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FA Cup scare to  
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Sunday, March 8, 2026  
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# GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Defending champions  
India eye third T20  
World Cup title against  
New Zealand today

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FORMULA 1

# Russell leads Mercedes 1-2 for Australian Grand Prix

Russell takes Mercedes' first pole in Australia since 2019, four-times world champ Verstappen crashes out



Mercedes' George Russell (centre) celebrates getting pole position next to second-placed Mercedes' Kimi Antonelli (right) and third-placed Red Bull Racing's Isack Hadjar after the qualifying session of the Formula One Australian Grand Prix at the Albert Park Circuit in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)



Red Bull Racing's Max Verstappen crashes during the qualifying session of the Formula One Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Melbourne

George Russell powered to pole position yesterday for the season-opening Australian Grand Prix ahead of Mercedes teammate Kimi Antonelli, but there was disaster for Max Verstappen as he crashed out.

On a fine day at Melbourne's Albert Park, Verstappen's Red Bull partner Isack Hadjar came third in chaotic qualifying as the pecking order became clearer after the biggest regulation shake-up F1 has seen in years.

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc will keep Hadjar company on the second row with McLaren's Oscar Piastri and world champion teammate Lando Norris starting fifth and sixth. Russell eclipsed his rivals with a flying lap of one minute

18.518 seconds on soft tyres, 0.293 ahead of Antonelli.

"A great day. We knew there was a lot of potential in the car," said the Briton. "Really happy to have Kimi here next to me as well, as the team did an amazing job in the garage today."

Incredibly, Antonelli showed up after crashing heavily in final practice earlier in the day and writing off his Silver Arrow.

The 19-year-old Italian left the car in a mess but his mechanics miraculously managed to stitch it back together and he got on track with just three minutes left of Q1 to stay alive.

"It has been a very, very stressful day. The mechanics today were the heroes. We couldn't even set up the car, we just went out," he said. "It was not easy, I needed to dig deep."

It was a nightmare for four-time world champion Verstappen - the

2023 and 2024 pole-sitter - who slammed into the barriers at Turn 1 of his first flying lap in Q1.

"The car just locked on the rear axle. Fantastic," said the Dutchman, whose hopes of a second win in Australia after his 2023 victory appear to be over.

Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton will start in seventh alongside the Racing Bull of Liam Lawson, with rookie Arvid Lindblad in the other Racing Bull and Audi's Gabriel Bortoleto filling out the top 10.

Brazilian Bortoleto's car stopped in the pit entry after Q2 and he was unable to take part in Q3, which was red-flagged with only Piastri lapping.

Antonelli's car was sent out with the cooling fan still attached, which fell off and Norris ran over it, leaving debris sprawled across the track. The Italian was cited by the stewards, but avoided a grid penalty. Instead, Mercedes were

fined 7,500 euros for releasing his car in an unsafe condition.

It was the first qualifying session at full throttle under the sport's radical new engine and chassis regulations. With a greater reliance on electrical energy in the hybrid power units, drivers had to grapple with better management of their batteries.

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.

"It was a very smooth qualifying," said Hadjar.

"We kind of built up to it, and it was a very good last lap. I want to keep my position, as a second podium would be good."

Alpine pair Franco Colapinto and Pierre Gasly failed to get through Q2, as did Williams' Alex Albon and Haas drivers Esteban Ocon and Ollie Bearman. Nico

Hulkenberg in his Audi joined them. Along with Verstappen, Williams' Carlos Sainz was eliminated in Q1. The Spaniard's car broke down in third practice and he failed to appear for qualifying.

Aston Martin's Lance Stroll was another no-show as the team continue to deal with extreme vibration in their Honda power unit.

Also out at the first hurdle was his teammate Fernando Alonso in 17th, along with both Cadillac drivers Valtteri Bottas and Sergio Perez in the team's maiden Grand Prix.

**STARTING GRID**

**Front row**  
George Russell (GBR/Mercedes)  
Kimi Antonelli (ITA/Mercedes)

**2nd row**  
Isack Hadjar (FRA/Red Bull)  
Charles Leclerc (MON/Ferrari)

**3rd row**  
Oscar Piastri (AUS/McLaren)

Lando Norris (GBR/McLaren)  
**4th row**  
Lewis Hamilton (GBR/Ferrari)  
Liam Lawson (NZL/Racing Bulls)

**5th row**  
Arvid Lindblad (GBR/Racing Bulls)  
Gabriel Bortoleto (BRA/Audi)

**6th row**  
Nico Hulkenberg (GER/Audi)  
Oliver Bearman (GBR/Haas)

**7th row**  
Esteban Ocon (FRA/Haas)  
Pierre Gasly (FRA/Alpine)

**8th row**  
Alexander Albon (THA/Williams)  
Franco Colapinto (ARG/Alpine)

**9th row**  
Fernando Alonso (ESP/Aston Martin)  
Sergio Perez (MEX/Cadillac)

**10th row**  
Franco Colapinto (ARG/Alpine)  
Valtteri Bottas (FIN/Cadillac)

**11th row**  
Max Verstappen (NED/Red Bull)  
Carlos Sainz (ESP/Williams)

Lance Stroll (CAN/Aston Martin)

SPOTLIGHT

# Defending champion Norris slams 'worst' F1 cars

Reuters  
Melbourne

McLaren's defending champion Lando Norris was scathing of Formula One's engine and chassis overhaul after qualifying sixth at the Australian Grand Prix, saying they had made the cars go from "best to worst" in a season.

