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CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

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Real Madrid,
says Guardiola

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Sadd seek rebound against Al Arabi as title race tightens

Defending champs winning streak came to an abrupt halt after loss to Umm Salal

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Leaders Al Sadd face a challenging test against Al Arabi in the Qatar Stars League at Khalifa International Stadium today as the title race enters a crucial phase.

Defending champions Al Sadd saw their impressive 10-match winning streak come to an abrupt halt in the previous round after suffering a shock 2-5 defeat to Umm Salal. Despite the setback, the Wolves remain firmly at the top of the standings with a four-point lead.

Sadd currently lead the table ahead of second-placed Al Shamal, who have 34 points from 17 matches, while Al Gharafa SC are third with the same number of points from 18 games.

However, with only four matches remaining for the defending champions before the league concludes, any further slip-up could complicate their title ambitions. The race for the championship remains tight, with several teams still capable of applying pressure at the top of the standings.

Al Arabi, currently sixth in the table with 25 points, will be eager to claim a strong result as they aim to climb higher in the standings. The Dream Team played out a 1-1 draw against Al Ahli in their previous match, but they will take confidence from the reverse fixture earlier this season when they defeated Al Sadd 3-1.

Speaking to the media on the eve of the match, Al Arabi's Romanian coach Cosmin Contra stressed the need for focus and discipline against the league leaders. "Derby matches are always unpredictable, requiring special mental preparation. We respect Al Sadd as a great team and they are the league leaders, but our goal is to return to winning ways and make up for our recent results," he said.

"Al Sadd's recent loss doesn't mean they have declined; on the contrary, it will motivate them to come into the match with a strong desire to make amends. This necessitates extreme caution and high defensive discipline from us. During training, we've worked on addressing our attacking weaknesses to ensure we capitalise on even half-chances in front of the opponent's goal," Cosmin elaborated.

Al Sadd coach Roberto Mancini, meanwhile, expects a strong response from his side following the heavy defeat in the previous round. "The match will be very difficult and intense, and we must be fully prepared. We are not happy with the result of our last match, but this feeling must be reversed and we must give our best to secure the three points," he said.

SHAMAL SEEK WIN AGAINST DUHAIL

In another key fixture today, Al Shamal SC will look to continue their impressive campaign when they face Al Duhail at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Al Shamal have been one of the surprise packages of the season and currently sit second in the table. Coach David Prats expects a tough contest but remains confident about his team's chances.



Al Sadd players train yesterday on the eve of their Qatar Stars League match against Al Arabi.



Al Arabi are sixth in the table with 25 points.

"We are expecting a tough match against a strong team with top-level players and tremendous potential, led by competent

coaching staff. They are also coming off a resounding 4-0 victory against Al Saliya in the last round. We are aware of Al Duhail's

strength, the experience of their players and their capabilities, but we are ready for the match. Our goal is to win and secure the three points to continue our impressive run this season and maintain our position at the top of league table," said Prats.

Al Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi also acknowledged the challenge for his team. "Al Shamal have been performing exceptionally well this season, currently sitting in second place with only a few matches remaining. The match will be tough. We will strive to win and secure the three points to continue our climb up the league table," he said.

RAYYAN MEET WAKRAH

Elsewhere, Al Rayyan SC will host Al Wakrah SC at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in another important encounter.

Both sides will be eager to bounce back after defeats in their previous matches. Al Wakrah suffered a narrow 0-1 loss to Al Shamal, while Al Rayyan were edged 1-2 by Al Shahania.

The Lions currently occupy fourth place in the standings with 28 points and will be keen to consolidate their position amid growing pressure from Qatar SC and Al Arabi, who are also pushing to move up the table. Al Wakrah, known as the Blue Wave, sit eighth with 23 points and will be aiming to return to winning ways as the season approaches its decisive stages.

FIXTURES (9:30PM KICK-OFFS)

Today: Al Arabi vs Al Sadd at Khalifa International Stadium; Al Shamal vs Al Duhail at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium; Al Rayyan vs Al Wakrah at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium
Tomorrow: Al Gharafa vs Al Ahli at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium; Umm Salal vs Qatar SC at Khalifa International Stadium; Al Saliya vs Al Shahania at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium

Egypt, Saudi move camps from Qatar and set friendly in Jeddah

Cairo: Egypt will play Saudi Arabia in a friendly in Jeddah on March 27 after both sides shifted their international-window training camps from Qatar due to travel disruptions caused by the conflict in the Middle East, the federations said on Sunday.

Qatar had planned to stage a wider football festival this month that would have included the 'Finalissima' between Spain and Argentina, but the event was scrapped after UEFA cancelled the match due to regional instability.

The Saudi federation said their squad would now train in Jeddah and Serbia and play an additional friendly away to Serbia in Belgrade on March 31 as part of preparations for the 2026 World Cup.

Egypt said the Jeddah match was arranged to secure strong preparation for the finals in North America later this year, thanking Qatar for its initial efforts to host the festival. Egypt will play in Group G in the June-July tournament alongside Belgium, Iran and New Zealand, while Saudi Arabia are drawn in Group H with Spain, Uruguay and Cape Verde.

