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Venus knocked out by qualifier Parry at Indian Wells

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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**PREMIER LEAGUE**

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**SPOTLIGHT**

## F1 likely to drop Bahrain, Saudi races without replacement

Reuters  
London

The Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Grands Prix are unlikely to be replaced on what would become a 22-race Formula One calendar if, as now looks probable, they are cancelled due to conflict in the Middle East.

Multiple senior sources in the F1 paddock told Reuters that reducing the world championship from a scheduled 24 rounds was the most probable outcome. Bahrain's floodlit race at the Sakhir circuit to the south of Manama is scheduled for April 12 with the Saudi race in Jeddah due on the following weekend. MotoGP is also due to race at Qatar's Lusail circuit near Doha on April 12 and has said that date looks very difficult for them to fulfil, with the round unlikely to move to another venue. The World Endurance Championship (WEC) round in Doha on March 26-28 has been postponed.

Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain's capital Manama have been targeted by Iranian missiles and drones, with a hotel hit in the latter city, after US and Israel launched attacks on Iran. Major airports in the region, significant hubs for international travellers, remain closed.

Rescheduling the Formula One races for the same venues later in the year would be extremely difficult since temperatures are much higher in the region through the European summer and autumn. There is also



McLaren's Formula One world champion Lando Norris signs autographs at the season-opening Australian Grand Prix at Albert Park Circuit in Melbourne. (Reuters)

an absence of obvious slots, with Formula One keen to maintain its August break and relieve the burden on teams.

Although a number of circuits have been mooted in the media as possible replacements - Italy's Imola, France's Le Castellet and Portugal's Portimao as well as Turkey's Istanbul Park - the practical reality

of shifting the circus at short notice makes it a major logistical challenge.

There would also be little incentive for promoters and a limited window to sell tickets to cover the hosting fees while organising marshals, security and transport takes time. Hosting another race at Japan's Suzuka after round three, another op-

tion suggested, would raise another set of problems and track owners Honda would also have little incentive to cast a double spotlight on their own embarrassing engine woes with Aston Martin.

While races were held behind closed doors at stand-in venues during the Covid-19 pandemic, with some circuits holding two in succession, there was a pressing need then to complete a season. A reduced 22-race calendar - still a long season compared to many in the past - would meet commercial obligations even if reducing Formula One's overall revenues.

### BAHRAIN GP WAS CANCELLED IN 2011 WITHOUT REPLACEMENT

The Middle Eastern races are major contributors to Formula One's bottom line but Bahrain and Saudi Arabia also have far deeper ties to the sport, the former as owners of champions McLaren and the latter as sponsors and investors. When the Bahrain Grand Prix was cancelled in 2011 due to unrest in the kingdom, it was not re-scheduled after teams objected to a late October date.

"We want our role in Formula One to continue to be as positive and constructive as it has always been, therefore, in the best interest of the sport, we will not pursue the rescheduling of a race this season," the circuit chairman, who subsequently became a government minister, said at the time.

Formula One's then commercial supremo Bernie Ecclestone said later that Bahrain had paid the hosting fee anyway. For-

mula One's current chief executive Stefano Domenicali and Mohammed Ben Sulayem, president of the governing International Automobile Federation (FIA) have both said safety comes first.

"We don't want to do any statement today because things are evolving and we still have time to make the right decision. This decision will be taken together," Domenicali said in Melbourne. The Italian is expected to meet F1 bosses today.

"It's the first get-together of all the teams. There's been very little communication about it (the situation) yet because of the effort that it took just to get here to Australia," said McLaren boss Zak Brown. Mercedes boss Toto Wolff told reporters: "I would very much hope we race. Is it realistic that we race there at the moment? I'm not quite sure."

While Formula One still has time before a decision has to be taken, other deadlines are fast approaching. Formula Two, a support series to Formula One, also has its first race of the season in Australia this weekend but the freight is then due to be flown to Bahrain on Monday for a test on March 25-27 at Sakhir. One senior source in the Formula Two paddock said teams were still awaiting clarification but expected both test and race to be cancelled, with an announcement possibly over the weekend. If the Bahrain F2 round, on the same weekend as Formula One, and the Saudi one are cancelled without replacement then the second race of the championship would not be until Monaco in June.

**FORMULA 1**

# Piastri edges Antonelli in Australian GP practice

Antonelli's Mercedes teammate and pre-season favourite Russell came third

AFP  
Melbourne

McLaren's Oscar Piastri powered to the fastest time ahead of Mercedes' Kimi Antonelli in second practice for the season-opening Australian Grand Prix yesterday as drivers grappled with sweeping new engine changes. The Australian sent 125,000 fans at his home track into a frenzy by blasting round Albert Park in one minute 19.729secs, 0.214 clear of Antonelli.

Antonelli's teammate, pre-season favourite George Russell, came third, a fraction clear of Ferrari's seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton. "A lot of learnings but overall a reasonably good day," said Piastri, who won seven times last year but could only finish the championship in third. "FP2 ran smoothly and we were able to find a bit more consistency and the car behaved more as we expected, which was good."

After a dismal debut season with Ferrari last year, an upbeat Hamilton was encouraged by what had been achieved so far by the Scuderia. "It was challenging at times on track, but we maximised our laps and executed to the best of our ability, getting some good information," he said. "Lots of work to do but I'm looking forward to getting back in the car tomorrow."

Charles Leclerc, in the other Ferrari, was fifth with four-time world champion Max Verstappen sixth after spending half the session in the garage having stalled his Red Bull. McLaren world champion Lando Norris clawed his way to seventh, more than one second off the pace, after managing only seven laps in first practice due to gearbox issues. "We've got some good bits of data to go over from the second half of FP2 and there's plenty we can learn from what our competitors have been doing," said Norris, while admitting to "a tricky first day".