Norris has had a difficult weekend in Melbourne, struggling with reliability and setup problems, and the new mode of driving, which puts more emphasis on energy harvesting and managing battery power, was not helping his mood.

"You decelerate so much before corners, you have to lift everywhere to make sure the (battery) pack's at the top," the Briton said in the Albert Park paddock.

"If the pack's too high, you're also screwed. It's just difficult, but it's what we have."

While powered by Mercedes engines, constructors champions McLaren were well off the pace of their Mercedes rivals in qualifying.

George Russell's pole lap of 1:18.518 was over eight-tenths of a second quicker than McLaren's Oscar Piastri, who qualified fifth. Russell's Mercedes teammate Kimi Antonelli qualified second.

"It doesn't feel good as a driver, but I'm sure George is smiling," said Norris. "We've come from the best cars ever made in Formula One and the nicest to drive to probably the

worst. It sucks, but you have to live with it."

Norris told Sky he was nonetheless "pretty happy" about qualifying sixth amid the challenges, which included running over a cooling fan that fell off Antonelli's car.

It caused a crack in Norris's front wing, forcing him back to the garage where mechanics taped up the damage. Norris was not holding out much hope of better lap performance in today's race.

"I mean it already sucks, so it's probably going to be even worse," he said.

Piastri had a better run with his car, saying he had got close to everything he could have out of qualifying. "Everything's a bit scrappy, but with these cars, you change something a little bit from lap to lap and you end up with more power or less power," he said.

"It doesn't always go in the direction you expect. There's plenty for us to learn after that, but I think we're roughly where we thought we would be."

McLaren team principal Andrea Stella said the team needed to work with Mercedes HPP, their engine supplier, to extract more performance from the power unit.

"Mercedes' performance today shows there is more to find there," he said.

Mechanics work on the car of McLaren's British driver Lando Norris in the pits during the Formula One Australian Grand Prix at the Albert Park Circuit in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)



## PREVIEW

# India, New Zealand ready for T20 World Cup showdown

ALL EYES ON THE TITLE CLASH IN AHMEDABAD WHERE A RECORD CROWD IS EXPECTED TODAY

Reuters  
Ahmedabad

The best way to deal with pressure is to embrace it, India captain Suryakumar Yadav reminded his teammates ahead of today's final of the Twenty20 World Cup at the Narendra Modi Stadium.

India are bidding to become the first team to retain the T20 World Cup title and to achieve that, they will have to deal with not just a strong New Zealand XI but also the weight of expectation from a cricket-mad nation of about 1.4 billion people.

Leading the team in the final of a home World Cup was a "special feeling", and Suryakumar said they were looking forward to the challenge.

"There are nerves, butterflies in the stomach, but as I always say - if there's no pressure, there's no fun," Suryakumar told reporters yesterday.

"I'm very excited. All the boys and support staff, and I'm sure all of India is excited for tomorrow?"

More than 100,000 predominantly home fans are expected to fill the world's largest cricket stadium where Australia famously beat India in the final of the 50-overs World Cup three years ago.

Expectations are mounting again as India also try to become the first host to win a T20 World Cup.

Suryakumar said they try not to talk about cricket and the presence of "characters" like Arshdeep Singh and Axar Patel keeps the dressing room atmosphere light.

"It's very important to have such characters around, because when the situation is tight, you need someone to joke around in the bus and in the dressing room, to calm the dressing room," said Suryakumar.

"We do not talk about cricket-intense situations because players, like Axar, Arshdeep, (Jasprit) Bumrah - all these people, they know what to do. "We want to be very relaxed, be in the present, not think about what will happen in the final."

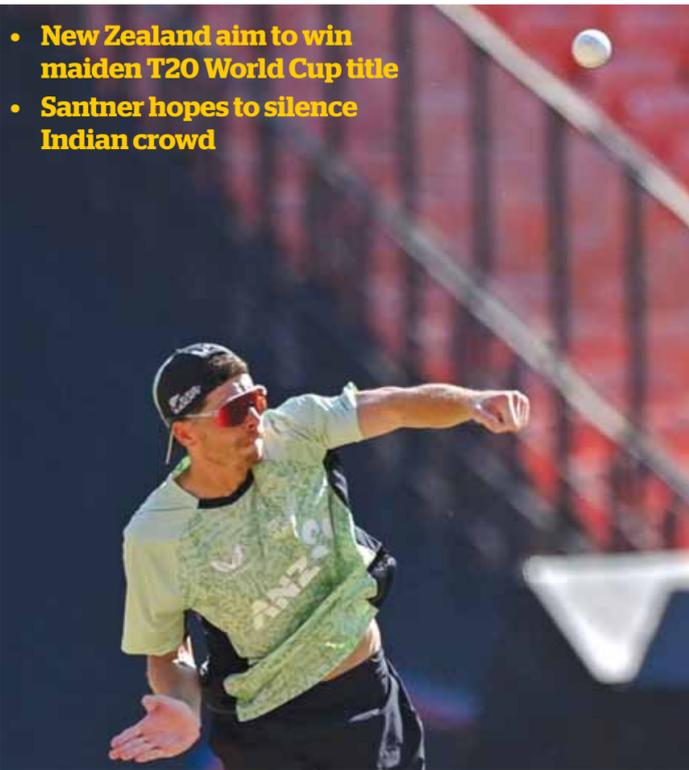
Suryakumar said as captain, he had also resisted the temptation to be the 'big brother' in the dressing room and encouraged individuality.

