 hard court tournaments, starting with Toronto in 2023 and adding Miami, Cincinnati and Shanghai in 2024 and Paris last year.

Women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka is also chasing a first Indian Wells title, having fallen in last year's final to Russian teen Mirra Andreeva and in 2023 to Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina -- who beat Sabalenka in the Australian Open final to claim a second Grand Slam crown.

Sabalenka, back in action for the first time since that Australian Open disappointment, will open her campaign against Japanese qualifier Himeno Sakatsume, a 6-4, 6-3 winner over US wild card Alycia Parks, with Japanese star Naomi Osaka and hard-hitting American Amanda Anisimova in her quarter.

Third-seeded Rybakina says the desert conditions can pose unique challenges, with big differences between day and night matches and slower courts making for longer rallies.

"It's not easy to get these short points, free points. You need to work for each point," said Rybakina, who is in the same half of the draw as second seeded Iga Swiatek, the Indian Wells winner in 2022 and 2024.

Swiatek says the conditions suit her game, but she has a tough draw that includes a potential quarter-final clash with Andreeva, who upset her in the semi-finals here last year.

SPOTLIGHT

## Djokovic says he will keep playing as long as he has 'fire and flair'

Reuters  
Indian wells

Novak Djokovic said he sees no reason to retire from tennis given that he is still motivated to compete and capable of beating the best players in the world.

The 38-year-old Serb defeated defending champion Jannik Sinner in a thrilling semi-final at the Australian Open in January before falling to world number one Carlos Alcaraz in the final, proving he is still a force on the sport's biggest stages.

"It was an incredible feeling to be able to beat Sinner in five sets in one of the epic matches that I played in recent times in Australia, and then have another great match with Carlos, who was just too good in the end," Djokovic told reporters at Indian Wells.

"For me, that has been a phenomenal result. So I have proven to myself primarily and to others that I can still compete at the highest level and beat these guys," he said.

"So my logic is why not keep



going as long as I have that fire and flair and quality and the motivation to do that."

The 24-times Grand Slam champion said he enjoys picking and choosing his schedule, which revolves mostly around the four Grand Slams and tune-up events. He also makes space for the Indian Wells tournament in the California desert, where he is a five-time champion.

"I really enjoy the thrill of competition," he said.

"I enjoy still getting out there in front of the fans and being competitive. Still number three in the world, so I don't think it's too bad in terms of the ranking and results and performances.

"So I'm still competitive. I still have that edge, and I'll keep on going as long as I feel like it."

## 'She's coming back': Djokovic predicts Serena return

Novak Djokovic is convinced US tennis great Serena Williams will return to competition, and the 24-time Grand Slam champion is itching to see "one of the greatest athletes" back on court.

"I think she's coming back," Djokovic said Wednesday at the ATP/WTA Indian Wells Masters. "I don't know. I haven't spoken to her, but I guess the sentiment is that she's coming back. Where and how, singles, doubles, we don't know, and if I'm in her position, I would hide it too."

Williams, a 23-time Grand Slam champion, hasn't competed since a third-round loss at the 2022 US Open. But the 44-year-old mother of two re-entered the anti-doping testing pool in December and regained eligibility. Initially she denied she planned a comeback, but in January she declined to rule it out, telling NBC's "Today" show: "That's not a yes or a no. I don't know, I'm just going to see what happens." Djokovic said players were buzzing at the prospect.

"Everybody is excited, and it's definitely something that's very highly anticipated," he said. Williams's sister Venus, 45, accepted a wild card into the Indian Wells singles draw and will face France's Diane Parry in the first round. Djokovic suggested Serena could return for Wimbledon - where she is a seven-time singles champion.

"I pick that one as well as her comeback," he said. "I don't know. I think she might maybe play a doubles tournament or two with Venus. That would be nice to see, just from my point of view and tennis fans', for sure. "She's one of the greatest athletes, really. It would be great to have her back too."

FOCUS

## Andreeva ready to defend title

Reuters  
Indian Wells, United States

Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva said she will go into her Indian Wells title defence without worrying about the potential for dropping ranking points after being swept up in the excitement of being defending champion at last month's tournament in Dubai.

Andreeva toppled world number one Aryna Sabalenka in last year's final in Southern California for back-to-back WTA 1000 titles after her triumph in Dubai, but struggled to find similar form thereafter as she navigated the demands of her breakthrough season.

The search for consistency continued after the 18-year-old won the Adelaide crown at the start of 2026 before a run to the quarter-finals in Dubai, where she embraced the added scrutiny that comes with past success.