Racing Bulls' impressive rookie Arvid Lindblad banked an eye-opening eighth, a place ahead of Isack Hadjar - the man he replaced and who is now Verstappen's teammate.

It was the first proper test of far-reaching new engine and chassis rules with the hybrid power units now 50 percent traditional combustion and 50 percent electric. With a finite amount of energy available, drivers



McLaren's Oscar Piastri (also below) drives during a practice session for the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne. (Reuters)



had to carefully manage their batteries on each lap, working out when to deploy while building it up back through braking.

The challenge of Albert Park is its long

sweeping straights, which deplete batteries, and relatively few twisty turns to brake and charge it up again. There have also been changes to the aerodynamics of the cars, which are lighter and smaller. On a perfect Melbourne afternoon, Nico Hulkenberg led them out, but it was Hamilton who set the opening time.

Verstappen had an inauspicious start, stalling in the pit lane, while Russell clipped Lindblad on his way out and needed a new nose. Verstappen's car was wheeled back into the garage, apparently stuck in gear, where he stayed for almost half an hour. The drivers started on a mix of medium and hard tyres and Russell soon upstaged Hamilton as they jockeyed for places.

At the halfway mark it was Italy's Antonelli, Russell, Hamilton and Piastri. Rus-

sell locked up and hit the gravel at Turn 3 as he pushed hard, as did Hamilton, but they both kept enough momentum to get back on track. Piastri blasted to the top of the timesheets on soft tyres with 25 minutes left as Verstappen began climbing the leaderboard.

But the Dutchman was trying too hard and careered into the gravel at Turn 10 with debris flying off his car, ending his day early. Fernando Alonso clocked 18 laps and Lance Stroll 13 as the troubled Aston Martins battle extreme vibration caused by the new Honda power unit.

Newcomers Cadillac - the 11th team on the grid - also struggled with Valtteri Bottas 19th and Sergio Perez last. In first practice, Leclerc outpaced Hamilton with Verstappen and Hadjar third and fourth.

### Aston Martin chief Newey says no quick fix to vibration problems

Melbourne: Aston Martin chief Adrian Newey said that a vibration issue plaguing their cars was "sucking all energy" out of the team with star driver Fernando Alonso in "a hard mental place".

The Newey-designed car suffered countless issues through pre-season testing with an unreliable Honda power unit, and that has continued in Melbourne at the season-opening Australian Grand Prix. Vibration into the chassis has caused mirrors and tail lights to fall off and there are fears that Alonso and team-mate Lance Stroll could suffer nerve damage in their hands.

A frustrated Newey said there was no quick fix after the two cars completed just three laps between them in first practice in Melbourne. "At the moment I think there's a very clear action of work to try to reduce the vibration that is emanating from the PU (power unit)," he said.

"They are working on that, it's not going to be a quick fix... I can't comment how quickly they can achieve that, but that has to be the main drive. Once they've got past that, then they can really start to concentrate on performance. But at the moment, this vibration issue is sucking all energy in every area."

Newey revealed the team also had battery problems with only two from four now working. Another failure would mean one car would be sidelined in Melbourne.

As one of the greatest designers the sport has seen, Newey admitted he felt "powerless" as Japanese manufacturer Honda desperately try to find a solution. The issues are having an impact on the drivers - veteran Alonso, 44, faces another season without a competitive car.

"Fernando is, in my opinion, one of the true greats. His ability, his talent, his all around capability. He should have won, in truth, far more than the two world championships," said Newey. "He's still super-quick, super-talented, super-sharp talking to him... so for Fernando it's a hard mental place to be in at the moment."

Powered by Mercedes last season, Aston Martin finished seventh in the championship.

## SPOTLIGHT

## India's Bumrah only 'human', says Phillips

AFP  
Ahmedabad, India

New Zealand will be ready to pounce if India's bowling star Jasprit Bumrah falters in the T20 World Cup final said all-rounder Glenn Phillips yesterday.

Defending champions India and New Zealand clash in Ahmedabad on a blockbuster tomorrow after the co-hosts edged out a spirited England team in the second semi-final.

A brilliant 105 from Jacob Bethell on Thursday kept England in the hunt during a record chase of 254 before Bumrah bowled a near-perfect 18th over.

A succession of precise york-

ers and length balls yielded just six runs and England were behind the chase. New Zealand, who thrashed South Africa in the first semi-final, are eyeing their maiden title in their second final appearance and Phillips said the team are ready for Bumrah.

"He's human as well," Phillips told reporters. "He is allowed to have a bad day, as are the rest of us. So hopefully we have a good day against him."

Bumrah's accuracy and his ability to bowl yorkers has choked opposition teams. Against England, his four overs returned figures of 1-33 in a match where 499 runs were scored in 40 overs.

However he fared less well against the Kiwis in a five-match T20 series at the start of the year.



India won 4-1 but Bumrah, who played in four of the matches, took just four wickets, conceding 9.46 runs an over.

Phillips acknowledged Bumrah's class but said the tactics against any bowler are never the same. "Obviously we had a really good

trip against him in the bilateral series as well but he's a class bowler," said Phillips. "He's got so many variations. He hits the block hole at the death incredibly well."

Phillips also played down the possible ploy of playing out Bumrah's four overs and targeting the other bowlers. "It's not necessarily going to be that, per se," he said.

"As I said, a bowler is allowed to miss, and if he happens to miss, we do have to put it away."

"That also means that if he does bowl, well, we have to accommodate for other things and adapt."

Perennial underdogs New Zealand edged into the semi-finals on net run rate but stepped up a couple of gears when Finn Allen's 33-ball 100 defenestrated favourites South Africa. New Zealand

overturned their target of 169-8 in just 12.5 overs to claim an outrageous nine-wicket win: they are now seeking a first World Cup title in either white-ball format. Mitchell Santner's team will be up against a crowd of over 100,000 at the Narendra Modi Stadium and a billion Indian fans watching on TV, although that doesn't appear to be worrying the New Zealanders.