"I feel a good team culture is very important. A happy team atmosphere is the key," he added.

"Give them freedom, listen to their ideas as well about what they feel.

"I think it is very important to under-

- **New Zealand aim to win maiden T20 World Cup title**
- **Santner hopes to silence Indian crowd**



New Zealand's captain Mitchell Santner attends a practice session on the eve of the World Cup final against hosts India. (AFP)

stand what everyone wants in the team."

## NEW ZEALAND READY TO BREAK HEARTS AND SILENCE INDIA'S CROWD IN T20 FINAL, SAYS SANTNER

New Zealand would not mind being the underdogs and breaking hearts in today's Twenty20 World Cup final against hosts India, captain Mitchell Santner said ahead of the contest in front of a partisan Ahmedabad crowd.

New Zealand reached the final after sweeping past South Africa in a ruthless nine-wicket win and are chasing their first global T20 crown after falling short in previous campaigns.

"We are pretty consistent because we try not get overawed by the situation or op-

ponents. We just go out there and do our thing," Santner told reporters yesterday.

"It's going to be an opposite challenge where everyone knows we're probably not the favourites. But we don't mind. We know we can do little things well and put in a strong team performance.

"It would put us in a pretty good position to hopefully lift the trophy. I wouldn't mind breaking a few hearts to lift the trophy."

Santner said the pressure would lean heavily on the hosts, who are bidding to defend the title in front of more than 100,000 spectators expected at the Narendra Modi Stadium.

He did not shy away from the prospect of silencing a packed house, drawing an echo of Pat Cummins-led Australia's triumph at

the same venue in the 2023 one-day World Cup final.

"The goal is to silence the crowd. There are a lot of variables in T20 cricket and it is fickle at times," the 34-year-old said.

"If we go out about our business the same way we can upset another big team. There's obviously a lot of pressure on in there (on India) to win this World Cup at home."

India are coming off the back of a stunning seven-run win over England in the semi-final and Santner emphasised the need for early breakthroughs to blunt their top order.

"The only way to slow any team down is wickets at the top and then try to squeeze a few overs in the middle... if you're not taking wickets, you have to find a way to stop boundaries," he said. He also praised the depth of New Zealand's squad, highlighting Cole McConchie's smooth transition after replacing the injured Michael Bracewell.

McConchie has scored 45 runs and taken two wickets in four matches.

"Cole coming straight in, was obviously a challenge. I think when you have the buy-in of the group, it's not just the 11 out there, it's the 15 in the squad... We're all in this journey together," Santner said.

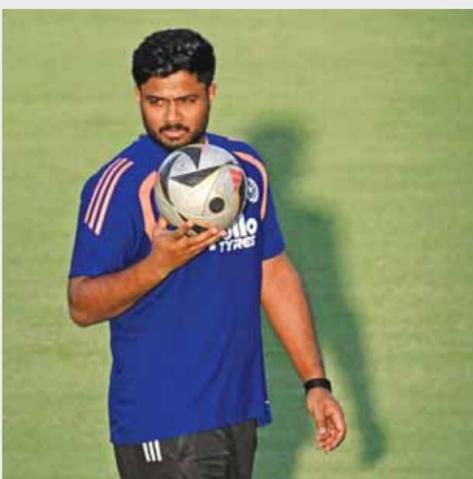
Despite the size of the occasion, Santner urged his side to treat it like any other day at the office.

"It's easy to say it's just another game - everyone knows it's probably not - but the way you go about it has to be the same," he added.



India's captain Suryakumar Yadav poses with the T20 World Cup trophy on the eve of the final against New Zealand in Ahmedabad. (AFP)

## PLAYERS WARMING UP FOR THE FINAL



India's Sanju Samson (left), Ishan Kishan and India's Tilak Varma attend a practice session in Ahmedabad on the eve of the T20 World Cup final against New Zealand. (AFP)



New Zealand's opener Finn Allen, Tim Seifert and Glenn Phillips (left) during a practice session in Ahmedabad.

## SPOTLIGHT

# Ticket prices and hotel tariffs skyrocket



India's captain Suryakumar Yadav (right) looks at the pitch as he interacts with head coach Gautam Gambhir (left) and chairman of the Indian cricket selection committee Ajit Agarkar yesterday in Ahmedabad. (AFP)

Reuters  
Ahmedabad

Ticket prices for today's Twenty20 World Cup final between India and New Zealand have soared on the black market, with fans shelling out more than 15 times the original rate as demand overwhelmed supply ahead of the title clash at the Narendra Modi Stadium.

Official tickets, starting at 2,000 Indian rupees (\$21.76), sold out within minutes on BookMyShow, prompting thousands of fans turning to unofficial routes.