"I was worried about defending points in Dubai since Roland Garros," Andreeva told reporters on Wednesday.

"I was thinking about it a lot, but when I came to Dubai the only thing I felt was the excitement



of being there again, feeling new emotions at the tournament as defending champion.

"It was all new to me but I didn't feel the pressure for some reason as I thought I would. And here it's the same thing. I'm just so excited to be here as a defending champion, to see my photos almost everywhere.

"It's just nice to be here again and now I don't feel any pressure defending points."

Andreeva, who also beat Elena Rybakina, Elina Svitolina and Iga

Swiatek en route to winning the Indian Wells title, said she is better equipped to handle drop-offs in form.

"I was just struggling to play and use that level in all the tournaments that I played," she added. "It was a bit on and off, which was a new experience for me. But now if that happens again, I know how to deal with it."

Eighth seed Andreeva has a bye into the second round where she faces either Peyton Stearns or Solana Sierra.

## Raducanu needs more physicality to rise up rankings: Henman

Tim Henman believes it is more important for Emma Raducanu to improve her physicality rather than settle on a new coach if she is to climb up the tennis world rankings. The British number one is in action at this week's WTA event in Indian Wells, where a good run in California could see her rise from her current position of 24th in the world. Raducanu, 23, has become notorious for regularly changing coaches since stunning the tennis world by coming through qualifying to win the 2021 US Open.

Last month, she said that she was in no hurry to find a new coach after Francisco Roig became the latest to leave the role. Roig spent six months working with Raducanu, who went into the Australian Open not fully prepared because of a foot injury. A see-saw start to the season has seen Raducanu reach her first senior final since the US Open, in Romania, and then struggle with illness - a common occurrence during her professional career. Britain's former world number four Henman believes that greater strength and speed is the key

to Raducanu's development. "She has to become physically more resilient to be stronger and faster to then compete with the biggest hitters and the best players," he said. Henman, who will be commentating at Indian Wells for Sky Sports, added: "You look at the physicality of a (Aryna) Sabalenka, a (Iga) Swiatek, a Coco Gauff, a (Elena) Rybakina, Emma's not at that level. And to a certain extent, with her physique, she might not ever be at that level, but she's got to close the gap." Raducanu's split with Roig followed a second-round Australian Open defeat by Anastasia Potapova that saw Raducanu voice her unhappiness with the way she was playing under the Spaniard. She will be aided at Indian Wells by British former player Mark Petchey, who served as a temporary coach for several months last season in between his broadcasting commitments, while hitting partner Alexis Canter provides daily support. "I worked with three coaches in 15 years. I liked consistency and continuity, but that's not what Emma does," said Henman.

GOLF

## Rahm rejection of DP World Tour deal a shame: McIlroy

AFP  
Miami

Rory McIlroy said Wednesday it's "a shame" Jon Rahm's dispute with the DP World Tour has put his Ryder Cup future in doubt but said the match play tournament can survive without the Spaniard.

"The Ryder Cup is bigger than any one person," McIlroy said in Orlando as he prepared for the US PGA Tour's Arnold Palmer Invitational. Rahm has rejected the DP World Tour's deal to settle his fines for playing on the breakaway LIV Golf tour.

The European-based circuit announced in February that eight LIV players had signed the agreement, which included a commitment to play more DP World Tour events, in return for a release to play LIV Golf in 2026 and their fines being paid.

Rahm said at the LIV Golf tournament in Hong Kong this month that the DP World Tour was "extorting players" and said he would play four DP World Tour events, in line with current membership rules, but not six. McIlroy said he thought the



conditions offered by the DP World Tour were "really generous," saying the terms were "much softer" than those imposed on five-time major winner Brooks Koepka to return from LIV to the US PGA Tour.

Koepka had to pay \$5 million to charity and is ineligible for PGA Tour equity shares for five years. He also loses out on FedEx Cup bonus money this year and he can't play in elite signature events unless he qualifies.

"Look, there's a reason eight of the nine guys took that deal," he said of the players who came to terms with the DP World Tour.

"He signed a contract for LIV and he plays 14 events and the whole thing," McIlroy said. "But the DP World Tour is well with-

in its rights to protect itself as a members organization and as a business.

"And if you asked any DP World Tour member about the deal that they have cut with the LIV guys, I think they would all say that it was pretty generous.

"Again, there's a reason that eight of the nine took it, because they probably think the same thing. And one guy thinks a little differently, and that's a shame."

McIlroy said the European Tour "can only do so much" to accommodate the golfers that jumped to LIV.

