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India crush
New Zealand to
win third T20
World Cup title



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Alcaraz cruises
into Indian Wells
third round,
Djokovic through

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FOOTBALL

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FORMULA 1

Dominant Russell wins Australian GP in Mercedes 1-2

Ferrari's Leclerc came in third place ahead of teammate Hamilton



Ferrari's Charles Leclerc (left) gets a jump on pole-sitter Mercedes' George Russell in the first corner on lap one of the Australian Grand Prix at Albert Park Circuit in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Melbourne

George Russell kept his cool to win a frantic season-opening Australian Grand Prix on Sunday from Mercedes teammate Kimi Antonelli after a thrilling battle with Ferrari's Charles Leclerc.

The pole-sitting Briton took the chequered flag by 2.974secs in Melbourne with Leclerc third and Lewis Hamilton fourth in a race that tested Formula One's new-look cars for the first time in competitive conditions.

World champion Lando Norris came fifth - 51 seconds adrift - in his McLaren with Red Bull's Max Verstappen a sensational sixth after starting from 20th following a crash in qualifying. But there was disaster for home hero Oscar Piastri, who crashed on his out-lap to the grid and failed to start with major damage to his McLaren. With the virtual safety car repeatedly brought out, pre-season favourite Russell stayed calm to clock a sixth Grand Prix win and his first since Singapore last year.

"Feeling incredible. It was a hell of a fight in the beginning," said Russell. "We knew it was going to be challenging. I made a bad start and some really tight battles with Charles at the start. Just really glad to cross the finish line."

Under new rules, half of every power unit now is a battery and drivers had to recharge while braking or by lifting off the throttle to avoid it draining. The challenge of Melbourne's 58-lap Albert Park circuit was its long sweeping straights, which deplete batteries, and relatively few twisty turns to brake and charge it up again. Five cars failed to finish as they grappled with the changes, including Piastri, Audi's Nico Hulkenberg, Red Bull's Isack Hadjar, Cadillac's Valtteri Bottas and Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso.

"Was not the best start we could have wished for, lost a lot of places and I had to recover," said Italy's Antonelli, who crashed heavily on Saturday and only just made qualifying after a major car rebuild. "But overall was a good race, the pace was really strong especially at the end."

In fine conditions, Haas' Ollie Bearman was seventh and rookie Arvid Lindblad eighth in his Racing Bull. Audi's Gabriel Bortoleto and Alpine's Pierre Gasly rounded out the top 10. "It was a very, very tricky race. None of us knew what to expect," said Leclerc. "It has been quite challenging. It looked like Mercedes had a bit more pace than us today."

When the lights turned green Leclerc, on medium tyres, got a jump on Russell while Antonelli, who started second, slid down to



George Russell celebrates with the trophy after winning the Australian Grand Prix. (Reuters)

seventh. Hamilton also had a flying start for Ferrari and surged to third, ahead of Hadjar. Russell immediately hit back, reclaiming the lead on lap two before Leclerc responded a lap later to go first again as they and Hamilton began pulling clear.

It morphed into a thrilling wheel-to-wheel battle at the front, with the lead changing hands three times on lap eight as Russell and Leclerc fought for supremacy. The virtual safety car came out on lap 12 when Hadjar's car stopped with Russell and Antonelli pitting and coming back on hards.

Leclerc and Hamilton stayed out and when they resumed the Ferraris were 10 seconds clear of Russell, with Lindblad, Antonelli and Verstappen making up the top six. The virtual safety car was again deployed when Bottas retired with Russell eight seconds behind the Scuderia when they got going again.

With his tyres starting to wear, Leclerc pitted on lap 26 but Hamilton stayed out and was passed by Russell before coming in. Russell radioed that he thought a one-stop race was viable and he began pulling clear, with Antonelli second.

And there was no way back for the Ferraris, who were 15 seconds behind and barely made a dent in the Mercedes advantage in the second half of the race. The season moves to China next weekend before Japan. Rounds four and five are scheduled for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia but are under threat given the war in Iran.

RESULTS
1. George Russell (GBR/Mercedes) 1hr 23min 06.801sec 2. Kimi Antonelli (ITA/Mercedes) at 2.974 3. Charles Leclerc (MON/Ferrari) 15.519 4. Lewis Hamilton (GBR/Ferrari) 16.144 5. Lando Norris (GBR/McLaren) 51.741 6. Max Verstappen (NED/Red Bull) 54.617 7. Oliver Bearman (GBR/Haas) 1 lap 8. Arvid Lindblad (GBR/Racing Bulls) 1 lap 9. Gabriel Bortoleto (BRA/Audi) 1 lap 10. Pierre Gasly (FRA/Alpine) 1 lap 11. Esteban Ocon (FRA/Haas) 1 lap 12. Alexander Albon (THA/Williams) 1 lap 13. Liam Lawson (NZL/Racing Bulls) 1 lap 14. Franco Colapinto (ARG/Alpine) 2 laps 15. Carlos Sainz (ESP/Williams) 2 laps 16. Sergio Perez (MEX/Cadillac) 3 laps