Some tickets with a face value of 3,500 rupees were selling at 54,000 when Reuters checked

on the eve of the match. Scalpers have seized control of the resale market, pushing prices far beyond face value as supporters scrambled for a seat to witness India's bid for back-to-back titles at the world's largest cricket stadium where more than 100,000 predominantly home fans are expected to turn up.

"I've paid 35,000 rupees for a 3,000-rupee ticket because I couldn't get through the waiting list," said a businessman from Mumbai requesting anonymity.

"There are specific WhatsApp groups for reselling tickets. You only get added if you're serious, and it works strictly on advance payment so buyers don't back out."

Ahmedabad police arrested a

youth for reselling tickets at an inflated rate, local media reported.

"The situation is not new to us. We paid exorbitant prices even during the 2023 ODI World Cup," said a Delhi resident.

Price has also ballooned on online resale platforms of tickets starting at 11,000 rupees. The price hikes have become a nightmare for the fans who cannot afford inflated rates and risk becoming prey for scammers. The Gujarat Cricket Association (GCA) said it had no knowledge of what was going on outside.

"Bookings happen only through the BookMyShow app. The cricket association does not sell any physical tickets," GCA secretary Anil Patel told Reuters by telephone.

The International Cricket Council did not respond to Reuters' request for comment.

Ahmedabad's hotel prices have also skyrocketed at least 10 times to cash in on the cricket hysteria.

Properties near the venue were fully booked despite the price hike.

Budget hotels along the Mumbai-Ahmedabad highway and in nearby Gandhinagar, which usually charge 4,000 rupees per night, were demanding rates of 40,000.

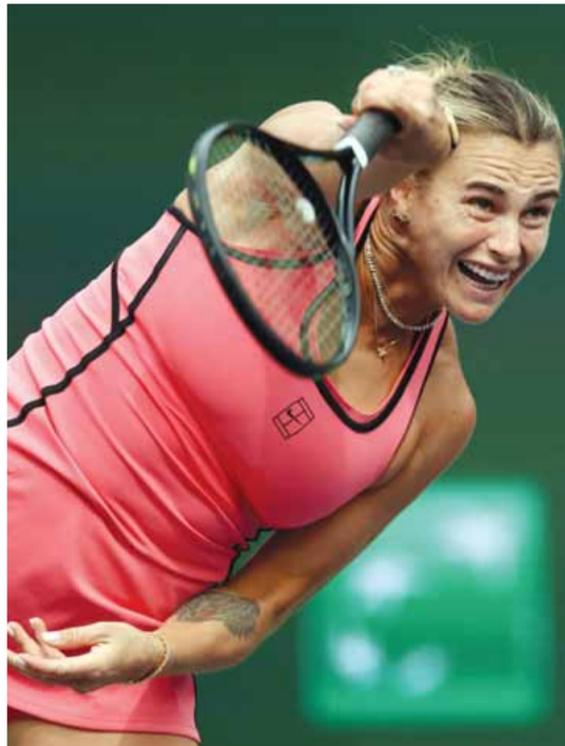
"This is our peak time to earn profits as a large number of people come to watch the match," a local hotel owner said.

Another hotel owner said the rush would have been a lot less had India not qualified for the final.

TENNIS

# Impressive Sinner downs Svrcina at Indian Wells Open

SABALENKA OF BELARUS WINS 100TH MATCH AS WORLD NO. 1



Jannik Sinner of Italy and Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus in action during their Indian Wells Open matches. (AFP)

AFP  
Indian Wells

World number two Jannik Sinner overwhelmed Czech qualifier Dalibor Svrcina 6-1, 6-1 on Friday to launch his bid for a first Indian Wells hard-court crown.

Sinner, back in the California desert after missing last year's edition serving a drugs suspension, controlled every aspect of the 64-minute contest in which he faced just one break point. After Svrcina held serve for 1-1 in the first set, Sinner won nine straight games before Svrcina managed another hold. The Czech fought valiantly to force Sinner to serve it out, saving three match points in the final game before Sinner closed it with one more service break.

It was an auspicious start to a tournament in which the four-time Grand Slam champion's best runs ended in semi-final defeats to Carlos Alcaraz. This year he can't meet top-seeded Alcaraz - or

third-seeded five-time champion Novak Djokovic - until the final.

"I feel mentally I'm in a good place," said Sinner, who lost to Djokovic in the semi-finals of the Australian Open and was surprised by Jakub Mensik in the quarters at Doha last month.

"I'm calm, I'm relaxed. But I'm also very happy to compete. We did a lot of work. Many, many hours on court. Many hours in the gym. I'm trying to get a little bit stronger."

Women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka, also chasing a first title in the prestigious ATP/WTA Masters 1000 event, opened in similarly dominant style, beating Japanese qualifier Himeno Sakatsume 6-4, 6-2.

Sabalenka showed no sign of rust in her first tournament since a runner-up finish to Elena Rybakina at the Australian Open.

"I'm really happy with the way I was serving, with the way I was putting her on the back foot," said Sabalenka, who has twice reached the Indian Wells final but lost to Rybakina in 2023 and to Mirra An-

dreeva last year. A nervous Sakatsume, ranked 136th, dropped her serve in the opening game but steadied after saving four break points to hold in the fifth.

Even so, she had no real answer to the Belarusian's power and the lone break was enough for Sabalenka to seize the opening set.