"If you want to play on the Ryder Cup you have to be a member of the DP World Tour ... you have to abide by the rules and regulations."

Rahm has been on every European Ryder Cup team since his debut in 2018, but McIlroy said the loss of one player wouldn't dim the luster of the USA v Europe showpiece.

"It's bigger than all of us," he said. "It's the platform that's the big thing. I think we should all be grateful that we have a platform like the Ryder Cup that we can play on and that we can showcase our skills and be a part of something that's obviously way bigger than ourselves."

## 'Miracle to walk', says golfer after lift shaft fall

Italian golfer Andrea Pavan said it felt "like a miracle" to be walking again after leaving hospital just a week after plunging down an empty lift shaft. The 36-year-old Pavan fractured several vertebrae after tumbling down multiple floors inside an empty lift shaft at his accommodation where he was preparing for the South African Open in Stellenbosch last week. On Wednesday, he posted photos of himself smiling with his wife - one with Pavan in a wheelchair and another showing him standing with the help of crutches, after requiring major surgery for his injuries. "It truly feels like a miracle to be able to walk,"

Pavan said in an Instagram post. He thanked medical staff, his fellow golfers, the event organisers and all the people who reached out to show their support. "God has answered many prayers," he said. "The road is very long but this small step feels very good. "I will need to stay in South Africa another five weeks and rehab both shoulder and back, and heal other bruises and secondary injuries and once home continue the rehab journey." Pavan, who lives in the United States, is a two-time winner on the European Tour. He won the Czech Masters in 2018 and the BMW International Open the following year.

## LIGUE 1

## PSG prepare for Chelsea clash with Monaco rematch

AFP  
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain warm up for their Champions League last-16 showdown with Chelsea by once again taking on Monaco today, as coach Luis Enrique looked forward to "the best part of the season" starting.

PSG have not managed to rediscover the exhilarating form that led them to Champions League glory for the first time in their history last season, but they come into March still on course to retain their French and European titles.

Chelsea visit the Parc des Princes next Wednesday in the first leg of their last-16 tie in Europe, which will be the first meeting of the teams since last July's Club World Cup final in which PSG lost 3-0.

Luis Enrique's side reached the Champions League last 16 with a nervy 5-4 aggregate win over Monaco in last month's play-off round, and now they take on the principality side in Ligue 1 in what will be the

clubs' third meeting in two and a half weeks.

Despite rarely finding their flowing best and being without last year's Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele for much of the campaign due to injury, PSG come into Friday's game four points clear of nearest rivals Lens at the top of the French table.

A 1-0 success away at Le Havre last weekend made it nine wins in their last 10 Ligue 1 games, while Lens have lost momentum in collecting a single point from their last two matches. "The best part of the season is beginning. We can't wait," Luis Enrique told reporters.

"Monaco were in the Champions League, so this will be like a Champions League game," added the Spaniard. "We have had lots of difficulties in the domestic league and we know how difficult the Champions League is, but we are happy with the position we are in."

The games against Chelsea will be PSG's 13th and 14th matches against Premier League opposition since the beginning of last season. Dembele looks set to feature in those games having been named in the

squad to play Monaco - he has started only 14 of his club's 39 matches this season to date. "It is always good when a player comes back," said the coach of Dembele, who took part in training with the rest of the team on Wednesday and yesterday.

However, midfield duo Joao Neves (ankle) and Fabian Ruiz (knee) are out of the Monaco encounter and it remains to be seen if either returns in time to face Chelsea. Monaco, who beat PSG at home in the league in November, are fighting for European qualification and come into the weekend in seventh place, three points behind Lille in fifth, which brings with it a Europa League berth.

## FIXTURES (TIMES GMT)

Today: Paris Saint-Germain v Monaco (1945)

Tomorrow: Nantes v Angers (1600), Auxerre v Strasbourg (1800), Toulouse v Marseille (2005)

Sunday: Lens v Metz (1400), Brest v Le Havre, Lille v Lorient, Nice v Rennes (all 1615), Lyon v Paris FC (1945)



Paris Saint-Germain's coach Luis Enrique (centre) with defender Achraf Hakimi (left) and forward Ousmane Dembele during a training session in Poissy, west of Paris. (AFP)

## PREMIER LEAGUE

## Arteta hits back at Brighton criticism after Arsenal win

Gunners are seven points clear of City, who drew with Nottingham

AFP

Brighton, United Kingdom

Mikel Arteta slammed Brighton manager Fabian Hurzeler's claim that Arsenal "make their own rules" after the Premier League leaders moved a step closer to the title with a 1-0 win at the Amex Stadium on Wednesday.