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP STANDINGS
Drivers: George Russell (GBR) 25 pts, 2. Kimi Antonelli (ITA) 18, 3. Charles Leclerc (MON) 15, 4. Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 12, 5. Lando Norris (GBR) 10, 6. Max Verstappen (NED) 8, 7. Oliver Bearman (GBR) 6, 8. Arvid Lindblad (GBR) 4, 9. Gabriel Bortoleto (BRA) 2, 10. Pierre Gasly (FRA) 1, 11. Esteban Ocon (FRA) 0, 12. Alexander Albon (THA) 0, 13. Liam Lawson (NZL) 0, 14. Franco Colapinto (ARG) 0, 15. Carlos Sainz (ESP) 0, 16. Sergio Perez (MEX) 0

Constructors: 1. Mercedes 43 pts, 2. Ferrari 27, 3. McLaren 10, 4. Red Bull 8, 5. Haas 6, 6. Racing Bulls 4, 7. Audi 2, 8. Alpine 19, Williams 0, 10. Cadillac 0, 11. Aston Martin

CRICKET

Suryakumar revels
in India's T20 World
Cup triumph, coach
Gambhir hails Samson



India's Sanju Samson and Kuldeep Yadav celebrate with the trophy after winning the ICC T20 Cricket World Cup. (AFP)

Agencies
Ahmedabad

India captain Suryakumar Yadav has set his sights on sustaining the team's white-ball dominance after they clinched a third successive ICC men's trophy with a commanding victory over New Zealand in the T20 World Cup final in Ahmedabad yesterday.

India had endured more than a decade without a major title, but since 2024 they have lifted two T20 World Cups and a Champions Trophy. "I'm very excited by the way things have gone since then," Suryakumar said after his side thrashed the Kiwis by 96 runs.

"The drought ended after a really long time and after that we never looked back. Everything changed in 2024. From there we understood how this team needs to work going forward, and it's been a wonderful journey since then. We wanted to do something special in front of our home crowd and we want to continue doing that and never stop."

India coach Gautam Gambhir also praised Sanju Samson, calling him "a special player" after the opener was named player of the tournament. Samson had regained his place in the side after a difficult build-up and went on to deliver decisive performances in all three knockout matches. He began with an unbeaten 97 in the winner-takes-all Super 8 clash against West Indies before scoring 89 in both the semi-final against England and the final against New Zealand.

"Coming back from the kind of form that he was in takes so much character and courage, when you know that maybe your career is on the line," Gambhir said.

"Making a comeback like that and playing those kind of innings, with that strike rate and that type of flamboyance, you need to be a special player, you to be special talent, and hopefully he can kick on from here. I think he deserves a lot more than actually he's got until now."

After the final, Samson revealed that guidance from batting legend Sachin Tendulkar had helped him rediscover his form.

"I'm out of words, out of emotions," he said. "After the New Zealand series (in January, when he averaged 9.2) I was completely out of my mind. I thought, 'My dreams are shattered, what else can I do?' But God had different plans, and I was rewarded for being brave enough to dream. In the last couple of months - I hope I can share it here - I have been in constant touch with Sachin. I reached out to him and have had some big conversations with him. Getting guidance from someone like him, what more can I ask for?"



India's Jasprit Bumrah was again at his mesmerising best, delivering a succession of brilliant slower-ball yorkers to finish with figures of 4-15. (AFP)

SANTNER "PROUD" OF NEW ZEALAND DESPITE LOSS

Meanwhile, New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner said the team should be "proud" of their efforts in the T20 World Cup despite a crushing defeat to India in the final. Santner's side conceded 255 runs after it elected to field first in the title clash and were then bowled out for 159 in 19 overs.

"To make it to a final is obviously a pretty good effort from the boys," Santner told reporters. "And, you know, they should be very proud of their efforts throughout this tournament."

New Zealand came in as underdogs after a hot and cold tournament where they lost to England and South Africa and squeezed into the semi-final on net run-rate. They hammered South Africa in the semi-final but lost their second T20 World Cup final after they went down to Australia in 2021.

"I guess it's not ideal, losing finals, but, you know, like I said the other day, you get to this situation, you're coming up against teams that are also playing very good cricket," said Santner. "They showed their class again tonight, you know, with their batting performance, and then, everything kind of has to go well when you're chasing 250 and losing wickets to the powerplayers, it's always a challenge."

New Zealand were up against 11 Indian players and over 86,000 home fans. Santner thanked New Zealand fans back home, some of whom may have got up in the wee hours to watch their team losing another final.

"It's thanks to the fans back home for following us. Yeah, they might have to go to work without a trophy today, but we obviously get great support," said Santner.