"For us, we just go out there and enjoy it," said Phillips.

"We have a great time as a group of guys, we go out there and do our best for our country and yes, obviously a packed crowd is fantastic.

"We play to entertain the people and whether they're supporting us or whether they're supporting India, it's fantastic for cricket in general."

## PREVIEW

## India target T20 history as New Zealand hunt first title

MORE THAN 100,000 SPECTATORS EXPECTED TO WATCH THE FINAL IN AHMEDABAD TOMORROW

Reuters  
Ahmedabad

India's bid to become the first team to retain the Twenty20 World Cup will collide with New Zealand's quest for a maiden global white-ball crown when the finalists step on to the field at the world's largest cricket stadium tomorrow.

The 20-team tournament will end in an Ahmedabad amphitheatre where more than 100,000 fans will expect a gladiatorial slugfest and most will hope for a home triumph.

The stands will transform into a sea of blue for Suryakumar Yadav's men but India do not have particularly sweet memories of their rivals or the venue in recent global finals.

Personnel have since changed but in New Zealand, India face opponents who got the better of them in the World Test Championship final in 2021 in England.

Two years later, Australia stunned the cavernous Narendra Modi Stadium when they humbled India, previously unbeaten in the tournament, in the 50-over World Cup final.

Still, it is a testament to India's consistency that reaching finals has become almost habitual.

This home campaign has not been flawless, but they are where



India's captain Suryakumar Yadav (right) yesterday arrives at Ahmedabad airport ahead of the 2026 ICC T20 World Cup final match against New Zealand. Right: New Zealand's Finn Allen plays a shot during the 2026 ICC T20 World Cup semi-final match against South Africa at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata on Wednesday. (AFP)



it matters - one win from becoming the first host nation to lift a T20 World Cup.

As the world's top-ranked T20 side, they have the means to do it.

Sanju Samson has reinvigorated the top order with back-to-back match-winning knocks to fire the hosts into the final.

His elevation has added a valuable left-right variety at the top, and India have shown tactical flexibility to rejig their batting order whenever needed.

With the ball, Jasprit Bumrah has led superbly, earning plaudits for strangling batters in the game's most unforgiving format for bowlers.

Seam-bowling all-rounder Hardik Pandya has been on point too, though the leakage of no-balls and wides from Arshdeep Singh and Shivam Dube - especially at the death - remains a concern.

Frontline spinner Varun Chakravarthy has not been at his best but Axar Patel's steady returns as a

spin-bowling all-rounder have been a major plus.

"There will be nerves, but then the boys and the whole support staff will be excited as well," Suryakumar said after beating England.

New Zealand's path to the final was hardly serene either and they only reached the last four after Pakistan failed to win big against Sri Lanka.

Then came a thunderclap - a nine-wicket demolition of previously unbeaten South Africa in the

first semi-final that left fans and pundits rubbing their eyes in disbelief.

Finn Allen, who smashed a record 33-ball hundred in that match, and Tim Seifert form arguably the most explosive opening pair in T20 cricket.

Rachin Ravindra's ability to tailor his batting to any situation and Glenn Phillips' natural aggression make it a formidable batting lineup.

Matt Henry leads a sharp pace

attack and New Zealand also have plenty of variety in their spin department, which has been bolstered by the late introduction of off-spinner Cole McConechie.

While there is no lack of skill and talent in their squad, New Zealand pride themselves on resilience.

"It just shows that us as a team, we get up for the fight," Allen said. "Those important fixtures, we really get up for them as a team. We're prepared to fight till the end."

## THE FACTBOX

**AHMEDABAD:** Key facts about Sunday's Twenty20 World Cup final between India and New Zealand.

**WHEN:** Sunday, March 8 at 1900IST (1330GMT)

**WHERE:** Narendra Modi Stadium (capacity 1,32,000)

**INDIA**  
T20 world ranking: 1  
Previous best result: Winners (2007, 2024)

**Coach:** Gautam Gambhir  
**Captain:** Suryakumar Yadav  
**Top-ranked batter:** Abhishek Sharma (1)  
**Top-ranked bowler:** Varun Chakravarthy (1)

**Squad:** Suryakumar Yadav (captain), Abhishek Sharma, Tilak Varma, Sanju Samson, Shivam Dube, Ishan Kishan, Hardik Pandya, Arshdeep Singh, Jasprit Bumrah, Harshit Rana, Varun Chakravarthy, Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Rinku Singh.

**ROAD TO THE FINAL**

**Group Stage** - Beat U.S. by 29 runs  
**Group Stage** - Beat Namibia by 93 runs  
**Group Stage** - Beat Pakistan by 61 runs  
**Group Stage** - Beat Netherlands by 17 runs  
**Super Eight** - Lost against South Africa by 76 runs  
**Super Eight** - Beat Zimbabwe by 72 runs  
**Super Eight** - Beat West Indies by five wickets

**Semi-final** - Beat England by seven runs

**NEW ZEALAND**  
T20 world ranking: 4  
Best result: Runners-up (2021)

**Coach:** Rob Walter  
**Captain:** Mitchell Santner

**Top-ranked batter:** Tim Seifert (10)

**Top-ranked bowler:** Jacob Duffy (18)

**Squad:** Mitchell Santner (captain), Finn Allen, Michael Bracewell, Mark Chapman, Devon Conway, Jacob Duffy, Lockie Ferguson, Matt Henry, Kyle Jamieson, Daryl Mitchell, James Neesham, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra, Tim Seifert, Ish Sodhi.