SPAIN REPLACE CANCELLED FINALISSIMA WITH FRIENDLY AGAINST SERBIA

Euro 2024 winners Spain will face Serbia in a friendly on March 27 to replace the Finalissima match against Argentina in Qatar. "The national team will travel to the city of Castellon to face the Balkan team in a demanding match," said the Spanish football federation in a statement.

The match will be played at Villarreal's Estadio de la Ceramica. Spain had been set to face Lionel Messi's Argentina in Doha but because of the war, triggered by US-Israeli strikes on February 28 against Iran, organisers looked for a new location or date.

UEFA said Argentina had not accepted any of the various alternative proposals offered, leading to the cancellation of the match.

Additionally, contrary to speculation otherwise, ESPN reported that Argentinian and Inter Miami star Lionel Messi had no role in the cancellation, instead citing sources that the star viewed the match as a chance for another title and one last key warmup before the World Cup.

The match also could have been the first time 18-year-old Spanish sensation Lamine Yamal and the 38-year-old Messi met on the pitch.

The Finalissima, played since 2022, pits the Copa America champions against the winners of the European Championship.

Luis de la Fuente's side were also due to face Egypt in Qatar on March 30 in a friendly, with Spanish media reporting they are likely to still do so but at an alternative venue in Spain and a day later than scheduled. Spain are one of the strong favourites to lift the World Cup this summer in the United States, Canada and Mexico. (Reuters)

IRAN STILL PLANNING TO PLAY IN FIFA WORLD CUP: ASIAN FOOTBALL BODY

Kuala Lumpur: The Iranian men's football team is still planning to play in the upcoming World Cup in North America, Asian football officials said yesterday, despite a warning that they may be at risk.

President Donald Trump warned the team on Thursday that their "life and safety" could be at risk, should they attend this summer's football extravaganza, co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico. The war, triggered by US-Israeli strikes on

February 28, has thrown into doubt Iran's participation. "As far as we know, Iran is playing," said Windsor Paul John, the Asian Football Confederation's general secretary. "We are monitoring whether they are playing or not, but at the moment they are. There is no official information that they are not playing," he told a press conference at the AFC's headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

Windsor stressed that the AFC wanted Iran, a "top team", to play in the global

showpiece. "So we hope that they will solve their issues... and be able to participate in the World Cup," he said.

Trump, in a post on his Truth Social Platform said the Iranian team was welcome, "but I really don't believe it is appropriate that they be there, for their own life and safety."

Meanwhile the captain of the Iranian women's football team, which played in the Asian Cup in Australia, withdrew her bid

for asylum on Sunday. Seven members of Iran's visiting football delegation competing in the Women's Asian Cup had sought sanctuary in Australia after they were branded "traitors" at home for refusing to sing the national anthem.

Following the captain's reported move to go back on her asylum request, only two of them are now set to remain in Australia. A former player and a Persian-language TV channel based outside Iran said the players

had been pressured to reverse their stance through threats against families.

Iranian authorities accused Australia of pressuring the players to stay. The players returning to Iran were at a hotel in Kuala Lumpur awaiting their onward travel.

Asked about the women's immediate future, Windsor said the AFC was waiting for word from the team "when they want to leave." "It's their decision and we will support that," he said.

TENNIS

Sinner tops Medvedev to win first Indian Wells title

The Italian has won 1000 tournaments at all six hard court venues

AFP
Indian Wells, United States

World number two Jannik Sinner surged home to beat Daniil Medvedev 7-6 (8/6), 7-6 (7/4) yesterday to capture his first Indian Wells ATP Masters 1000 crown.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Sinner won his first title of 2026, rallying from 0-4 down in the second-set tiebreaker to seal the win against a resurgent Medvedev, winner of the title in Dubai last month who was riding a nine-match ATP winning streak.

That included an upset semi-final triumph over Carlos Alcaraz that ended the top-ranked Spaniard's 16-match winning streak to start the season.

But Sinner, who didn't drop a set in the tournament, proved just that bit better in a match where both sets went to the tiebreakers without a break of serve.

"I kept believing and kept pushing," Sinner said of his closing burst.

"I went for my shots a little more. A third set, we would have started even, so I tried my best to close it out and I am very happy.

"It was an incredible ending," added Sinner, who said he wasn't troubled by the hot afternoon temperatures thanks to the lack of humidity and some extra days of pre-tournament preparation.

Sinner didn't face a break point in the one-hour 55-minute contest, winning 43 of the 47 points on which he put his first serve in play.

Medvedev saved the only two break points he faced in the seventh game of the opening set, but Sinner's tiebreaker prowess proved too much. Medvedev was up 5-4 in the first-set tiebreaker when he let



Jannik Sinner of Italy poses with the championship trophy after defeating Daniil Medvedev in the Indian Wells Open final. (AFP)

a ball sail by him and it landed in.

He'd go on to save one set point, but Sinner gave himself another with a blistering forehand that the Russian couldn't handle and pocketed the set with a thundering service winner.

Medvedev looked on track to level the match when he raced to a 4-0 lead in the second-set decider - aided by Sinner's second double-fault of the match.

But Sinner roared home to join Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer as the only players to win all six of the ATP's hardcourt Masters 1000 tournaments.