MATCH REPORT

INDIA WIN T20 WORLD CUP



India's captain Suryakumar Yadav lifts the trophy as he celebrates with teammates after winning the T20 World Cup following the final against New Zealand in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday. (Reuters)

OPENER SAMSON AND PACER BUMRAH STAR AS INDIA HAMMER NZ TO DEFEND WORLD CUP TITLE

Reuters
Ahmedabad

India became the first team to retain the men's Twenty20 World Cup title after handing out a 96-run demolition of New Zealand in the final at the Narendra Modi Stadium yesterday.

India also became the first team to lift the World Cup title three times, while New Zealand's wait for a maiden white-ball World Cup continues.

The victory will taste particularly sweet for India since it came at a venue where they were beaten by Australia in the final of the 50-overs World Cup three years ago. Put in to bat, India capitalised on a 98-run opening stand between Sanju Samson (89) and Abhishek Sharma (52) to rack up 255-5 in their 20 overs.

Number three Ishan Kishan smashed 54 but James Neesham bowled a three-

wicket over to apply the brakes on India's scoring rate towards the end of the innings.

Chasing such a daunting target, New Zealand could not recover from a top-order collapse and were all out for 159 in 19 overs despite defiant knocks by Tim Seifert (52) and Mitchell Santner (43).

"This feels extremely special because I've played one final in my home venue but couldn't win that one, but today I won," said India pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, whose 4-15 fetched him player of the match award.

"I knew the wicket was a flat one so had to use all my experience."

Samson, who smashed his third successive 80-plus knock, was adjudged player of the tournament.

Earlier, wary of having to bowl with a hard-to-grip, dew-soaked ball later in the evening, New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner elected to field.

LIST OF WINNERS

- 2007 India beat Pakistan
- 2009 Pakistan beat Sri Lanka
- 2010 England beat Australia
- 2012 West Indies beat Sri Lanka
- 2014 Sri Lanka beat India
- 2016 West Indies beat England
- 2021 Australia beat New Zealand
- 2022 England beat Pakistan
- 2024 India beat South Africa
- 2026 India beat New Zealand

New Zealand used four different bowlers in the first four overs but could not stop India from milking 92 without losing a wicket after the six powerplay overs.

BATTING CARNAGE

Rachin Ravindra dismissed Abhishek with

his first ball to bring relief to the New Zealand camp, ending the opener's 21-ball knock that included three sixes.

With Samson continuing in the same vein and Kishan joining him in a batting carnage, there was hardly any respite for New Zealand. Both found boundaries with remarkable regularity as India reached the 200-mark in the 15th over.

Samson, who smacked Ravindra for three sixes in a row, was finally caught in the deep off James Neesham, who also removed Kishan and Suryakumar Yadav in a three-wicket over.

India could not maintain the tempo after the departures of their set batters and yet comfortably breached the 250-mark.

New Zealand's top order wilted early in their chase and they could never really recover after being reduced to 47-3 inside five overs. Finn Allen, who smashed a 33-ball hundred in the semi-final against South Africa, got a reprieve when Shivam

Dube dropped him in the first over from Arshdeep Singh.

Allen could not capitalise on it though, and holed out against spinner Axar Patel in the third over. Bumrah dismissed Ravindra with his first delivery and Axar got rid of Glenn Phillips to rattle New Zealand.

Stymied by lack of partnerships and faced with a spiralling required run-rate, Seifert had to go for the jugular but it did not pay off.

Spinner Varun Chakravarthy had Seifert caught in the deep as New Zealand lost the top half of their batting for 72 to effectively drop out of the hunt. Santner, dropped on 26, went on to make 43 but India had the match in the bag by then.

BRIEF SCORES

India 255 for 5 (Samson 89, Kishan 54, Abhishek 52, Neesham 3-46) beat New Zealand 159 (Seifert 52, Santner 43, Bumrah 4-15, Axar 3-27) by 96 runs.

FEELS LIKE A DREAM, VERY HAPPY AND GRATEFUL: SAMSON



India's Sanju Samson (centre) celebrates with his coach Gautam Gambhir after their team's win in the final in Ahmedabad yesterday.

India thrashed New Zealand by 96 runs to become the first team to defend their T20 World Cup title and win a record third crown in Ahmedabad yesterday. AFP Sport picks out some of the best reaction:

"Feels like a dream, very happy and grateful. Out of words, out of emotions."

-- **PLAYER OF THE TOURNAMENT SANJU SAMSON.**

"Feels extremely special because I've played one final in my home venue but couldn't win that one, but today I won."

-- **PLAYER OF THE MATCH JASPRIT BUMRAH.**

"Congratulations to the Indian team on winning the ICC Men's T20 World Cup! This remarkable triumph reflects exceptional skills, determination and teamwork. They have shown outstanding grit through the tournament. This victory has filled every Indian heart with pride and joy. Well done, Team India!"

-- **INDIA PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI ON X.**

"Totally deserving and rightful winners of the trophy. What a fantastic performance by our team and a special brand of cricket on display."

-- **INDIA BATTING GREAT SACHIN TENDULKAR ON X.**

"To be honest, we have prepared since (the) last one and a half years. We have prepared to bat at any position for the team."