Bukayo Saka's deflected strike early in the first half sealed Arsenal's third successive victory. The Gunners are seven points clear of second-placed Manchester City, who were held to a surprise 2-2 draw by lowly Nottingham Forest.

Arteta have complete control of the title race as they chase a first English crown since 2004 after three consecutive runners-up finishes. But if Arsenal do go on to claim the title it is highly unlikely they will be held in the same regard as Arsene Wenger's squad 22 years ago.

In contrast to the eye-catching style of the 'Invincibles', there is little to love about Arteta's prosaic team, who have thrived thanks to their set-piece excellence and a supremely well-drilled defence. Criticism of Arsenal's 'ugly' tactics is growing and Hurzeler was the latest to join the chorus as he accused the Gunners of time-wasting and faking injuries.

Hurzeler was frustrated by Arsenal's habit of delaying the restart of the game at free-kicks. Gunners keeper David Raya also went down injured on three separate occasions and required treatment, sparking suggestions he was faking to allow time for tactical discussions between Arteta and his players.

"I think there was only one team that tried to play football today. Did you see in a Premier League game a goalkeeper going down that many times? No?" Hurzeler said. "They (Arsenal) make their own rules. At the moment I have the feeling they are doing their own rules. I will never be the kind of manager who tries to win in that way. If I ask everyone in the room,



Arsenal's Piero Hincapie (left) and Brighton's Jack Hinshelwood go for a header during the Premier League match in Brighton on Wednesday. (Reuters)

did he really enjoy this game? I'm sure maybe one raises his arm because he's a big Arsenal fan. Where will this go in the future? Is this what the supporters are paying for?"

Yet Arteta was unrepentant about Arsenal's game plan, insisting his players deserved praise for grinding out another vital victory. "What a surprise," he said when informed of Hurzeler's claims. "If you go back through previous games you will find a lot of comments like this, always. I love my players. That's the highlight. I love my players and I love the way we compete. When you're in the position we

are in, obviously the opposition want to take that away from you. That's normal, that is sport."

Arsenal aren't earning many style points, but Arteta doesn't care as they remain in contention for the quadruple. As well as leading the Premier League, the Gunners face Bayer Leverkusen in the Champions League last 16, meet Manchester City in the League Cup final and visit Mansfield in the FA Cup fifth round.

Asked whether he cared what other managers thought of him, Arteta replied: "No comment."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Title race not over vows, City's Guardiola

AFP

Manchester, United Kingdom

Pep Guardiola insisted the Premier League title race is not over after Manchester City's shock 2-2 draw against lowly Nottingham Forest handed the initiative to leaders Arsenal.

Pep Guardiola's side twice squandered the lead at the Etihad Stadium as goals from Antoine Semenyo and Rodri were cancelled out by Morgan Gibbs-White and then Elliot Anderson. Savinho had a shot cleared off the line by Murillo with the last kick of the game to compound City's frustration.

Their failure to kill off Forest was bad enough but the news from the south coast was even worse as a 1-0 win for leaders Arsenal at Brighton left the title race out of City's control. Arsenal are now seven points clear of City and have the destiny of the title in their hands as they chase their first English crown since 2004.

City have a game in hand on the Gunners, who visit the Etihad in April but Guardiola will rue another game in which his side lost control in the second half. Not for the first time this season, City slipped up in the second half, taking the total number of points dropped from winning positions this season to 13.

But Guardiola is adamant City can still

overhaul Arsenal in their last nine games. "Still many games to play, them (Arsenal) one less," Guardiola said. "There are games where we don't deserve it. Today we played in general good for 90 minutes. It's not about this action or that action. In general, when we analyse the game, the game was well played."

Guardiola would not be drawn on a penalty claim for City late in the game when Haaland went down after knocking the ball past Forest goalkeeper Mats Sels, with the decision cleared by VAR. "Always I believe we have to do it much better to make sure the officials don't intervene," Guardiola said.

"It's our responsibility to be better. If we have to rely on them it's impossible. Nothing more to say. In the end we created a lot against a team that is really defensive. We were dynamic. We missed maybe more contact with Erling (Haaland), his incredible movements, we have to look for him a bit more, but in general it was well played."

The momentum in the title race is now firmly with Arsenal, but Guardiola's attention is switching to this weekend's FA Cup fifth round clash with Newcastle before a Champions League last 16 first leg against Real Madrid.