**ROAD TO THE FINAL**

**Group Stage** - Beat Afghanistan by five wickets  
**Group Stage** - Beat UAE by 10 wickets  
**Group Stage** - Lost against South Africa by seven wickets  
**Group Stage** - Beat Canada by eight wickets  
**Super Eight** - No result as match abandoned due to rain against Pakistan  
**Super Eight** - Beat Sri Lanka by 61 runs  
**Super Eight** - Lost against England by four wickets  
**Semi-final** - Beat South Africa by nine wickets

**PREVIOUS T20 MEETINGS**  
India wins: 16  
New Zealand wins: 11  
Tied: 3



## FOCUS

## Axar's masterclass helps India shine on the field



India's Shivam Dube celebrates with Axar Patel after taking a catch to dismiss England's Will Jacks in Mumbai on Thursday. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Mumbai

India put some forgettable fielding moments from this year's Twenty20 World Cup in the rear-view mirror during their semi-final win over England on Thursday, as Axar Patel's inspired display reminded his teammates of their quality.

The defending champions had dropped 13 catches heading into the match at the Wankhede Stadium - the most by any side in this year's tournament - but Axar single-handedly raised the level and shifted the momentum in their seven-run win.

Axar's first magical moment came as England captain Harry Brook looked to hit pacer Jasprit Bumrah over extra cover, when he sprinted back with the ball dropping over his shoulder to complete

a stunning catch in the fifth over.

As Jacob Bethell and Will Jacks raised England's run rate in their chase of 254, Axar stepped up again to halt their momentum with a relay catch on the edge of the boundary to dismiss Jacks and draw roaring applause from the stands. Axar caught the ball after a dash towards the ropes, but realising that his momentum would take him over, he flicked it mid-air into Shivam Dube's hands to complete the dismissal.

"The momentum of both the catches was different," Axar told reporters in the mixed zone. "I liked the way I caught Harry Brook. It was a tough one. But considering the situation of the game, Will Jacks' catch was very important. I felt the ball was chasing me today."

The 32-year-old, who has forced his way back into the side after missing matches against the

Netherlands and South Africa as India picked Washington Sundar, has made a strong case for inclusion in tomorrow's final against New Zealand.

India will look to win an unprecedented second straight T20 title in the Ahmedabad showpiece and Axar, who has made 16 runs and picked up eight wickets in six matches, will have added motivation if picked.

"I've been waiting for this moment. It'll be a proud moment to play at home in front of my family," he said.

Sanju Samson's 89 earlier laid the platform for India's win as they posted 253-7.

"Credit goes to him," Axar said. "He has carried forward the confidence from his last knock and experience matters in such pressure situations. He batted quite easily and wasn't rushing into anything."

## COMMENT

## McCullum is keen to stay on as England coach

Reuters  
Mumbai

England head coach Brendon McCullum said he intends to continue in the role despite his side's exit from the Twenty20 World Cup following a seven-run defeat to holders India in Mumbai on Thursday. McCullum, 44, took charge of England's Test setup in 2022 and added the white-ball responsibilities in January 2025 under a con-

tract running through 2027. His tenure has included a difficult stretch, notably a 4-1 Ashes defeat in Australia that prompted the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to launch a "thorough review" into the team's preparations in January.

"I love the job. It's a great job. It doesn't come without its challenges, of course, but that is the nature of it," McCullum told Sky Sports. "I feel we have achieved some really cool things over the last few years but there is still so much to achieve with the side, across all formats.

"A bit of time to reflect, to let things land and objectively look at what is and isn't working. I think the white-ball side has been exceptional post-Ashes, winning away in Sri Lanka and then getting to this stage at the T20 World Cup," McCullum said. "I think we have played some good cricket with a real identity about it under Brook's captaincy. Brook's leadership throughout, after a couple of tough months leading in... for him to have the mental fortitude to be able to galvanise the team, and connect the side how he has, it's been superb," he said.

TENNIS

# Qualifier Parry ends Venus' desert dream

The 45-year-old wild card rallied from a set and a break down to force a third set

AFP  
Indian Wells, United States

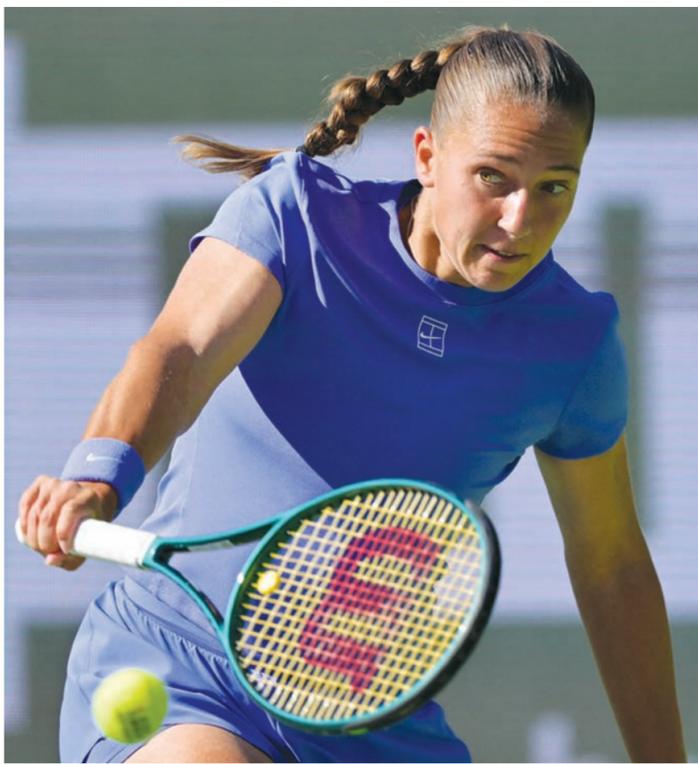
Seven-time Grand Slam champion Venus Williams was sent crashing out at Indian Wells on Thursday, falling in three sets to French qualifier Diane Parry.