-- **INDIA BATTER TILAK VARMA.**

FREEZE FRAMES FROM THE FINAL



India's Abhishek Sharma and Ishan Kishan celebrate after winning the T20 World Cup. **RIGHT:** India's Jasprit Bumrah walks past the trophy during the presentation ceremony. (AFP/Reuters)



New Zealand's captain Mitchell Santner gestures during the World Cup final. **RIGHT:** Former player and TV presenter Sunil Gavaskar celebrates with captain Suryakumar Yadav after India won the World Cup in Ahmedabad yesterday. (AFP/Reuters)



TENNIS

Alcaraz cruises into third round as Djokovic advances

'I knew that the first match in such a long time will be a little bit tricky'

AFP
Indian Wells, United States

World number one Carlos Alcaraz swept past Grigor Dimitrov 6-2, 6-3 to reach the third round of the Indian Wells Masters on Saturday as Novak Djokovic battled back for a three-set victory over Kamil Majchrzak.

Spain's Alcaraz was untroubled by the former world number three from Bulgaria, pushing his perfect 2026 match record to 13-0 in just 66 minutes.

Djokovic, a five-time Indian Wells champion who has struggled in recent years, had to grind for two hours and 12 minutes to subdue 57th ranked Majchrzak of Poland 4-6, 6-1, 6-2.

Alcaraz said he has been wary of Dimitrov, but even in the swirling winds on Stadium Court he was in control, firing from the baseline with power and accuracy.

He barely broke sweat and cracked plenty of smiles, saving the lone break point he faced in the second set and even getting a high-five from his opponent on a changeover.

"I think I played great," said the 22-year-old Spaniard, whose Australian Open triumph made him the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam.

"The conditions weren't easy, a lot of wind today. I'm really, really happy just that I was able to do every goal that I set up before the match."

Alcaraz, who followed up his Melbourne triumph with a title in Doha, says Indian Wells is the perfect place to keep the wins coming. "I love being here so much, I think that's why I'm just playing relaxed, playing calm, chilling," he said.



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain plays a forehand against Grigor Dimitrov of Bulgaria in their Indian Wells Open second round match. (AFP)

Although he shares the record for most Indian Wells titles with Swiss great Roger Federer, Djokovic has found the early going in California anything but relaxing in recent years.

That was true again on Saturday, but the 38-year-old Serb superstar - back on court for the first time since he fell to Alcaraz in the Australian Open final - managed to escape with a win.

Majchrzak grabbed two quick breaks in the opening set before Djokovic began to find his rhythm from the baseline and assert his superiority.

"Five weeks with no official match, I knew that the first match in such a long time will be a little bit tricky," Djokovic said.

"I felt like I had to find my A-game when it was most needed, particularly the beginning of the third, which was the case," Djokovic added after a match marked by extended, entertaining rallies that included a 40-ball exchange in the opening game of the third.

It was an especially satisfying win for Djokovic, who lost his opener last year to Dutch lucky loser Botic van de Zandschulp and fell to lucky loser Luca Nardi in the third round in 2024. He hasn't reached the quarter-finals here since his last run to the title in 2016. Britain's Jack Draper launched his title defense with a 3-6, 6-3, 6-2 victory over Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut.

Draper halted Alcaraz's bid for a

rare Indian Wells three-peat in the semi-finals last year before beating Holger Rune in the final.

That victory launched his rise to fourth in the world, before an arm injury brought his 2025 season to a premature close. "To come out and play the level I'm playing after the injury I had, I am really proud of that," Draper said.

In other matches, unseeded Brazilian Joao Fonseca saved two match points to take out 16th-seeded Russian Karen Khachanov 4-6, 7-6 (9/7), 6-4.

Seventh-seeded former champion Taylor Fritz squandered four match points in the second set but held on for a 6-3, 6-7 (8/10), 6-1 victory over 87th-ranked Briton Jacob Fearnley.

BADMINTON

Lin downs Sen for All England Open glory

Reuters
Birmingham

Taiwan's Lin Chun-yi defeated India's Lakshya Sen 21-15 22-20 to clinch his first All England Open title yesterday, while China's Wang Zhiyi captured the women's singles crown with a straight-games win over South Korea's top seed An Se-young.

Lin, 26, showed great composure to deny Sen a chance at redemption following the Indian's 2022 final loss to Danish great Viktor Axelsen.

The left-hander had already turned heads in the semi-finals, where he stunned 2023 world champion and second seed Kunlavut Vitidsarn of Thailand.

Sen, who had knocked out defending champion and top seed Shi Yuqi of China in the opening round, built a 9-4 lead in the second game as he sought to force a decider. But Lin, ranked 11th in the world, steadied himself, and the pair traded a series of rallies before the Taiwanese shuttler seized control.

Lin dropped to his knees with his arms outstretched before roaring in celebration, savouring a landmark victory at one of badminton's most storied tournaments.