"It feels amazing, great achievement," said Sinner, who was already turning his gaze to the Miami Open, the second leg of the "Sun-

shine Double" where men's first-round play begins tomorrow.

"I have couple of days to relax (but) there is not so much time in between here and Miami ... we try to play the best tennis possible there, too."

BITTERSWEET FEELING

Medvedev said the outcome was "bittersweet" after a semi-final victory over Alcaraz - who beat him in the Indian Wells finals in 2023 and 2024 - that felt like winning the tournament.

"But that's not the reality," he said. "There is a final to play. I had my opportunity, small opportunity in the first set. A bit bigger opportunity in the tiebreak in the second.

"But at the same time, I was hanging by not big margins in the whole set. It's a bittersweet feeling where it feels good to do what I did this week. But of course I wanted to try to push him even more. He was serving phenomenal. (It) was super tough to be on the return position today."

While Medvedev missed a chance to become just the second player to beat both Alcaraz and Sinner in the same tournament, the former world number one underscored his return to form after a disappointing 2025 campaign and returned to the top 10 yesterday.

"It's great to see Daniil back playing this level," Sinner said. "I do believe that tennis needs him."

'Arriving early to acclimatise helped Indian Wells title bid'

Indian Wells, United States:

Jannik Sinner said his first Indian Wells title was the result of meticulous preparation in the heat of the Californian desert after the Italian arrived a week before the tournament began to train and acclimatise.

The world number two has sometimes struggled in hot and humid conditions, most notably when severe cramp nearly forced him to quit his Australian Open third-round match in January and when he retired in retired in Shanghai last year.

However, he showed little sign of discomfort during his 7-6(6) 7-6(4) win over Daniil Medvedev on Sunday, when the temperature approached 35 degrees Celsius shortly before the final's scheduled start time of 2 p.m.

"It was hot but it wasn't humid, so it makes a difference," Sinner told reporters.

"But I've been here a week before the tournament started. Very similar conditions as it was today. We put in long days of practice. I

felt very well prepared, so I wasn't having issues with the weather and the heat, which is very positive for me.

"It's all part of the process we're trying to do and becoming the best possible athlete. We definitely do a lot of work in the gym to play at this level."

Victory meant Sinner has now collected titles at all six ATP Masters 1000 events on hardcourts, as well as the ATP Finals, Australian Open and US Open on the surface, to join an elite group also comprising Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic.

"I knew that this was a tournament I haven't won, so I wanted to prepare in the best possible way, as professionally as possible," he said. "Having this achievement now means a lot to me. Now I have couple of days to relax ... there is not so much time in between here and Miami.

"It's again an important tournament in Miami, but we try to play the best tennis possible there too."



Daniil Medvedev (left) embraces Jannik Sinner of Italy after losing the final in Indian Wells, California. (AFP)

REVIEW

Impressive Sabalenka finds a way to win

Reuters
Indian Wells, United States

Aryna Sabalenka had plans for every eventuality going into the Indian Wells final on Sunday but even when nothing went right the world number one still found a way to win, claiming the title with a gutsy 3-6 6-3 7-6(6) victory over Elena Rybakina.

Sabalenka had lost the 2023 final to Rybakina as well as the title deciders at last year's WTA Finals and the Australian Open in January, and the Belarusian looked to be on the way to another defeat to the Kazakh in the Californian desert.

However, the four-times Grand

Slam champion showed all her battling qualities to claw her way back into the match and go on to record victory.

"The whole point was to have A, B, C, D, E, and blah, blah, blah plans. Today, A, B and C definitely didn't work," Sabalenka told reporters.

"So I had to basically run there and put as much ball back at her as possible, and when I felt more confident, I went back to my usual game which is an aggressive and dominating game.

"I'm super happy that I was able to progress that far and to have so many tools in my game, so that no matter what happens in the match, I'm able to still find the small things that are going to help me to win the match."

Sabalenka said losing big finals in the past had helped her build mental strength.

"With so many finals I've lost, they also teach me a lot of things that the game is never done till it's done.

"So if it's a matchpoint, you still have a chance to get back into the game," Sabalenka said.

"That's something I learned, to be mentally strong no matter what. Though I lost so many big ones and painful ones, I'm still able to go out there, even when things are not going well, and stay focused and fight for it."

Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus holds the trophy after winning the final against Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan. (AFP)



CRICKET

Gill targets ultimate goal of winning 2027 WC

Reuters
New Delhi

India's One-Day International captain **Shubman Gill** said winning next year's World Cup is the ultimate goal for his team, especially after they fell at the final hurdle in the 2023 edition on home soil.

India's unbeaten campaign in that home World Cup ended in defeat by Australia in the final in Ahmedabad.

India have since won back-to-back T20 World Cups but Gill has set his sights on 50-overs cricket's biggest prize when the tournament takes place in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia in October-November next year.

"We felt like we were so close last time," Gill said yesterday.

"To be able to get another crack at it in South Africa, it's going to be a great opportunity for us. Winning a World Cup in any format for the country is the ultimate goal. So obviously, that is something that sometimes runs in my mind."



India's T20 captain Suryakumar Yadav said their 20-overs World Cup triumph in 2024 had sparked a run of success for the country's cricketers, with the men winning the Champions Trophy and the women lifting a first ODI World Cup title last year.