The 45-year-old Williams, playing on a wild card at the prestigious ATP/WTA Masters 1000 event, rallied from a set and a break down to force a third set, but Parry, ranked 111th in the world, stormed through the decider for a 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 6-1 triumph. "It's always so fun," Williams said. "Of course, losing isn't fun, but it's great to play in front of a home crowd."

While the Californian star is enjoying competition since returning last July from a 16-month hiatus, Williams was mum on the chances fans would see her and sister Serena play together this year. "You'll have to ask her that," Williams said to the question that has bubbled in the tennis world since 23-time Grand Slam champion Serena re-entered the anti-doping testing pool.

While Williams remains in search of her first win of the year after first-round exits at the Australian Open and in Austin, Texas, she said Thursday's game wasn't a good gauge of her game. "I think today is not the kind of day that you want to assess," she said. "The conditions are impossible. Also, my match in Austin the conditions were impossible. In Austin I refused to relent and change my game and I lost very quickly. Today I tried to adjust. It's not easy. You can't trust anything that you do out there."

The 23-year-old Parry, who was born after Williams had won the first four of her Grand Slam titles, said despite the conditions she could feel the force of Williams' game. "Even if it wasn't pretty tennis today



France's Diane Parry hits a backhand during her first round match against Venus Williams of the US at the Indian Wells Open.

because of the wind, you can still clearly see the quality of her shots - forehand, backhand - as soon as she gets a ball she can attack, there's little chance you're get-

ting it back. You can imagine what it was like when she was at her best," said Parry, adding it was "an honor to be able to play against a legend of our sport."

"I watched more of Serena, the greatest player of all time, but I think a lot of people forget the career that (Venus) has had. When, during the warm-up, the announcer gave a brief summary of her career, you think, 'Oh right, that's really something.'"

In men's first-round action, Bulgarian veteran Grigor Dimitrov booked a second-round meeting with top-seeded Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz with a 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 grudge match victory over Terence Atmane, who had beaten the former world number three in Acapulco last week. "I think I started the match really well, but it was just difficult to maintain a solid level," Dimitrov said. "It could have gone either way, but I was able to stay very strong in the most important moments."

Dimitrov, a 2021 Indian Wells semi-finalist, now gets a shot at Alcaraz, who is undefeated in 12 matches in 2026 and beat Dimitrov in the fourth round here last year. Alcaraz, whose Australian Open triumph in January made him at 22 the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam, will launch his bid for a third Indian Wells title today.

Second-seeded Jannik Sinner of Italy launches his campaign for a first Indian Wells title, headlining the night session against Czech qualifier Dalibor Svrčina. Fourth-seeded German Alexander Zverev will open second-round play on Stadium Court against Italian Matteo Berrettini, with women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka up next against Japanese qualifier Himeno Sakatsume.

Like Sinner, Sabalenka is chasing a first Indian Wells title. She fell in last year's final to Russian teen Mirra Andreeva and in 2023 to Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina.

## Medvedev arrives in Indian Wells after being stranded in Dubai

**Indian Wells:** Russian tennis player Daniil Medvedev has made it to Indian Wells for the ATP/WTA hardcourt Masters 1000 after being stuck in Dubai for several days amid Israel and the United States' war with Iran.

Medvedev, a two-time runner-up at Indian Wells ranked 11th in the world, was spotted working out in the players' warm-up area near Stadium Court One along with compatriot Karen Kachanov - who was also unable to leave Dubai after the ATP tournament won by Medvedev last Saturday.

Russian media reports said Medvedev and compatriots Andrey Rublev and Kachanov left Dubai via Oman on Tuesday, flying on to Turkey and then Los Angeles. "You feel like you're in a Hollywood movie," Medvedev told the Russian outlet Bolshv. The ATP said Wednesday that the "vast majority" of players who had been stuck in Dubai had "successfully departed".

Medvedev, Kachanov and Rublev are all seeded at Indian Wells, which began on Wednesday, and therefore received first-round byes. Rublev and Kachanov were scheduled to open their campaigns in the second round yesterday, with Medvedev set to play today. Two secondary ATP Challenger Tour events were cancelled in Fujairah, in the northeast of the United Arab Emirates.

## McIntosh grabs dominant 200m fly win at Westmont Pro Swim

**Los Angeles:** Olympic swim star Summer McIntosh clocked an impressive 2min 4.72sec for a dominant victory in the 200m butterfly on Thursday at the Westmont Pro Swim in suburban Chicago. Canada's McIntosh, the reigning Olympic and world champion, beat American Lindsay Looney by an emphatic 4.31sec.

"Honestly, I was hoping for a bit more than what I just went," the 19-year-old who is now training in Texas with former Michael Phelps mentor Bob Bowman told streaming service Peacock.

The 19-year-old Canadian holds the second-, third-, fourth- and fifth-fastest times in the event behind the world record of 2:01.81, set by China's Liu Zige during the era of now-banned super suits.

In other events, Australian Sam Short won the 800m freestyle in 7:40.98, beating a pair of Olympic gold medalists. American Bobby Finke, winner of the 800 free at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics in the first time it was added to the men's Games program, was second in 7:58.35. Ireland's Paris Games gold medalist Daniel Wiffen was third in 8:07.21.

GOLF

# Berger sets early pace at Arnold Palmer with 63



Daniel Berger of the United States plays an approach shot on the 18th hole. (AFP)

AFP  
Miami

Daniel Berger made nine birdies in a flawless round as he stormed to an impressive three-stroke lead on day one of the Arnold Palmer Invitational in Florida.