His triumph capped a week



Taiwan's Lin Chun-yi holds up the trophy after winning the All England Open title at the Utilita Arena in Birmingham yesterday. (AFP)

in which the men's singles draw opened up dramatically following early exits for several favourites, including Shi and Danish third seed Anders Antonsen.

In the women's singles final, 25-year-old Wang claimed her maiden All England title and denied An a third crown.

Elsewhere, China's Liu Shengshu and Tan Ning overpowered South Korea's Lee So-hee and Baek Ha-na 21-18 21-12 to win the women's doubles title.

Taiwan's Ye Hong-wei and Nicole Gonzales Chan defeated France's Delphine Delrue and Thom Gicquel 21-19 21-18 to claim the mixed doubles crown.



China's Wang Zhiyi poses with the trophy after winning the women's All England Open title. (AFP)

Andreeva powers into third round with 6-0, 6-0 rout of Sierra

Mirra Andreeva launched her Indian Wells title defense with a 6-0, 6-0 rout of Solana Sierra on Saturday to lead a trio of former champions into the third round. World number two Iga Swiatek, who lifted the prestigious trophy in 2022 and 2024, survived some sticky moments in a 6-0, 7-6 (7/2) victory over US qualifier Kayla Day. Third-seeded Elena Rybakina, the 2023 Indian Wells winner and reigning Australian Open champion, found the going even tougher in a 7-6 (7/5), 2-6, 6-2 victory over 43rd-ranked American Hailey Baptiste.

Eighth-seeded Andreeva was understandably delighted with her performance against an opponent she'd never played before.

"I was pretty nervous because obviously I don't know what she's going to do," the 18-year-old Russian

said. "Also the conditions were pretty tricky. The wind was changing directions every time. So I'm pretty happy with how I adjusted my game to these conditions." Rybakina said she had plenty to work on after fending off the aggressive Baptiste.

After squandering an early break in the opening set, Rybakina fought off three set points to force the tiebreaker. Three forehand winners put her in command before she pocketed the set with another.

Rybakina was broken twice in the second set. Baptiste taking advantage to serve it out after Rybakina double-faulted on break point to hand the American a 5-2 lead.

A shaky service game from Baptiste gave Rybakina a break for a 3-1 lead in the third set and from there she was able to roll home.

"It was a really tough match today, but I'm super-happy with the win," Rybakina said. "She played really well." "She was staying aggressive. She has a good serve. I had my opportunities, didn't get them from the beginning and then I was struggling in the second set, was rushing a bit."

Swiatek sailed through her opening set against Day only for the 187th-ranked lefty to break the Polish star in the opening game of the second. Swiatek battled back from 0-40 down to avoid falling 0-3, but when she fell behind 0-40 in the fifth game she couldn't escape and Day gained another break to lead 5-1.

Swiatek responded, winning five straight games as they went to the tiebreaker, in which she powered to a 5-0 lead.

"I think for sure I drifted off a little

bit for some games, and then I became tight because of that," Swiatek said. "For sure I needed to get back to my first-set game."

"I feel like I did that quite well," added Swiatek, who is hoping a return to a venue she loves will kickstart a season in which she fell in the quarter-finals at the Australian Open and in Doha.

Fifth-seeded home favorite Jessica Pegula opened the night session on Stadium Court with a 4-6, 6-2, 6-3 win over Croatian veteran Donna Vekic.

Pegula is coming off a victory in Dubai, where she beat Elina Svitolina in the final to claim her fourth WTA 1000 crown.

Czech Karolina Muchova, who won in Doha last month for her first WTA title since 2019, opened her campaign with a 7-5, 6-2 victory over Anna Bondar.

Uganda's Kiplimo regains half marathon world record

Ugandan Jacob Kiplimo reclaimed the men's half marathon world record yesterday winning in Lisbon in 57 minutes and 20 seconds, to take 10 seconds off the time set in 2024 by Yomif Kejelcha.

Kiplimo had previously set the record in Lisbon in 2021 before Ethiopian Kejelcha shaved off one second in Valencia.

In a race without pacemakers, Kiplimo covered the first five kilometres in a rapid 13:28 with Kenyans Nicholas Kipkorir and Gilbert Kiprotich on his heels.

After the trio reached 10km in 27:00 Kiprotich faded. When the pace dropped as the leaders passed 15km in 40:52, Kiplimo, who had an eye on

the record, accelerated and ran the next 5km in 13:31, a pace he kept up to the end.

"After the first 10km, I thought the world record was possible. I tried to keep pushing the pace in the final two kilometres,"

he said at the finish. Kipkorir crossed the line 48sec behind with Kiprotich a distant third.

Kiplimo ran 56:42 in Barcelona last year, but World Athletics refused to ratify the record because, it said yesterday, "the race conditions were not fully compliant with World Athletics rules".

Ethiopian Tsige Gebreselama retained the women's title in 1:04:48.