"That one step was important, that taste was important for everyone to understand what it takes to win an ICC trophy," Suryakumar said. "Now, there is no looking back. If this wonderful thing has started, let's try and collect as many (trophies) as possible."

FOCUS

Livingstone says 'no-one cares' in England set-up

AFP
London

Liam Livingstone has slammed the England hierarchy following his exile from international cricket, saying "no-one cares about you" when you are dropped.

The Lancashire all-rounder has exactly 100 caps for his country across all three formats but has not featured for over a year.

In an interview with ESPN Cricinfo, the 32-year-old was highly critical of his treatment by England director of cricket Rob Key.

He also described his time at last year's Champions Trophy as "the worst experience I've had playing cricket" and said he did not miss being involved in the recent T20 World

Cup. The England and Wales Cricket Board's Ashes review, covering "tour planning and preparation, individual performance and behaviours" after the 4-1 thrashing in Australia, is still ongoing.

Livingstone, reflecting on a lack of communication after his dropping in a brief phone call by England coach Brendon McCullum in May, said: "I don't think it would have reached a minute. I asked why; they said they wanted to try someone else. That was off Baz (McCullum). Brooky (captain Harry Brook) sent me a text. Keysy said nothing, (he) said 'I'll speak to you in the summer'."

"I actually rang him one day, and he said he was busy at a Test camp at Loughborough and then I didn't hear off him until the end of September. That probably sums that group up as a collective. That was a bit of an eye-opening

experience about the group and the regime: if you're in, you're in, and if you're not in, no-one cares about you?"

Livingstone, still in demand on the franchise circuit, with a £1mn (\$1.32mn) IPL deal from Sunrisers Hyderabad and a £350,000 bid from London Spirit at last week's Hundred auction, insisted: "I still believe I'm one of the best players in white-ball cricket in England."

"Just because I'm not playing for England, because of a couple of people's opinions, it doesn't mean that I'm not good enough to do it." As for missing the T20 World Cup in Sri Lanka and India, where Will Jacks performed well in Livingstone's old role of spinner and hard-hitting batsman, he said: "I didn't miss it one bit. There wasn't any part of me that was wishing I was playing in that team, to be honest."

Manyonga named in South Africa team for World Indoor Championships

Torun, Poland: Former Olympic long jump silver medalist Luvo Manyonga will end a seven-year international hiatus after being selected in the South African delegation to compete in the World Indoor Championships in Torun, Poland this month.

Manyonga, 35, won a silver medal at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games and is regarded as one of South Africa's most gifted

athletes, but has received two doping bans in his career. He has admitted to recreational drug addiction and in December 2024 completed a four-year ban for failing to provide anti-doping officials with sufficient information to complete drug testing.

He remains determined to put himself in the frame for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles, however, and this year has jumped a best of

8.11 meters, placing him 17th in the world. "I think I have another Olympics in me because in those four years I was out, it was like a car was parked, not being used," he told South Africa's Eyewitness News last year. Manyonga's silver medal in Rio was a remarkable tale of triumph over adversity. Having admitted drug addiction, he underwent rehabilitation and did not compete between 2012 and 2014.

GOLF

Young outduels Fitzpatrick to bag Players title

'It's absolutely exhausting. This place has had my number the last few years'

AFP
Miami

Cameron Young outduelled England's Matt Fitzpatrick down the stretch to fire a four-under-par 68 and claim a one-shot victory at The Players Championship at TPC Sawgrass on Sunday.

The 28-year-old from New York, who started the day four shots adrift of third-round leader Ludvig Aberg, pocketed the biggest PGA Tour win of his career after rattling in five birdies and a bogey in his final round.

An elated Young said the mentally taxing nature of Sawgrass's unforgiving 7,352-yard layout had made Sunday's victory extra special.

"It's absolutely exhausting," Young said. "This place has had my number the last few years. I've never really had a good finish here. It is incredibly taxing."

"Every shot all day long you can get yourself into trouble. There's no easy ones. There's no givens. And you're going to make mistakes. It's a great test of will, a test of patience and obviously a test of hitting some good shots. I feel like I did a lot of those things really well this week."

Young, who had drifted off the pace after a double-bogey on the 18th in Saturday's third round, conjured a moment of magic on Sawgrass's notoriously tricky par-three 17th to thrust himself into contention.

Trailing Fitzpatrick by one shot with two holes to play, Young drilled his tee shot onto the water-encircled island green to 10 feet and then rolled in the birdie putt to leave it all square heading to the 18th.

Young quickly erased the mem-



Cameron Young of the United States holds the winner's trophy after winning The Players Championship in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. (AFP)

ory of his double-bogey nightmare on the 18th from the third round with a majestic tee shot into the center of the fairway.

His second found the back of the green and although he missed his birdie chance, Fitzpatrick could only bogey to give Young the biggest title and payday of his career

with a \$4.5mm winner's check. Young's closing 68 left him on 13-under 275 for the tournament, with Fitzpatrick one adrift on 12-under.

HECKLING 'HILARIOUS'

Fitzpatrick closed with a 68 but later brushed off any suggestion

that the ferociously partisan final day crowd - who had bombarded him with boos and chants of U-S-A! on the 18th tee - had been a factor.