The 32-year-old American - a four-time winner on the PGA Tour, whose last triumph came five years ago at Pebble Beach - picked up three birdies on the front nine, but caught fire with six coming in. The early pace-setter rolled in three straight birdies starting on the 10th, before adding another with an 11-foot putt at the par-three 14th, and two more birdies on the 16th and 18th for a bogey-free round of 63. Berger sits three clear of recent Pebble Beach champion Collin Morikawa and Sweden's Ludvig Aberg.

World number one Scottie Scheffler shot 70, while Rory McIlroy - gearing up to defend his Masters title next month - finished

on even-par after an erratic round featuring five birdies and a double bogey.

Berger, who missed three months of golf last fall after breaking the ring finger on his right hand on a shot at the BMW Championship in August, said "the biggest thing for me is just getting in a bit of a rhythm."

"When you come back you're just kind of getting back into the flow of things and getting into your routine," he said. "I've really played not really that poorly, and just haven't had the results," he added.

The broken finger was just the latest injury setback for Berger, who missed 10 months over 2022 and 2023 with back issues and struggled for consistency when he returned in 2024. The native Floridian predicted conditions would be "incredibly difficult and challenging" for the rest of the week at the Bay Hill Club & Lodge in Orlando.

"You can already see the greens are like white. So a little bit of wind, a little bit less moisture, and it's just going to be like a US Open," he said. "I think when you come to

Bay Hill to play this event you know what you're getting, and so it doesn't shock me. You're ready for it."

Morikawa, a two-time major winner who ended a two-year title drought with a victory at Pebble Beach in February, surged late for his six-under round. He hit a flush seven-iron into the par-five 16th and holed a 15-foot eagle putt before birdies at 17 and 18 - where he drained a 27-foot putt. "I hit three 7-irons to finish the day, three birdies, I'll take it," said Morikawa, who finished runner-up at last year's Arnold Palmer Invitational, despite leading eventual winner Russell Henley by three strokes with five holes to play.

Aberg was delighted with his 66 in swirling winds on a notoriously tricky course, describing leader Berger's 63 as "quite unbelievable."

McIlroy found the water with his approach iron on the par-four 13th. Forced to take a drop, he again missed the green and had to settle for a double bogey.

BASKETBALL

# James breaks NBA all-time field goal record in Lakers loss

AFP  
Los Angeles

LeBron James broke the record for most field goals made in NBA history Thursday, though the latest milestone in his glittering career did not stop the Los Angeles Lakers from crashing 120-113 to the Denver Nuggets.

James, who already held the NBA all-time points record, sailed past Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's 15,837 field goals with a fadeaway jumper in the first quarter. The 41-year-old has played a record 23 NBA seasons, and has stoked rumors of possible retirement in recent weeks, telling reporters in January: "I don't know what the future holds."

James, who scored 16 points in Thursday's loss, appeared to injure his left elbow in the fourth quarter, after he was shunted off the court and landed on the legs of a cameraman. Play was halted as he was substituted out. James returned to the court for the game's final two minutes, but in evident pain.

It was a wire-to-wire win for the Nuggets, though the Lakers had closed to within one point with two minutes remaining. "They're a difficult team to beat," said Nikola Jokic, who grabbed another triple-double including 28 points, 13 assists and 12 rebounds. "We scored when we needed."

The result could prove crucial to playoff qualification, with the Lakers sitting in the final automatic spot in sixth, just behind the Nuggets. They are two games clear of the Phoenix Suns, who lost 105-103 to the Chicago Bulls.

James' career tally of well over 43,000 points is nearly 5,000 more than second-



Los Angeles Lakers' LeBron James (left) controls the ball against Denver Nuggets' Zeke Nnaji in the first quarter.

placed Abdul-Jabbar, whom he passed back in 2023. James reached the points record earlier in part because Abdul-Jabbar played much of his career before the introduction of the three-pointer, but the field goal record is further testament to his longevity and prowess.

Elsewhere, Victor Wembanyama scored 38 points and grabbed 16 rebounds as the San Antonio Spurs brushed aside the Eastern Conference-leading Detroit Pistons 121-106. The French 7-foot-5 prodigy was near-unplayable as the Spurs notched up their second straight wire-to-wire win,

and their 13th victory from 14 games. "Any game between top seeds should be impressive. For us, it was super fun," said Wembanyama. "It wouldn't have been fun if we didn't... dictate the game. I think we led for 48" minutes, he added.

Wembanyama was ably supported by

De'Aaron Fox with 29 points, as the second-placed Spurs moved within three games of West-topping Oklahoma City Thunder. For the Pistons, it was rare back-to-back losses, despite star man Cade Cunningham showing grit in a losing cause with 26 points.

The Golden State Warriors bested the Houston Rockets 115-113 in an overtime thriller. The Warriors had led until the end of the third quarter, before a madcap finish saw 12 lead changes, with regular time ending 101-101.

Kevin Durant scored a huge three-pointer to bring the Rockets back to a one point deficit with a minute of overtime left. But having made a league-best 36 consecutive free throws, Durant then missed two in a row, leaving his team -- who are locked in a tight race for the third seed in the West -- agonizingly short.

It was a key win for the Warriors, whose form had slumped and left them clinging to eighth spot, with injuries to star players including Stephen Curry.

The playoff-chasing Orlando Magic edged another thriller against the Dallas Mavericks thanks to last-gasp heroics by Jalen Suggs.

Nineteen-year-old sensation Cooper Flagg appeared to have won it for Dallas, muscling through Wendell Carter Jr for a four-point lead with 37 seconds left.

But Suggs had other ideas, burying a three-pointer and then finding Carter Jr for a running dunk and a 115-114 victory. Flagg, returning from a foot injury, became the second-youngest player in NBA history to reach the 1,000 career points mark. The only player to reach that milestone younger? A teenage LeBron James back in 2004.