(Reuters)

GOLF

Berger's lead narrows at rain-hit Palmer Invitational

AFP
Miami

Daniel Berger's lead dwindled to two strokes on a tough, rain-interrupted third day at the Arnold Palmer Invitational Saturday, as world number one Scottie Scheffler struggled and Rory McIlroy withdrew with back pain.

Play was held up for an hour as a quarter-inch of rain hit Florida's Bay Hill in a 15-minute mid-afternoon period, leaving greens briefly unplayable as grounds crew scrambled to remove the water.

Berger - a four-time PGA Tour winner, chasing his first title in five years - led by six strokes before the break. When play resumed, the American runaway leader survived a scare on 13 as his ball somehow held up in thick grass on the water's cusp.

But he still had to settle for a bogey after two-putting, and completed just 15 holes before darkness fell, allowing the chasing pack to gain ground.

His playing partner Akshay Bhatia sank a twilight birdie on the 16th, while Berger

opted not to attempt his eagle putt on the same green until Sunday. "Sixteen was kind of a must... It's fun to be in the hunt," said Bhatia.

Two shots further back was Sepp Straka who carded 66, the day's best score. The Austrian shared third place with Collin Morikawa and Cameron Young, who made a fine 67 featuring four straight birdies at the turn.

Morikawa said barely managing to finish his third round could be an advantage, with the leaders forced to tee off early again Sunday to complete theirs.

"Just being able to wake up and sleep in, and just kind of get the day situated, it's a huge kind of momentum thing I think for the routine," he said. McIlroy withdrew before the third round began, citing a lower back problem.

The world number two said in a statement he had felt a "small twinge" in his back while warming up in the gym.

"As I started hitting balls on the range before the round, it worsened and developed into muscle spasms in my lower back," the Northern Ireland star said. "Unfortunately, I'm not able to continue and have to withdraw."

McIlroy's withdrawal comes at a critical period of the season, with the five-time major-winner due to defend his Players Championship title at TPC Sawgrass and his Masters title at Augusta next month.

Elsewhere, Scheffler endured another rollercoaster round, a day after tossing his ball into the 18th hole's lake in frustration. Scheffler started Saturday with a string of bogeys, made four straight birdies on the back nine, then ended with a double bogey.

He found the water with an aggressive line from very deep rough on the final hole, then wedged the ball into a bunker.

"When you hit it in the rough out here you don't know what you're going to get," said Scheffler.

"Sometimes you can get the ball on the green. And then you look at the lie I had on one, I can't hit it more than 90 yards, and I'm not necessarily weak in terms of speed."

The end result was an eventful 72 that left Scheffler where he began, on three under. "Pretty up and down, I would say," Scheffler summarized, joking that "golf's a game that kind of beats you up."



Daniel Berger of the United States plays a shot from a bunker on the second hole during the third round of the Arnold Palmer Invitational in Orlando, Florida. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Fans in pitch battle after Celtic beat Rangers in Scottish Cup

AFP
Glasgow

The Scottish Football Association launched an investigation after Celtic defender Julian Araujo and a member of his team's backroom staff were attacked by Rangers fans in ugly clashes after Scottish Cup quarter-final.

Backed by 7,500 fans, Celtic beat their Old Firm rivals 4-2 on penalties following a 0-0 draw after extra-time at Ibrox. Fighting broke out when dozens of visiting Celtic supporters invaded the pitch to celebrate their victory. That sparked an incursion from hundreds of Rangers fans, who attempted to attack their Old Firm rivals.

Fans threw missiles and fireworks. They continued to trade after police and stewards finally formed a barrier across the pitch. Police apprehended a man after Celtic players, including Tomas Cvancara, ran to the scene amid an incident involving a Celtic member of staff.

Cvancara was later interviewed on tele-

vision with blood stains on his strip, while Celtic right-back Araujo was pushed by a Rangers supporter. "An investigation will be carried out immediately in line with the Judicial Panel Protocol," the SFA said as they condemned the "behaviour from supporters entering the field of play".

Celtic boss Martin O'Neill added: "As we were making our way back, I think there was some sort of fracas; somebody tried to get on the field. There is a natural euphoria about winning a game and about fans joining in. If this has gone too far, that would be disappointing."

The ugly scenes came in the first Old Firm derby for almost a decade to feature a large allocation of tickets for away fans.

Following numerous hooligan clashes in previous meetings between the Glasgow rivals, away supporters were banned from the matches in 2023, before being allowed to return on a reduced basis last year.

The Scottish Cup tie was seen as a test for greater numbers of away fans. O'Neill's side moved into the semi-finals despite failing to register a single shot on target

in 120 minutes. In the shoot-out, Rangers captain James Tavernier hit the bar with the first penalty before Djeidi Gassama blazed over. Cvancara converted to seal Celtic's victory before chaos erupted. "There were a few tete-a-tetes. It's unfortunate. Hopefully it doesn't dilute the performance," O'Neill said. "Old Firm games are explosive games, they always have been. That's maybe one of the reasons why the derby is one of the best in the world."