The Englishman contrasted Sunday's galleries with the bedlam at Bethpage Black last year during the Ryder Cup.

"Listen, the crowd, that was literally child's play compared to Bethpage," Fitzpatrick.

"If they think that that was anything, then they need to reassess. Get yourself up to New York."

"That's how it is. I would hope it's the exact same - well, it probably wouldn't be because we're a little bit more polite in Europe - but I would hope it would be of similar intensity in Europe. It's funny to me. I find it hilarious."

Xander Schauffele took third place with a three-under-par 69 that left him on 11-under, while Scotland's Robert MacIntyre was a shot back on 10-under after a closing 69.

Sweden's Aberg, meanwhile, was left ruing a collapse over the back nine that torpedoed his bid for the title.

After starting the day three shots clear of the pack and leading at the turn by two shots, Aberg's challenge went awry when he plonked his approach on the par-five 11th into the water before making bogey.

He followed that up with another wobble on the 12th, when he pulled his tee shot into the water down the left-hand side of the fairway before making a double bogey.

Another bogey on the 15th saw him drift further out of contention before he finished with a closing 76, tied for fifth place on nine-under alongside Jacob Bridgeman and Canada's Sudarshan Yellamaraju.

ATHLETICS

Record breaker Duplantis ready for 'special' Torun

AFP
Paris

Pole vault king Armand 'Mondo' Duplantis says he is raring to return to the site of his first world record this week, just days after raising the bar to a whopping 6.31m.

Duplantis sailed over that new mark in a meet in Uppsala, Sweden, on Thursday. It was the 15th world record he has set in an event he has totally dominated since coming onto the international stage. His victory in Uppsala was his 38th consecutive victory in competition dating back to the summer of 2023.

The double Olympic gold medalist (2021, 2024) is also the three-time world outdoor champion (2022, 2023, 2025).

In addition, he is a three-time world indoor champ (2022, 2024, 2025) and heads to Torun, Poland, for this season's world indoors as firm favourite at a venue he knows well.

"Torun is a very special place for me since I broke my first world record there," Duplantis said on Sunday in reference to the 6.17m he cleared in February 2020 to better by 1cm Renaud Lavillenie's previous world best.

"I've been fortunate enough to break a few since then, but the first one's always a very life-changing moment."

"You go from, in one instance being not the world record holder, to the world record holder, which is one of my biggest childhood dreams."

The central Polish city that hosts the March 20-22 world indoors, was "a very special place for me as an athlete", Duplantis said. "I'm just really excited for it, honestly, and especially after what I was able to do just now in Uppsala."

Since breaking the world record in Torun six years ago, Duplantis has single-handedly raised the bar, a demonstration of a stunning consistency that has seen him clear the 6.00m

barrier for eight straight seasons over 79 competitions dating back to the 2018 European championships in Berlin.

But the 26-year-old, born in Louisiana to an American father and Swedish mother, insists he takes nothing for granted.

"You can never have too much of a hubris and be overconfident when it comes to sports, and you never can just underestimate your opponents," said Duplantis, who listed "Levels" by Avicii as his world record-breaking "anthem".

It also came down, he added, to respect for the art of pole vaulting, a field discipline demanding not only exceptional speed, strength and agility, but also a considerable level of technical nous.

"It always requires just a laser amount of focus. There's no slacking off that you can do really," he said.

"It's just such a difficult sport and, especially at this level, it's like I just always have to bring my 'A' game - I feel like that's always my mentality going into it."

"I never feel like it's just ever given to me."

Duplantis did add, however, that "when I do the things that I know that I can do, and I focus and I jump the way that I know that I can jump, then I do feel like I'm the best one every time I step out onto the track."

Asked whether he thought he could increase the world record beyond 6.40m, Duplantis was coy. "I probably think about it a lot less than you," he told reporters.

"I like the chase and the journey and pushing myself and trying to be the best version that I can be and of course trying to compete really hard every time I step on the track."

That involves trying "to just keep raising it and pushing the envelope", but Duplantis insisted that he had "never been so much of a numbers guy. I'm not very analytical".

"It's really not something that I care about all that much."



MICKELSON TO MAKE LIV SEASON DEBUT THIS WEEK

Phil Mickelson will make his LIV Golf season debut this week in South Africa. HyFlyers GC confirmed the return of its captain Monday with a post on social media: "Cap is Back." Mickelson, 55, missed the first four events of the 2026 season due to an undisclosed family health matter. The LIV Golf tournament in South Africa, the league's first event on the continent, begins

Thursday at The Club at Steyn City in Johannesburg. Mickelson said he was missing the season opener in Riyadh due to a "family health matter" and he's not been seen in action since. "I will not be able to participate in the first two LIV Events as Amy and I need to be present for a family health matter," Mickelson posted on social media before Riyadh. "I can't wait to compete again and look forward

to rejoining my teammates as soon as possible." Before the confirmation of Mickelson's return, there was speculation that he might miss next month's Masters. The six-time major winner is a three-time champion at Augusta National (2004, 2006 and 2010). He missed the cut last season in three of four majors, with his only finish at T56 at The Open Championship.