After Sakatsume held serve to open the second, Sabalenka won five straight games, closing out the match without facing a break point. Men's fourth-seed Alexander Zverev also sailed into the third round, beating Italian Matteo Berrettini 6-3, 6-4 without facing a break point.

It was an encouraging start for the German, who fell in his opening match last year and has never made it past the quarter-finals in the California desert. "I have struggled in Indian Wells before, but I feel different this year," he said.

Hungarian veteran Marton Fucsovics pulled the first big upset, ousting fifth-seeded Italian Lorenzo Musetti 7-5, 6-1. It was another disappointing setback for Musetti, who was playing his first

tournament since he retired with a right leg injury while leading 24-time Grand Slam champion Djokovic by two sets in the Australian Open quarter-finals. Home hopes Ben Shelton and Coco Gauff had to battle into the third round.

Ailing eighth seed Shelton clawed out a 6-7 (3/7), 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 victory over Reilly Opelka in an all-American clash.

Women's fourth seed Gauff rallied from two breaks down in the second set for a 6-3, 7-6 (7/5) victory over qualifier Kamilla Rakhimova. Rakhimova, ranked 88th, served for the second set three times, wasting one set point. She led Gauff 5-4 in the tiebreaker before the American reeled off the last three points.

"I think I got a little bit passive in the second set and a little lazy with the footwork," Gauff said. "Then I was able to pick it up."

Japanese superstar Naomi Osaka, seeded 16th in her first tournament since withdrawing from the Australian Open with an abdominal injury, defeated qualifier Victoria Jimnez Kasintseva 7-5, 6-2.

## Berger extends lead midway through Palmer Invitational

Daniel Berger opened up a substantial five-shot lead at the Arnold Palmer Invitational Friday, as he chases his first PGA Tour win in half a decade. The 32-year-old American is sitting at 13 under par at the midway point, after carding an impressive 68 at Florida's challenging Bay Hill course. Despite having sunk nine birdies a day earlier, Berger said he had played even better on Friday, as "the course was a little tougher."

"The green speeds are up there. The pin positions are tough," he said.

"It's just one of those courses. It's treacherous," Berger added. A four-time winner on the PGA Tour, whose last triumph came at Pebble Beach in 2021, Berger started his second round with

intent, immediately sinking a 24-foot putt from the fringe for a birdie on the opening hole. "I hit a nice putt, just walked it in. Good start to the day," said Berger. Though he recorded his first bogey of the week at the par-three seventh, two-putting after finding a bunker, it was smooth sailing for the native Floridian on the back nine, where he picked up three more birdies. After multiple injuries, Berger has enjoyed a strong start to 2026, finishing sixth at the season-opening Sony Open in Hawaii in January. He missed three months of golf last fall after breaking the ring finger on his right hand - just the latest setback for Berger, who was absent for 10 months over 2022 and 2023

with back issues, and struggled for consistency when he returned in 2024. Akshay Bhatia sat in second place after notching the day's best round with a 66 that featured seven birdies, including a 36-foot chip-in on eight. "I'm just going to keep plodding along... (Berger) could run away with it and I could be playing for second or it could be a little bit of a challenge," he said. "There's a lot of guys within six shots of the lead, which is not much around Bay Hill."

Sweden's Ludvig Aberg and recent Pebble Beach champion Collin Morikawa were among the players a shot further back on seven under par, along with Sahithi Theegala, who shot up the leaderboard with a bogey-free round of 67.

ATHLETICS

# Former world champ Kerley banned over hereabouts failures

AFP  
Los Angeles

Former 100m world champion Fred Kerley was hit with a two-year ban on Friday after failing to notify anti-doping officials of his whereabouts, the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) said in a statement.

Kerley, who won 100m gold at the 2022 World Championships in Eugene, has been provisionally suspended since August last year after committing three whereabouts failures in a 12-month period.

An AIU disciplinary tribunal confirmed his suspension on Friday, ruling that the 30-year-old, who also won 100m medals at the Tokyo and Paris Olympics, had been "negligent and, to a certain extent, reckless" in failing to comply with anti-doping regulations.

Elite athletes have strict requirements about informing anti-doping officials about their locations, such as at training camps or when traveling, and must provide a time and location each day to comply with rules regarding unannounced doping tests.

Three failures within a year to comply with the requirements, such as a missed test or inaccurate information given to the anti-doping agency, are punishable.

An AIU statement said Kerley had breached those rules three times between between

May 11 and December 6, 2024. A further whereabouts failure on December 7, 2024 was not taken into account when determining his suspension, which will run until August 2027.

The AIU said Kerley, a seasoned competitor in elite sprinting whose accomplishments also include world sprint relay gold in Doha in 2019 and Budapest in 2023, should have "exercised more care."

"Unfortunately, sophisticated doping substances may only be detectable within an athlete's sample for a few days or even hours after administration," AIU head Brett Clothier said in a statement.

"Anti-doping organisations need to be able to test athletes without notice on the day and hour of our choosing, otherwise anti-doping programmes will not work, and dopers will easily avoid detection. Whereabouts rules are therefore fundamental to the integrity of sport and must be respected," he added.

Whether Kerley returns to elite international competition is an open competition.

The American has said he plans to take part in the Enhanced Games in Las Vegas in May, where competitors will be free to use performance-enhancing drugs.