Rangers boss Danny Rohl added: "I was not on the pitch in this moment. I didn't see it until now. I heard just that there was something on the pitch. I think we all know the emotional situation after a game. Nobody likes to see this."

Despite amassing 24 shots and having a goal wiped out by VAR following a handball by Emmanuel Fernandez in extra-time, Rangers once again stumbled against their hated neighbours. The defeat was a bitter blow after Rangers blew a two-goal half-time lead in their 2-2 draw with Celtic in the Scottish Premiership at Ibrox last weekend.



Rangers fan clashes with a steward on the pitch after the Scottish League Cup quarter-final against Celtic in Glasgow, Scotland. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Port Vale cause FA Cup shock to reach quarter-finals

Third-tier strugglers stun Sunderland, Southampton upset Fulham



Port Vale's Ben Waine (centre) scores past Sunderland's Melker Ellborg during the FA Cup fifth round match in Stoke-on-Trent, Britain. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Sunderland suffered an embarrassing FA Cup fifth round exit against third tier strugglers Port Vale, while Championship side Southampton upset Fulham.

Sunderland have enjoyed an impressive first season back in the Premier League, but this was a dismal defeat for Regis Le Bris's side. Ben Waine, a boyhood fan of Sunderland's arch rivals Newcastle, capitalised on poor marking to head the 28th-minute winner, sending Port Vale into the FA Cup quarter-finals for the first time since 1954.

Jon Brady's side appear destined for relegation, but they beat second-tier Bristol City in the fourth round and produced an even more remarkable performance to make a mockery of the 56-place gap between them and Sunderland.

The giant-killing will delight their most famous fan, pop star Robbie Williams, who grew up near their Vale Park stadium in Burslem, and is now the club's president.

It was also a memorable moment for Brady, a 50-year-old Australian who replaced the sacked Darren Moore in January and has spent his managerial career in the shadows with

Brackley and Northampton. "I'm trying to let it sink in at the moment. It was tremendous from the boys, we had to suffer at times," Brady said. "I couldn't believe we were in the last 16, I told my kids we were in the last 32 by mistake. It's nice to create history, isn't it!"

Le Bris said: "I don't think we were complacent. We went strong with the ambition to win, with the knowledge that it was a tough challenge. Full credit to them."

At Craven Cottage, Ross Stewart's ice-cool penalty in stoppage-time sealed Southampton's 1-0 upset win.

It was a bitter loss for Fulham manager Marco Silva, who paid the price for a selection gamble that backfired.

Silva made nine changes following a disappointing 1-0 defeat against West Ham in the Premier League earlier this week, but his switches failed to produce the desired result.

Southampton won it in the first minute of stoppage-time when Finn Azaz was fouled by Fulham defender Joachim Andersen and Stewart drilled his spot-kick past Benjamin Lecomte. Relegated from the Premier League last season, they are through to the FA Cup quarter-finals for the first time since 2022.

Southampton's success served as a fitting tribute to the greatest day in the club's history. Their players wore a yellow commemorative

kit to mark 50 years since they wore the same shirts when Bobby Stokes sealed second tier Southampton's shock 1976 FA Cup final win against Manchester United at Wembley.

Southampton's current crop still have a way to go to emulate the achievement of Lawrie McMenemy's men. But Tonda Eckert's side are unbeaten in 10 games in all competitions as they chase FA Cup glory and a place in the Championship play-offs. "You see how much it means to the club," Eckert said. "You can definitely say we feel the importance of it."

Premier League strugglers Leeds beat second tier Norwich 3-0 to reach their first FA Cup quarter-final since 2003. Leeds boss Daniel Farke twice led Norwich to promotion to the Premier League before being sacked in 2021. Prioritising his fight to avoid relegation, Farke's decision to make nine changes paid off against his former club.

Chasing a first appearance in the final since 1973, Leeds went in front in the 32nd minute at Elland Road. Sean Longstaff scored for the first time since September with a clinical finish from inside the area. Gabriel Gudmundsson slotted home in the 43rd minute and Joel Piroe bagged Leeds's third in the 85th minute.

Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City and Liverpool booked their quarter-final places on Friday and Saturday.

LA LIGA

Villarreal down Elche to stay on Atletico's tail

AFP
Vila-real, Spain

Villarreal beat Elche 2-1 to keep pace with Atletico Madrid in the battle for third in La Liga. After Atletico, third, beat Real Sociedad on Saturday, Marcelino Garcia Toral's Yellow Submarine, fourth, pulled level on 54 points.

Tajon Buchanan and Santiago Mourino's first-half goals were reward for a dominant performance by Villarreal, although Andre Silva pulled one back late on to make the hosts sweat. "We relaxed a bit, until the 70th minute we were dominating the game, then we suffered until the end and that can't happen," Mourino said.

Villarreal had a host of chances in the first half but Elche goalkeeper Matias Dituero made several good saves to keep Nicolas Pepe and Georges Mikautadze at bay. Elche started the season superbly but are yet to win in 2026 or away from home across the campaign and have slumped to 17th, one point above the drop zone.