FORMULA 1

Chinese GP triumph 'starting point' for success, says Antonelli



Mercedes' driver Kimi Antonelli celebrates on the podium winning the Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai. (AFP)

AFP
Milan

Kimi Antonelli said Monday that he is eyeing further Formula One success after the teenage Italian announced himself on the world stage with victory in the Chinese Grand Prix.

The 19-year-old won his maiden GP from pole position on Sunday and was greeted by media and enthusiastic fans as he touched down in his native Bologna. "I'm so happy for the win and to have brought the Italian flag back onto the highest step of the podium," Antonelli told reporters.

"It's a starting point and I hope I can keep going because we're on the right track. It won't be easy."

Antonelli, who took over Lewis Hamilton's old seat at Mercedes at the start of the 2025 season, is the first Italian to win an F1 GP since Giancarlo Fisichella 20 years ago.

He finished in front of Mercedes teammate George Russell and Ferrari's Hamilton after becoming the youngest pole sitter in F1 history.

And Antonelli even hinted that he was aiming to become the first Italian to win the drivers' championship since Alberto Ascari in 1953.

"I've removed a bit of weight from my shoulders, I'm more relaxed. It's the kind of result which

gives you strength and more awareness of what you can do," he said.

"There's another, bigger step, which is the most difficult. I'm sure that if I do everything well we can get there."

Antonelli's win was huge news in Italy and led to tennis superstar Jannik Sinner dedicating his Indian Wells triumph to F1's rising star. "I was really surprised by Sinner's homage, I sent him a message because I really appreciated it, it was really nice of him," he said.

Antonelli sits four points behind Russell in the world championship standings with the Japanese GP coming up on March 29.

'McLaren will turn past pain to future gain after China blow'

Formula One champions McLaren hope to turn past pain into future gain following the double blow of Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri failing to start Sunday's Chinese Grand Prix.

Sunday was the first no-start of reigning champion Norris's F1 career while Australian teammate Piastri has yet to complete a lap in two races this season after crashing out on his way to the grid at the opening round in Australia.

Piastri had qualified fifth and Norris sixth but both suffered problems with the electrical side of the Mercedes power unit that could not be fixed in the limited time available.

The last time McLaren had failed to start a race with either car was the infamous 2005 U.S. Grand Prix at Indianapolis that featured only six drivers due to Michelin tyre concerns.

"If we consider that Oscar has not been able to start a race in the start of the 2026 campaign, that's pretty difficult for Oscar to process," team principal Andrea Stella told reporters. "But at the same time... both remain quite positive."

"I think what we have gone through at McLaren in terms of the journey from 2023 has been such a good journey of developing a culture, a mindset, what we call internally a winner's mindset."

"Last year, where we won the double championship... we said internally that the victory was not in Abu Dhabi, the victory was in Qatar and in Vegas for the way we withstood the difficulties. That's where you really become a champion."

In Qatar last November Piastri was denied a win by a strategy blunder while in Las Vegas both McLarens were disqualified for a skid plank breach after finishing second and fourth.

"You have to withstand the difficulty, you have to process it, and you have to use it to become even more of a worthwhile champion in the future and gain the qualities to be a champion," said Stella.

"That's our mindset, and I've seen it completely at play today with Oscar, with Lando and with the team."

Stella said the problems in China were of a different nature on the two cars, apparently coincidental albeit involving the same component, and it was a 'tough moment' to lose out on potential points so early in the championship for something out of the team's control.

"It's quite exceptional and uncharacteristic that you have two terminal problems pretty much at the same time on the same component," said the Italian. "We will review together with HPP (Mercedes High Performance Powertrains) the reason for these faults. "Once we go a little bit deeper we will be able to have a more comprehensive assessment and see if there's anything that was actually on the McLaren side."



McLaren's Lando Norris gestures during the Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai. (AFP)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Man City must be 'perfect' to stun Real: Guardiola

Guardiola's side are on the brink of elimination after first leg loss

AFP
Manchester

Pep Guardiola admits Manchester City will have to play a "perfect" game when they face the "massive" task of overturning a 3-0 deficit against Real Madrid in the Champions League today.

Guardiola's side are on the brink of elimination after the last-16 first leg loss in Madrid last week. City must produce one of the greatest fightbacks in the history of the Champions League to avoid being knocked out by Real for a third successive season.

It is a daunting challenge against the 15-time European champions and City boss Guardiola knows only a sublime display in the second leg at the Etihad Stadium will give his team a chance of a miraculous escape. "I have to admit the task is massive. To score more than three goals against Madrid is not easy," Guardiola told reporters.

"The result in the first leg was not the perfect one but at the same time we are here. It's a football game, everything can happen. We have to create as much momentum as possible with our people. It has to be a perfect game in many, many departments.

"Always we can create chances, we know that, but this season we're not finishing. If we are able to be clinical there and defend well, always we will be in the game."

Guardiola called on City to emulate the spirit of one of their most memorable fightbacks as they seek inspiration against Real. City came from 2-0 down with three goals in the final 14 minutes against Aston Villa in the last game of the 2021-22 season to win the Premier League title.