World Athletics, the global governing body for track and field, has said any athlete taking part in the drug-fuelled inaugural edition of the event will face "significant" bans from the sport.

ALL ENGLAND OPEN

# Taiwan's Lin upsets Vitidsarn to set up final against India's Sen

Reuters  
Birmingham

Taiwan's Lin Chun-yi stunned Thai second seed Kunlavut Vitidsarn 21-14 18-21 21-16 in the All England Open semi-finals yesterday and faces India's Lakshya Sen in the showpiece match.

Sen, 24, booked his place in the final after overcoming Canada's Victor Lai 21-16 18-21 21-15, recovering well after dropping the second game.

With defending champion and top seed Shi Yuqi knocked out in the opening round by

Sen, the men's draw at the Super 1,000 event opened up early. Danish second seed Anders Antonsen also exited in the first round.

The women's field, however, remains dominated by its heavyweights. Defending champion and top seed An Se-young of South Korea, along with Wang Zhiyi, Chen Yufei and Akane Yamaguchi, all advanced to the semis. An meets Chen later, while Yamaguchi takes on Wang in the other last-four clash.

In mixed doubles, Taiwan's Ye Hong-wei and Nicole Gonzales Chan reached the final, where they will play France's Thom Gicquel and Delphine Delrue.



India's Lakshya Sen celebrates his win over Canada's Victor Lai during their semi-final at the All England Open in Birmingham yesterday. (AFP)

CYCLING

# Pogacar begins season with dominant Strade Bianche win

AFP  
Siena, Italy

World champion Tadej Pogacar won a record fourth Strade Bianche title as he made a triumphant start to his 2026 season yesterday, with teenage French sensation Paul Seixas second.

Pogacar made a typically devastating long-range break around 80-kilometres from the finish, after which it was a procession to the line in Siena for his third win in a row there.

In doing so, the four-time Tour de France winner proved once again that his appetite to triumph

- and dominantly - has not diminished despite his myriad successes.

One of the 27-year-old Slovenian's main targets for this season comes in a week's time at the Milan-San Remo one-day classic - one of only two of the five Monument races he is yet to win.

Seixas, 19, came home in second place with the young Mexican Isaaca Del Toro third after 207km racing through picturesque rolling Tuscan countryside dusted with white gravel roads.

Pogacar made his decisive move with around 80km still to race - just as he had done two years ago - on the Monte Sante Marie gravel section.

His UAE team had put the hammer down heading into that section and once Pogacar attacked on a tough climb, he quickly distanced everyone else. Seixas was the rider who resisted the longest - even briefly dragging back Pogacar - before the world champion accelerated again and disappeared over the horizon for good.

The Frenchman ended up in a chase group that included Del Toro - who was sitting on with his UAE teammate in the lead - former Strade Bianche winner Tom Pidcock and two-time Paris-Nice champion Matteo Jorgenson, but they were already over a minute behind 20km after Pogacar's attack.

Seixas attacked about 18km from the finish and only Del Toro went with him but the Mexican refused to help the Frenchman chase down Pogacar, who won with ease.

Seixas, who many believe is the man to end his country's 41-year wait for another Tour de France winner, finally dropped Del Toro on the Via Santa Catarina climb to the finish to earn what is probably his most impressive professional result to date.

Swiss champion Elise Chabbey won the women's race in a thrilling finish.

Seven riders arrived together at the Via Santa Catarina, the final climb up to the Piazza del Campo finish, before it was soon whit-

tled down to a front four. Italian Elisa Longo Borghini led most of the way up the climb but Franziska Koch and Katarzyna Niewiadoma drew level with her and the three went into the penultimate corner shoulder-to-shoulder.

They almost touched as they ran wide, allowing Chabbey to dart down the inside to take the lead barely 100 metres from the line.

Pole Niewiadoma took second with German Koch third.

Tadej Pogacar celebrates as he crosses the line to win the 20th one-day classic 'Strade Bianche' cycling race between Siena and Siena in Tuscany yesterday. (AFP)



## LA LIGA

# Valverde strikes late as Real beat Celta Vigo

AFP  
Vigo, Spain

Federico Valverde's heavily deflected 95th-minute drive snatched injury-hit Real Madrid a 2-1 win at Celta Vigo in La Liga on Friday.

The Uruguayan midfielder needed a stroke of fortune at the death to pull his team to within one point of leaders Barcelona, who visit Athletic Bilbao.

Aurelien Tchouameni opened the scoring for Los Blancos early on but Borja Iglesias soon pulled Celta level at their Balaidos stadium. Alvaro Arbeloa's Madrid, without injured striker Kylian Mbappe, had lost their previous two league games and are struggling to find consistent form.

Valverde's shot, which flew into Celta's net after bouncing off former Barcelona defender Marcos Alonso, stopped his side going three consecutive La Liga matches without a win.

"There's a long way to go in La Liga, a lot of points left to play for... at this point it's almost like

La Liga has not started yet," Arbeloa told reporters.

"Every game you're playing against a team that has their own objectives and each game will be a war.

"We came here with 10 players out so I think our win deserves a lot of credit."

As well as French superstar Mbappe, the team's top goalscorer, Arbeloa was without several other players including Jude Bellingham, Rodrigo Goes and Eduardo Camavinga.