"I think with a bit more time we could have got level, we finished in the way we should have played the whole game," said Silva. "After letting in the first goal the team dropped in morale and we can't do that."

Real Betis, fifth, fell further behind in the race for Champions League football with a 2-0 defeat at Getafe. Manuel Pellegrini's side now trail Villarreal by 11 points with 11 matches remaining.

Kiko Femenia and Martin Satriano netted for Getafe in a good

week for Jose Bordalas's side, who beat Real Madrid on Monday at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Later Sevilla host Rayo Vallecano and Alaves visit Valencia.

SUMPTUOUS YAMAL STRIKE GIVES BARCA WIN IN BILBAO AND FOUR-POINT LEAD

On Saturday, La Liga leaders Barcelona restored their four-point on Real Madrid at the top of the table with a 1-0 win at Athletic Bilbao. Lamine Yamal struck a superb second-half winner to earn his side a hard-fought victory.

In the wake of Barca's Spanish Cup semi-final exit against visitors Atletico Madrid on Thursday, and with one eye on tomorrow's Champions League last-16 first leg at Newcastle United, coach Hansi Flick shuffled his pack and watched his side labour through a disjointed first half in Bilbao.

Athletic created the better chances but were repeatedly denied by goalkeeper Joan Garcia, who produced a string of fine saves to help the visitors stay on level terms and underlined his growing importance this season.

Flick introduced Raphinha, Pedri and Robert Lewandowski midway through the second half and the breakthrough came in the 68th minute. Pedri released Yamal inside the box running from the right channel and the 18-year-old curled a left-footed shot into the top corner to silence the home crowd. Barcelona top the standings with 67 points after 27 games ahead of second-placed Real Madrid, who won 2-1 at Celta Vigo on Friday, while Athletic are ninth with 35 points.



Elche's Spanish forward German Valera (left) vies for the ball with Villarreal's Ivorian forward Nicolas Pepe during the La Liga match at La Ceramica Stadium in Vila-real, Spain. (AFP)

Lens close in on PSG in Ligue 1 with victory over lowly Metz

Paris: Lens clawed to within a point of Ligue 1 leaders Paris Saint-Germain after beating bottom side Metz 3-0 to relaunch their unexpected title challenge. Saudi international Saud Abdulhamid drilled in the opening goal late in the first half and Florian Thauvin doubled the lead for Lens immediately after the break.

Amadou Haidara wrapped up the victory on 52 minutes as Lens won for the first time in three matches to relaunch their pursuit of PSG, who lost 3-1 at home to Monaco on Friday. Metz, who beat Lens earlier in the season, stayed rooted to the foot of the table. They have not won in the league since November, taking only two points

from their last 13 matches.

Recently fired coach Franck Haise had a triumphant return to south coast side Nice. Under new coach Claude Puel, Nice continued their slump towards the relegation zone as they were thumped 4-0 at home by Haise's resurgent Rennes, the Brittany club climbing above Lille to fourth.

Marseille avenged their midweek French Cup elimination by Toulouse, as Mason Greenwood scored the only goal in a 1-0 league win.

ROMA DROP OUT OF FOURTH SPOT IN SERIE A WITH GENOA LOSS

Roma dropped out of the top four in

Serie A and were replaced by Como after Vitorino's late strike grabbed Genoa a 2-1 home win over the capital club. Como, who have never played in Europe, took the last Champions League berth. They lead Roma on goal difference. Como won at Cagliari on Saturday. Juventus are a point further back in sixth. Roma travel to face Como in a week's time in what could prove a crucial clash in the top-four battle.

MESSI BAGS 899TH GOAL AS MIAMI DOWN DC UNITED

Lionel Messi moved to the brink of another goalscoring milestone as Inter Miami bagged their second win of the Major

League Soccer season with a 2-1 victory over DC United on Saturday. Messi, who scored twice in Miami's Florida derby win over Orlando last week, bagged his third goal of the season with a deft chipped finish in the 27th minute at Baltimore's M&T Bank Stadium in Baltimore.

The Argentine superstar's 80th goal for Miami takes his career tally to 899, leaving him just one away from reaching the 900-goal milestone. The eight-time Ballon D'Or winner, who turns 39 in June, scored 672 goals for Barcelona earlier in his career and 32 at Paris Saint-Germain, with a further 115 international goals for Argentina.

Saturday's win moved the reigning MLS

champions up the Eastern Conference standings into third place with six points from three games.

FRANKFURT'S EUROPEAN HOPES HIT AFTER ST PAULI STALEMATE

Eintracht Frankfurt's hopes of returning to Europe next season suffered a setback with a scoreless draw at St Pauli in the Bundesliga. The result left Frankfurt in seventh, nine points behind Bayer Leverkusen, who occupy the Europa Conference League spot.

Despite picking up a point, St Pauli fell into the bottom three due to Werder Bremen's late win at Union Berlin.