"Aston Villa, the last game to win the Premier League - 74 minutes 0-2 and we made three goals in 12 minutes," Guardiola said. "Of course we have to take more risk in terms of trying, but even if the results are not good in the first half we have to keep going, carry on, go, because you never know?"

City captain Bernardo Silva echoed Guardiola's belief that the tie is not over yet. "This sport has taught us that a lot of things can



Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola speaks at a press conference. (Reuters)

happen in a football game," he said. "Even though the result in Madrid was really bad, we will fight until the end. After a big defeat, on the day you feel like everything is very dark, then it gets brighter and brighter. We know what this team is capable of."

City's preparations for the match have been unusual as Guardiola opted to give his players a day off and not train the day before the game. That decision could potentially risk censure from tournament organisers UEFA as clubs are obliged to allow media access to a training ses-

sion or match preparation for 15 minutes.

Guardiola's said the team's recent heavy schedule was behind his decision, with a lacklustre 1-1 draw at West Ham on Saturday dealing a major blow to their Premier League title hopes.

"I prefer today everybody be at home. We'll train tomorrow," Guardiola said.

"Repetition for training will not make us play better in the game against Madrid because today in modern football, in the top teams, training doesn't much improve a lot."

SPOTLIGHT

PSG fully focused for Chelsea clash, says Dembele

AFP
London

Paris Saint-Germain forward Ousmane Dembele has urged the Champions League holders to show no mercy in their last-16 second leg against Chelsea today.

Luis Enrique's side are expected to ease into the quarter-finals after thrashing Chelsea 5-2 in the first leg last week. Chelsea collapsed in the closing stages in Paris to leave themselves with a daunting task in the rematch at Stamford Bridge.

But Ballon d'Or winner Dembele is adamant PSG should go for the kill with an attacking display rather than try to defend their substantial lead. "As I said after the first leg, our mentality is to win. We cannot just remain defensive. We need to win," the France star told reporters. "We need to remain extremely focused. Chelsea is a high-quality team, they've won many matches in Europe. Our mentality will not change - we came here to win."

Dembele believes PSG have learnt from the scare they received in last season's Champions League quarter-finals after building a big lead against Aston Villa. At one stage in the second leg they were beating Unai Emery's side 5-1 on aggregate at Villa Park.

But Villa hit back with three goals to leave PSG having to survive a tense finish. "We may suffer a little bit," Dembele said. "It's like last season, we won the Champions League but we also had difficult moments. We need to remain focused. We're three goals ahead but our mentality has not changed. We're not going to be a defensive team and wait. We're going to play our game."

Enrique echoed Dembele's belief that the Villa thriller should serve as a warning to his team that Chelsea are not finished yet. "It's a clear example of what a football match could be come," he said. "We prepared the Villa match just like the Chelsea match, with the intention to win and score goals. It's important to know how to control the match, control the pace. It's our goal to win the match but



we know we will have complicated moments."

Enrique insisted PSG would ignore the controversy surrounding Chelsea's pre-match huddle. Referee Paul Tierney was surrounded by Liam Rosenior's players when they gathered in a circle before the Blues' defeat to Newcastle on Saturday.

Holding the huddle in the centre circle has been seen as disrespectful to opponents but the PSG boss said: "I was surprised when I saw it. But I heard Liam talk about it with maturity. "We can see different things but if there is respect - and I think there is a respect from Chelsea players and staff - no problem at all."

FOCUS

Arsenal teen star Dowman ready to make impact: Arteta



Arsenal's 16-year-old midfielder Max Dowman with manager Mikel Arteta during a training session in London Colney. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta said Max Dowman is ready to start "regularly" for Arsenal after the history-making teen sensation pushes for a place in today's Champions League clash with Bayer Leverkusen.

Dowman starred as Arsenal beat Everton 2-0 on Saturday to move nine points clear at the top of the Premier League.

Aged just 16 years and 73 days, Dowman came off the bench to secure a vital victory for the Gunners as he provided the cross for Viktor Gyokeres to score the opener before netting himself in stoppage-time.

The midfield prodigy's goal made him the youngest scorer in Premier League history, earning plaudits from Arteta, who now has to decide whether to start him in the last-16 second leg against Leverkusen. When asked if Dowman is ready to play regularly, Arteta told reporters: "Yeah

regularly. Depending on what you call regularly. Depending on the game and how he reacts. I think his reaction has been really positive and in relation to what we need in the game. To do what he did in such a moment, it's very rare to see, or impossible almost. He's done it and now it's football and what you've done a few days ago is not relevant any more, it's about the next one."

Gunners defender Riccardo Calafiori said Dowman, who is still studying for school exams, is already a popular figure in Arsenal's squad.

"The first time that you see him on the pitch, you're quite curious about him. He's so young but at the same time so mature on the pitch," Calafiori said.

"He can improve so many things but he's a talent, as you can see. But at the same time we have to leave him quiet and don't speak about him too much because he has everything. For sure we try to give him some advice but for the moment he's doing well even without our advice."

Arsenal drew the first leg

against Leverkusen 1-1 in Germany thanks to a late Kai Havertz penalty. They are firm favourites to see off the Bundesliga side in north London, but Arteta warned against complacency. "We know what we have to do and in front of our crowd, with our people, putting all the energy in the world again. Hopefully we're going to do it," he said.