## PREMIER LEAGUE

# Dismal Tottenham can still avoid relegation: Tudor

Spurs are in 16th place, just one point above the relegation zone

AFP  
London

**I**gor Tudor claims troubled Tottenham's dismal 3-1 defeat against Crystal Palace on Thursday has convinced him they will avoid relegation from the Premier League. Tudor's side squandered the first half lead given to them by Dominic Solanke as Palace struck three times in 12 minutes before the interval in north London.

Tottenham defender Micky van de Ven was sent off for a needless professional foul on Ismaila Sarr, who converted the resulting penalty. Jorgen Strand Larsen scored Palace's second and Sarr struck again as the atmosphere at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium turned toxic. Languishing in 16th place, Tottenham are just one point above the relegation zone after third-bottom West Ham's win at Fulham on Wednesday.

With just one win in their last 13 home league games, Tottenham are in grave danger of playing in the second tier for the first time since 1977-78. Interim boss Tudor has already faced calls for his sacking after losing his first three matches since replacing the axed Thomas Frank.

But the Croatian is adamant Tottenham's improved second half display showed the players still want to fight for survival. "It was two games. After the red card, it was a second game. The second half we tried and I saw interesting things but I'm very disappointed like the fans," Tudor said. "We need to work hard and believe. After this game, I believe more than I did before. I know that sounds strange but I saw something in the team. Even in the dressing room after the game. When we are complete and choose the right guys, I believe it will be good."

Tottenham have conceded two or more goals in nine successive league matches for the first time in their history. They have lost five successive league games and are without a win in 11 consecutive top-flight matches for the first time since 1975.

Despite those wretched statistics, Tudor tried to accentuate the few glimmers of hope from the Palace debacle. "I saw some good energy, some more passion. The fight was there," he said. "There are nine games to play. (Cristian) Romero is coming back, (Kevin) Danso was good, maybe others will come back. We



With just one win in their last 13 home league games, Tottenham are in grave danger of playing in the second tier for the first time since 1977-78. (Reuters)

will be good when we are complete."

Van de Ven's dismissal sparked Tottenham's latest collapse, his panicked foul on Sarr serving as the perfect summation of the crisis gripping the club. Tudor had arrived at Tottenham insisting they were 100 percent certain to avoid relegation. But defeats to Arsenal, Fulham and Palace have made that bold claim look increasingly foolish.

Asked if the manner of Van de Ven's red card showed Tottenham are unable to cope with the stress, Tudor said: "We need to stop talking about pressure. This is not a topic to speak about. I will not speak any more about pressure."

Tottenham have spent only one season outside the top-flight since 1950. They have nine games left to save themselves from an astonishing relegation, starting with their trip to Liverpool on March 15 before a vital clash with

fellow strugglers Nottingham Forest.

Tottenham striker Dominic Solanke revealed Tudor and his squad held crisis talks immediately after the match. "We've just had a big conversation. We know the position we are in is definitely not where we want to be so we need to figure out how we are going to get out of it as soon as possible," Solanke said.

"We know there's been difficulties, but we're not in a position to make any excuses anymore. We need to do the job on the pitch. It is easy to say we want to be better but we want to be better on the pitch. We need to fight and realise the position we are in."

Tudor did his best to stay positive, adding he is not expecting the sack. "I don't think in that direction. I have my job to do. Still nine games to play," he said. "The message I said to the players is not public. I know it is not easy. It is a moment but it will pass."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Ronaldo heads to Spain for rehab after injury in Saudi league

Reuters  
Riyadh

**P**ortugal forward Cristiano Ronaldo will travel to Spain for rehabilitation after sustaining a hamstring injury, Saudi Pro League leaders Al Nassr's coach Jorge Jesus said. The 41-year-old, who has netted 21 goals in 22 games this season in the SPL, was injured in a 3-1 win over Al-Fayha on Saturday.

"After examining Ronaldo's injury, it became clear that he needs a period of rest and treatment, so we decided to send him to Spain," Jesus told a press conference. "The medical staff diagnosed Ronaldo's condition and confirmed that he is unable to take part in tomorrow's match or the following one (against Al Khaleej)."

It remains unclear whether the five-times Ballon d'Or winner will be fit to participate in Portugal's friendlies against Mexico on March 29 and the US on April 1.



## Dybala out for six weeks as Roma battle for top-four spot

**Rome:** Roma, battling for a Champions League spot in Serie A, will be without Argentine striker Paulo Dybala for over six weeks with a knee injury, Italian media reported. According to reports, Dybala underwent surgery in Rome after suffering "a complete longitudinal tear of the external meniscus".

The 2022 World Cup winner cut short Thursday's training session with what Roma initially described as "muscle fatigue". He is expected to be out for 45 days, which means he will miss seven Italian league matches and the Europa League round of 16 tie against fellow Italian club Bologna.

He did not appear for Roma in February, with the club giving a "knee problem" as the reason. He returned to the bench for the match against Juventus on March 1 but was an unused substitute in a 3-3 draw.

Dybala, 32, lost his undisputed starting position at Roma late last season. In this campaign he has scored only two goals in 17 Serie A appearances. Roma are fourth in Serie A, 16 points be-

hind leaders Inter Milan, but only two points behind Napoli in third and three ahead of fifth-placed Como.

### LENS BEAT LYON TO REACH FRENCH CUP SEMIS

Lens kept their dream of an unlikely French league and cup double alive, beating Lyon 5-4 on penalties on Thursday to reach the semi-finals after their last-eight tie had ended in a 2-2 draw. French international forward Florian Thauvin was the hero for Lens with a goal and an assist in normal time before he converted the decisive kick in the shoot-out.