Despite the victory, Madrid's form and their injury list does not inspire confidence ahead of next week's Champions League last 16 clash against Manchester City.

Arbeloa started 18-year-old midfielder Thiago Pitarch for the first time and he offered a decent display even as his team failed to impress. Iglesias forced Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois into a solid low save with a drive from the edge of the box in the opening exchanges.

Arbeloa's side started well and Vinicius Junior struck the post before Tchouameni put them ahead



Real Madrid's Federico Valverde (right) celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the La Liga match against Celta Vigo at the Balaidos Stadium in Vigo. (AFP)

in the 11th minute. The French midfielder produced a fine finish from the edge of the box as Madrid worked a corner to him, his strike hitting the upright on its way in.

Celta were not discouraged though and some poor defending from Trent Alexander-Arnold let them back in.

The England international al-

lowed Williot Swedberg to get in behind him and then lacked the agility to block off the Swede, who cut the ball across for Iglesias to finish. Courtois made a good save

to keep Swedberg at bay before the break, as sixth-place Celta largely gave as good as they got.

Madrid appealed for a penalty when Ferran Jutgla handled the ball in the box, but a VAR review showed there was a push on a Celta defender just before and no spot kick was awarded.

Celta substitute Iago Aspas hit the post late on and it seemed like his team were destined for a point as the clock ticked down.

However in the final minute of stoppage time Valverde's effort from the edge of the box hit Alonso and left Celta goalkeeper Ionut Radu wrong-footed.

"We hardly gave up any chances, and the shot at the end was well defended, so we're a bit annoyed (to lose)," Iglesias told Movistar.

Arbeloa said he hoped Madrid's determination to claim the three points could be a platform to build from going forward.

"I know we can do a lot of things better, but with the personality and character we showed today, I hope that this is a turning point and from here everything goes a lot better," added Arbeloa.

## FOCUS

# Eze guides Arsenal past Mansfield into FA Cup quarters

ARSENAL SURVIVE SCARE TO KEEP QUADRUPLE DREAM ALIVE

AFP  
Mansfield, United Kingdom

Eberechi Eze smashed home the winner as Arsenal survived a scare to overcome third-tier Mansfield 2-1 and reach the FA Cup quarter-finals yesterday, keeping alive their hopes for a historic quadruple.

Gunners boss Mikel Arteta made nine changes to the side that beat Brighton 1-0 in midweek to open up a seven-point lead over Manchester City at the top of the Premier League.

Noni Madueke put the 14-time FA Cup winners ahead against the League One strugglers shortly before half-time, only for substitute Will Evans to level soon after the break.

The game opened up, with chances for both teams before England forward Eze thumped home to restore Arsenal's lead, minutes after being introduced by Arteta.

"It was a proper FA Cup game and credit to Mansfield, the stadium, the atmosphere that the fans created," Arteta told TNT Sports.

"It was a bit of banter, great atmosphere as well for them to keep pushing the team and they made it really difficult for us."

The Spaniard said his team needed to be more ruthless in front of goal after an uncomfortable afternoon in the East Midlands.

"We had four or five big, open chances that we didn't convert," he added. "If that's the case, then the margin becomes smaller. You give hope to the opposition.

"Obviously, we made a mistake on the goal as well. That cost us the momentum and the belief for them. But overall, happy with their performance."

Max Downman became the Gun-



Arsenal's Eberechi Eze (centre) scores their second goal during the English FA Cup fifth round match against Mansfield Town at the One Call Stadium at Field Mill in Mansfield yesterday. (AFP)

ners' youngest-ever FA Cup player, starting at the age of 16 years and 66 days and there was also a starting place for 16-year-old Marli Salmon as Arteta shuffled his pack.

Arsenal enjoyed the bulk of the early possession but Nigel Clough's men, who had beaten Premier League strugglers Burnley in the previous round, settled quickly and created a number of chances.

Rhys Oates was a constant threat while Tyler Roberts flashed narrowly wide from distance. But Arsenal broke the deadlock in the

41st minute when England winger Madueke sent a curling left-footed shot arrowing past Mansfield goalkeeper Liam Roberts.

That meant they became the Premier League team to reach 100 goals in all competitions this season. Undaunted, Mansfield were level shortly after the restart when substitute Evans made Salmon pay for a loose pass, keeping his nerve to slot past Kepa Arrizabalaga.

Both teams had further chances in an entertaining fifth-round tie but Eze, who had only been on the pitch for a few minutes, smashed home from the edge of the box to

put Arsenal back in front in the 66th minute.

Arteta's men were never able to relax but held on to reach the last eight. Arsenal's FA Cup triumph in 2020 remains Arteta's only major trophy during his time in charge at the Emirates.

But they are hot favourites to win the Premier League for the first time since 2004 and take on Bayer Leverkusen in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie on Wednesday. Arsenal also have a League Cup final against City at Wembley on March 22.

## LIGUE 1

# PSG beaten by Monaco before Chelsea showdown

AFP  
Paris

US national team star Folarin Balogun was among the scorers as Monaco won 3-1 at Paris Saint-Germain on Friday, dealing a blow to the side from the French capital before they face Chelsea in a crunch Champions League last-16 tie.

Maghnes Aklouché gave Monaco a first-half lead at the Parc des Princes and Aleksandr Golovin doubled their advantage early in the second half of the Ligue 1 clash.