"The feeling is we have one game less to play," Guardiola said when asked about the title race. "Now it is Newcastle, always the thought is about what's next."



## Travel chaos threatens Iraq's participation in World Cup playoffs

**Baghdad:** Iraq's participation in the inter-confederation playoffs in Mexico that will decide two berths at this year's World Cup is in doubt because of the travel chaos triggered by the conflict in neighbouring Iran.

The Iraqis are scheduled to play the winners of an earlier tie between Bolivia and Suriname in Monterrey on March 31 for a spot at the World Cup finals but are concerned they might not be able to get everyone to Mexico.

Iraqi airspace has been closed since the United States and Israel launched air attacks on Iran last weekend and the Islamic Republic responded by firing missiles and drones at Israel, Gulf states and other countries.

"FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation are fully aware of every development regarding our team's situation," the Iraq national team said in a statement. "Because

of airspace closures, our head coach Graham Arnold is unable to leave the United Arab Emirates. In addition, several embassies remain closed at the present time, preventing several players, technical and medical staff from obtaining entry visas to Mexico.

"We assure our loyal supporters that we remain in close contact with both FIFA and the AFC, who are keeping tabs on the situation," Iraq, who have played only once at the World Cup back in 1986, are favourites to win the playoff and become the ninth Asian team to qualify for the finals.

New Caledonia, Jamaica and the Democratic Republic of Congo will travel to Guadalajara later this month to compete in the other three-way playoff for a ticket to the World Cup finals. The finals take place in the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11 to July 19.

## ROUND-UP

## Real Madrid will 'keep fighting' in title race, vows Arbeloa

Real Madrid will "keep fighting" as long as they mathematically have a chance of winning La Liga, after slipping four points behind Barcelona, under-pressure coach **Alvaro Arbeloa** said. Los Blancos visit Celta Vigo today, hoping to move back within one point of Barcelona ahead of the reigning champions' match at Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

Madrid lost their lead at the top of the table with a defeat at Osasuna a fortnight ago, before being humbled at home by Getafe last weekend to increase the scrutiny on Arbeloa. "We're four points behind, not 18. This is Real Madrid. As long as we can mathematically fight, we will, and if there ever comes a time when we can no longer fight, we will still keep fighting," said Arbeloa, who replaced Xabi Alonso as coach in January.

"In the dressing room, we're aware that there's still a lot of the season left. We've had two consecutive league defeats. Of course, at a club like Real Madrid, defeat is always difficult to handle because of the expectations and the pressure, but right now the only thing we're thinking about is tomorrow's match."

Madrid have been hit badly by injuries in recent weeks. Brazilian winger Rodrygo Goes joined Kylian Mbappe, Jude Bellingham and Eder Militao on the sidelines after suffering a serious knee injury against Getafe which will likely see him miss the World Cup in the summer. Centre-back Dean Huijsen will also sit out the game at Celta through suspension.

Real Madrid host Manchester City in their Champions League last-16 first leg next Wednesday. Mbappe has travelled to Paris for treatment on his knee injury and Bellingham is in London, with both hoping to recover in time to face City.

## REAL SOCIEDAD SET UP COPA DEL REY FINAL AGAINST ATLETICO MADRID

Real Sociedad will face Atletico Madrid in the Copa del Rey final after a 1-0 win over Basque rivals Athletic Bilbao on Wednesday sealed a 2-0 aggregate semi-final victory. Captain Mikel Oyarzabal



settled a tight contest at the Reale Arena with a spot kick in the 87th minute after referee Cesar Soto Grado reviewed the incident on the pitchside monitor.

Inigo Ruiz de Galarreta was penalised for pulling Yangel Herrera's shirt at a corner and Oyarzabal fired his effort to the keeper's left. The final will be played at Seville's La Cartuja stadium on April 18, when La Real and Atletico meet in the Spanish Cup showpiece for the second time. The Basque side won their previous final showdown on penalties in 1987 after a 2-2 draw following extra time. They lifted the trophy again in 2020.

## KANE TO MISS BAYERN GAME AGAINST GLADBACH WITH CALF KNOCK

Harry Kane will miss Bayern Munich's Bundesliga match against Borussia Moenchengladbach today with a calf injury, coach Vincent Kompany said. The England striker, who has been an ever-present for Bayern this season, should be fit in time for the Champions League last-16 first leg at Atalanta next Tuesday.

Bayern took a big step towards defending their Bundesliga title last weekend with a comeback 3-2 win at closest challengers Borussia Dortmund to open up an 11-point lead. Kane scored twice in that match to take his tally in all competitions this season to 45 goals.