Lens are Paris Saint-Germain's closest challengers at the top of Ligue 1, sitting four points behind the reigning champions. Now they are through to the last four in the Cup, in which they will host Toulouse next month as they dream of lifting the trophy for the first time in their history.

Toulouse defeated Marseille 4-3 on penalties on Wednesday after their quarter-final also ended 2-2. Nice won on penalties at Lorient and will now go to Strasbourg, who beat Reims 2-1.

## FOCUS

## Morocco part company with coach Regragui as World Cup looms

AFP  
Rabat

**M**orocco parted company with coach **Walid Regragui** on Thursday, three months before the World Cup, with the country's football federation naming Mohamed Ouahbi as his replacement. Regragui leaves despite having led the Atlas Lions to the World Cup semi-finals in 2022 and to the final of the Africa Cup of Nations at the beginning of this year.

"I leave my post with loyalty, gratitude, and the certainty that I have served my country," he declared during a ceremony broadcast live on television, confirming weeks of persistent rumours that he was on his way out.

Ouahbi, 49, is promoted to the role having overseen Morocco's triumph at the Under-20 World Cup in October, with the federation describing the move as "a strategic transition" in the run-up to the World Cup in North America in June and July.

"It's a desire not to waste time and to take a different direction," a source close to the Moroccan Federation said. "By appointing Mohamed Ouahbi and welcoming top-tier reinforcements, we are raising our standards and our demands," the source said.

Morocco will be in Group C at the World Cup along with five-time winners Brazil, Scotland and Haiti. They begin their campaign against Brazil at the MetLife Stadium just outside New York City on June 13 and will be hoping to make a big impression at the tournament before co-hosting the 2030 edition with Spain and Portugal.

"Our ambition is to consolidate



our place among the best nations in a sustainable way and to perform well from this summer, as well as in 2030," the leader of the Moroccan federation, Fouzi Lekjaa, said recently.

Regragui was hailed in 2022 after Morocco became the first African nation in World Cup history to reach the semi-finals, beating Spain and Portugal along the way. However, Regragui likely paid the ultimate price for the manner in which Morocco lost the recent AFCON final to Senegal.

His team were beaten 1-0 after extra-time at the end of a match marred by the Senegal team's decision to walk off the pitch in protest at the award of a controversial late penalty to the hosts.

The penalty award with the game goalless sparked trouble in the crowd involving Senegal fans, 18 of whom were jailed following the disruption. Real Madrid star Brahim Diaz eventually took the penalty after a long delay but his kick was saved and Senegal went on to win the game.

## LA LIGA

## Champions League ambitions encourage Barcelona to gamble against Bilbao

AFP  
Barcelona

**B**arcelona swept to a domestic treble last season but fell agonisingly short in the Champions League, beaten in the semi-finals by Inter Milan, making it their clear priority this year.

The dream of returning to the European throne for the first time since 2015 may lead Hansi Flick's side to take their eyes off the ball in La Liga this weekend.

The Spanish champions visit Athletic Bilbao today, going into the weekend with a four-point lead on rivals Real Madrid, who were visiting Celta Vigo late last night.

With Alvaro Arbeloa's side at a low ebb following Monday's defeat against Getafe, Flick may choose to use the breathing room to gamble on heavy rotations before next week's Champions League last 16 clash at Newcastle.

The Catalan giants finished Tuesday's Copa del Rey semi-final clash against Atletico Madrid drained, winning 3-0 but eliminated 4-3 on aggregate, adding to the pressure for Flick to give his stars a break.

"Everyone was exhausted because they left everything on the pitch, they gave more than 100 percent," said Flick.

Barca changed their travel plans on Wednesday to head directly to England from Bilbao, rather than returning home first. With Newcastle in the last 16, and then either Atletico or Tottenham Hotspur in a potential quarter-final, Barcelona can see a relatively kind route towards the final four.

Jules Kounde and Alejandro Balde suffered injuries against Atletico and join Frenkie de Jong on the sidelines, while Robert Lewandowski may have to play in a mask after suffering a fractured eye socket.

Midfielder Pedri has only recently returned from injury but Flick pushed him to play the full 90 minutes against Atletico.

"I think we needed Pedri on the pitch, this is why I ask him if he can continue and I'm really happy (he's not hurt)," admitted Flick. "It was a risk to play 90 minutes. He said after the game 'nothing happened, I'm okay'."

Lesser-utilised players like Marc Casado, Ronald Araujo and Roony Bardghji could be



The dream of returning to the European throne for the first time since 2015 may lead Hansi Flick's side to take their eyes off the ball in La Liga this weekend.

handed starts, along with on-loan Manchester United winger Marcus Rashford. The England international has impressed at times this season but since Raphinha returned from injury, has fallen out of favour.

One player Flick has a hard time rotating is teenager winger Lamine Yamal, who is hungry to play every minute he can. During a recent 3-0 win over Levante, the 18-year-old showed his frustration at being taken off with just a few minutes remaining and the points in the bag.

Former Barca coach Ernesto Valverde's Athletic Bilbao have had a difficult season and sit ninth in La Liga, 16 points off fourth place. However the Basque side are usually extra-

motivated by the visit of one of Spain's biggest two sides to San Mames and with Barca's Champions League ambitions evident, can smell blood. They will be looking to make amends to their fans after a derby defeat by rivals Real Sociedad on Wednesday in the Copa del Rey semi-finals.

### FIXTURES

**Today:** Osasuna v Mallorca (1300), Levante v Girona (1515), Atletico Madrid v Real Sociedad (1730), Athletic Bilbao v Barcelona (2000)  
**Tomorrow:** Villarreal v Elche (1300), Getafe v Real Betis (1515), Sevilla v Rayo Vallecano (1730), Valencia v Alaves (2000)  
**Monday:** Espanyol v Real Oviedo (2000)