Bradley Barcola pulled one back for the reigning European champions, but Balogun struck shortly after with a fifth goal in his last five games as Monaco claimed a precious win in their quest to qualify for Europe next season.

The principality side were seeking revenge after a 5-4 aggregate defeat by PSG in the Champions League knockout phase play-offs last month, when they squandered a two-goal lead before losing 3-2 in the first leg and came up short with a 2-2 draw in the return.

That result allowed Luis Enrique's side to reach the last 16 and they will now put their title on the line against Chelsea, with the first leg in Paris on Wednesday and the return on March 17.

That will be a season-defining tie for PSG, who won the Champions League for the first time last season, before losing 3-0 to Chelsea in the Club World Cup final. "It is not the best result going into the Champions League. We are aware of that," said Luis Enrique.

"When you play like that against a team in a very positive dynamic like Monaco, you pay for it"

The result is a setback for PSG in their bid to win a fifth consecutive Ligue 1 title, with closest challengers Lens now able to trim their lead at the top from four points to one by beating bottom side Metz on Sunday.

This was PSG's fourth league loss in 25 games this season, as many defeats as in the last two seasons combined.

They have now been beaten seven times in all competitions in 2025/26, and four times this calendar year.

Luis Enrique will be concerned at how far away his team are from the remarkable form they showed in the second half of last season on their way to winning the Champions League.

"We are clearly in difficulty at the moment but we need to maintain hope that will change," he added. "Confidence is not just something you buy at the supermarket."

One plus was the latest return from injury of last year's Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele, who came off the bench in the second half.

However, he has started only 14 of PSG's 40 games this season and it remains to be seen how long he will be able to play against Chelsea. Monaco were worthy winners, going ahead just before the half-hour mark.

PSG's Warren Zaire-Emery gave possession away inside his own box, and the ball ricocheted into the path of Balogun who teed up French international Aklouché to score.

The hosts were wasteful with their final ball and Golovin showed them how it should be done on 55 minutes, the Russian applying a clinical first-time finish with his first touch having come on as a substitute after Vitorinha inadvertently played the ball into his path.

PSG got one back on 71 minutes when Achraf Hakimi set up Barcola to score his 10th of the season with a first-time effort that took a deflection off Jordan Teze and beat Monaco 'keeper Philipp Koehn at his near post.

But Monaco snuffed out the PSG comeback, Balogun's shot from outside the area going in via a touch of Nuno Mendes.

That was a 13th of the season in all competitions for the striker who is set to play a leading role for co-hosts the United States at the World Cup.

Monaco have won five and drawn two of their last seven Ligue 1 games and are now fifth in the table.

"I am proud of the team," said Monaco coach Sebastien Pocognoli. "We feel there is a really positive momentum building."



Monaco's Folarin Balogun (right) vies for the ball with PSG's Illia Zabarnyi during the Ligue 1 match at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris. (AFP)

## LEVERKUSEN HELD AT FREIBURG BEFORE ARSENAL CLASH

Bayer Leverkusen came from behind twice but gave up the lead late to draw 3-3 at Freiburg yesterday, days out from their Champions League clash with Arsenal. Leverkusen host the Champions League favourites on Wednesday in the first leg of their last-16 tie but Saturday's wild draw may hurt their chances of reaching next year's competition.

The result leaves Leverkusen sixth, losing ground on top-four rivals Hoffenheim and RB Leipzig, who both won on Saturday.

"We're more than a little disappointed," Leverkusen coach Robert Andrich told Sky Germany,

"Starting Sunday, we'll be focused on Arsenal, but we still need a lot of points in the Bundesliga to get back into the Champions League." Freiburg twice went ahead thanks to goals from Vincenzo Grifo and Yuito Suzuki but Leverkusen twice equalised through Christian Koufane and another superb free-kick from Alejandro Grimaldo. Martin Terrier's goal had the visitors on track for victory but Matthias Ginter struck with four minutes remaining to level things up. Elsewhere, RB Leipzig also looked set to drop points in the top-four race but forced Augsburg's Arthur Chaves into a stoppage-time own

goal in a comeback 2-1 home win. Robin Fellhauer gave Augsburg the lead after teammate Keven Schlotterbeck missed a penalty but Yan Diomande pulled one back for the hosts before Chaves scuffed a David Raum cross into his own net.

Leipzig's win took them to fifth, level on points with fourth-placed Stuttgart, who drew 2-2 at lowly Mainz. Stuttgart fell behind to a Jae-Sung Lee strike but looked to have turned the match with goals to Ermedin Demirovic and Deniz Undav inside 61 seconds, before Danny da Costa nabbed a late equaliser for the hosts. Hoff-

enheim took a step towards a second Champions League qualification with a 4-2 win at last-placed Heidenheim to stay in outright third. Alexander Prass bagged a first-half brace and Fisnik Asllani and Tim Lempere scored for the visitors, while Luca Kerber scored a double for Heidenheim. Elsewhere, Hamburg came from a goal down to win 2-1 at Wolfsburg, with all three goals coming from the penalty spot. Frustrated fans threw flaming scarves onto the pitch after the defeat, which pushes second-last Wolfsburg, who were German champions in 2009, closer to a first-ever relegation