Arteta also revealed Martin Odegaard could be fit to lead Arsenal into Sunday's League Cup final against Manchester City at Wembley. Odegaard has been sidelined since the 4-1 win at Tottenham on February 22 because of a knee injury.

The Norway midfielder is pushing to be available for Arsenal's attempt to win their first major trophy since the FA Cup in 2020. "We are really pushing him. He really wants to try to be available but we'll have to wait and see how he feels over the next few days when he trains with the team," Arteta said. "We know the game that we're going to be playing in a few days again and the more players that we have the better."

Chelsea fined £10.75mn for historical financial breaches

London: Chelsea were fined £10.75mn (\$14.27mn) and received a suspended one-year transfer ban in relation to historical breaches of Premier League rules. The Blues avoided a points deduction after self-reporting the undisclosed payments of more than £47mn under former owner Roman Abramovich. The sanctions relate to information shared with the league by the consortium led by American businessman Todd Boehly following their takeover of Chelsea from Russian billionaire Abramovich in 2022.

The Premier League found that between 2011 and 2018 undisclosed payments by third parties associated with Abramovich were made to players, unregistered agents and individuals connected to clubs, helping to facilitate transfers for players including Eden Hazard, Samuel Eto'o and Willian.

The Premier League said those payments, which totalled £47,524,925.74, were made with the "knowledge and approval" of senior former Chelsea officials and were not properly disclosed. However, the league determined that even if the payments had been properly included in historical financial submissions, the club would not have been in breach of the profitability and sustainability rules (PSR).

Chelsea's "proactive self-reporting, admissions of breach and exceptional co-operation" were also mitigating circumstances when it came to deciding the severity of the punishments. More than £23mn was paid to seven unregistered agents, or entities associated with them, in connection with the transfers of seven players to the club. Five of the seven were named in the sanction agreement as Hazard, Ramires, David Luiz, Andre Schurrle and Nemanja Matic.

Payments of over £19mn were made to facilitate the transfers of Willian and Eto'o to Chelsea.

LAPORTA'S NEW BARCELONA CHAPTER BEGINS WITH NEWCASTLE CLASH

Barcelona: After his re-election as Barcelona president, Joan Laporta is desperate to propel Spanish giants back to the European throne. On Sunday, he dispatched his rival election candidate Victor Font with consummate ease, but now the real fight begins.

Newcastle visit tomorrow in the Champions League last 16, the tie delicately poised after a 1-1 draw on Tyneside last week. Eddie Howe's men underdogs but posing a clear threat to Laporta's dream as shown by their strong first leg display.

If the last five years were about bringing Barcelona back from the ICU, as he put it after inheriting a tower of debt, then the next five must build on the platform they have created. Should the Catalan giants go one better than last season, when they reached the semi-finals for the first time in six years, and then triumph in Budapest, theoretically Laporta wouldn't even be the president yet.

His second consecutive mandate - and fourth in total, having led the club from 2003-2010 - begins in July, with temporary chief Rafa Yuste in charge until then. "If Yuste wins this Champions League, it will be wonderful, he is like a brother to me," said Laporta.

However the reality is charismatic 63-year-old Laporta will be pulling the strings, as he did on Sunday's election day, zealously greeting famous faces from the club's past who turned up to vote. Sergio Busquets was one of them, with the defensive midfielder part of three Champions League triumphs with Barcelona, in 2009, 2011 and 2015.

The latter of those was the last time Barca lifted the trophy, over a decade ago, with all-time great Lionel Messi still at the peak of his powers, still wearing Blaugrana colours. Losing the Argentine, whom he had pledged to keep at the club, just a few months after taking charge in 2021 was a

black mark on Laporta's presidency.

There was plenty to criticise, with the return to the club's partially rebuilt Camp Nou home delayed by a year, and registration issues with Dani Olmo's contract embarrassing the club. Many feared Laporta's decision to activate the 'palancas' - financial levers - would send the club to ruin, selling off future television rights and parts of the club for an immediate cash injection.

However the approach worked, at least in the short term. Laporta and his sporting director Deco bet the house on Robert Lewandowski, Raphinha, and Jules Kounde, trying to power Barca back to the elite, and in time the deals paid off.

Most importantly, the duo turned to Hansi Flick. That was a gamble too, on the former Bayern Munich coach, but Flick's thrilling attacking football entertained fans and has proven successful. It led the team to a domestic treble last season, and the

final four in Europe where they fell short against Inter Milan.

Flick's side were defensively weak, and that still appears to be the case, with Newcastle aiming to get in behind their high line to cause an upset in Catalonia. However in teenage winger Lamine Yamal and midfielder Pedri Gonzalez, Barca have arguably the best two players in their positions in the world.

"We are going to live the best years of our lives these next five years," pledged Laporta after his victory, a sizeable claim considering he also oversaw the arrival of Ronaldinho, the emergence of Messi and Pep Guardiola's treble-winning campaign in 2009.

With Camp Nou now able to house nearly 63,000 fans, and a planned capacity of 105,000, Laporta believes Barca's finances are now in a healthier position to compete with clubs funded by Gulf states, including Saudi Arabian owned Newcastle.