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POLE VAULT | Page 2

Karalis hits prime form to threaten Duplantis surprise



CYCLING | Page 3

Pogacar targets Milan-San Remo as Van der Poel defends crown

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FOOTBALL

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Page 4

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Europe's super elite teach English clubs a lesson

Only Premier League leaders Arsenal and Liverpool reach quarters

AFP
Paris

Four teams out of six eliminated, with a total of 28 goals conceded over the two legs - it has been a chastening week for most of England's representatives in the Champions League knockout phase.

Only Arsenal, the Premier League leaders, and Liverpool - the English team with the richest history in Europe - reached the quarter-finals. Manchester City, Chelsea, Newcastle United and Tottenham Hotspur were sent packing. But does this really merit calling into question the standard of the Premier League?

England's top flight is easily the richest in Europe, with domestic and international broadcasting rights revenues dwarfing the rest. A report last month by UEFA showed television revenue for English top-flight clubs increased by 1.5bn euros (\$1.77bn) from 2014-2024 - the combined figure for the rest of Europe was almost the same.

Fifteen of the 30 richest clubs in analysts Deloitte's latest Football Money League are English. However, three of the four English teams eliminated in the last 16 this week lost to clubs with larger revenues. The exception was Tottenham, but they are having a dreadful season and so losing 7-5 on aggregate to Atletico Madrid was no surprise.

City, champions in 2023, lost 5-1 on aggregate to Real Madrid, the record 15-time European Cup winners and the only club with revenue over one billion euros in Deloitte's latest table. Chelsea were crushed 8-2 on aggregate by reigning champions Paris Saint-Germain, while Newcastle lost 8-3 overall against Barcelona. There have only been three occasions since 1955 in which an English team has conceded at least eight goals on aggregate in a European tie, two of them this week.

England's strength in depth is unrivalled, and shown by the presence of an unprecedented six sides in the last 16. But this level is also the territory of a small band of giant continental clubs perhaps not subject to the same levels of competitiveness in their domestic leagues.

The four clubs with the highest revenue in Europe last year were Real, Barcelona, Bayern Munich and PSG - they generate more money than anyone in England, and enjoy huge financial advantages over domestic rivals. Nineteen of the last 21 Spanish titles have been won by Madrid or Barcelona. Over the same period the duo have won a combined 10 Champions Leagues.

Qatar-owned PSG have won 11 of the last 13 French championships and won their first Champions League last year after one final appearance and two semi-finals in the preceding



Barcelona players celebrate after a 7-2 thrashing of Newcastle in the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second leg at Camp Nou in Barcelona. (Reuters)

five seasons. Bayern, who hammered Atalanta 10-2 on aggregate this week, are set for a 13th Bundesliga title in 14 years.

They are also now almost always in the Champions League quarter-finals, and next face Real in a mouthwatering tie. For all the Premier League's pulling power, few matchups have the same appeal as that impending confrontation. "Both clubs are giant," said Bayern coach Vincent Kompany.

Bayern have been helped by a strategy of signing a big Premier League name in each of the last three seasons: Harry Kane, Michael Olise and Luis Diaz. Kane's status as England's leading player is maybe threatened only by Jude Bellingham, who was joined last year at Real by Trent Alexander-Arnold, lured from Liverpool.

PSG boast Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele, and in Khvicha Kvaratskhelia they have a player who has terrorised English de-

fences over the last year. "In the Premier League, we don't have Dembele, (Desire) Doue, (Bradley) Barcola and Kvaratskhelia," said Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior. "They're an outstanding team."

They are also youthful like Barcelona, who are once more leaning heavily on their academy, La Masia - their average age against Newcastle was barely 25, and in 18-year-old Lamine Yamal they have the emerging global footballing superstar. "La Masia did a fantastic job there," purred Barca coach Hansi Flick.

Those clubs may be best equipped to dominate in Europe, while Liverpool and Arsenal fly the flag for England which has provided only three of the last 13 continental champions. But the Premier League will be there en masse again next year - it is on course to have five qualifying spots via the league and may again have a sixth if Aston Villa or Nottingham Forest win the Europa League.

SPOTLIGHT

Iran continuing World Cup preparations but will not play in US, says football chief

Reuters
Tehran

The Iranian national team are continuing to prepare for the World Cup finals and have no intention of pulling out of the tournament even if they will not travel to the United States, football chief Mehdi Taj said.

Iran were one of the first nations to qualify for the finals but their participation has been in doubt since the conflict between the Islamic Republic and the United States began in late February. The tournament runs from June 11 to July 19 and is being staged in the US, Mexico and Canada.

Team Melli are scheduled to play all three of their opening-round group matches in the US but Taj said on Monday the Iranian FA (FFIRI) was negotiating with FIFA to have them moved to Mexico. Iran will play Nigeria on March 27 and Costa Rica four days later in Antalya as part of a four-nation invitational tournament that had to be moved from Jordan because of the conflict in the Middle East.

"The national team is holding a training camp in Turkey, and we will also play two friendly matches there," FFIRI President Taj was quoted as saying by the Fars News Agency on Wednesday. "We will boycott America, but we will not boycott the World Cup."

Taj was speaking on Wednesday as he welcomed the players from the women's national team back to Iran at the border crossing

from Turkey after their protracted journey from Australia. All of the delegation, who were in Australia for the Women's Asian Cup, were offered asylum by the host nation because of fears for their safety in Iran. While seven accepted, only two ended up staying.

US President Donald Trump had urged Australia to offer the players asylum and later said that while the Iranian men were welcome to play in the US, it might not be appropriate for their "life and safety".

Trump later stressed any threat to the players would not come from the United States, but Taj - a former member of Iran's hardline Revolutionary Guard - used the president's statement as grounds for demanding the venue switch.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said on Tuesday that her country would be open to hosting Iran's World Cup matches against New Zealand, Belgium and Egypt in June, but the final say on any venue switch would be FIFA's.

Beau Busch, the Asia-Pacific president of football players' union FIFPRO, said it was FIFA's duty to ensure the safety of everyone involved at the World Cup. "FIFA have an institutional responsibility to protect human rights," the Australian told Reuters.

"What's critical is that FIFA undertake a really comprehensive human rights impact assessment, and they assess to ensure that every single participant at the World Cup, every player, every fan, can be safe, and that any risks are identified and mitigated effectively."

FIFA planning for World Cup to 'go ahead as scheduled' amid Iran uncertainty

Paris: FIFA president Gianni Infantino underlined the body's commitment to making sure the World Cup goes ahead "as scheduled" with "all teams" taking part amid doubts about Iran's presence at the tournament.

"FIFA is looking forward to all teams participating at the World Cup to compete in a spirit of fair play and mutual respect," Infantino said from Zurich during an online FIFA Council meeting. "We have a schedule. We will soon have the 48 competing teams confirmed, and we want the World Cup to go ahead as scheduled."

Iran's participation has been shrouded in doubt due to the conflict in the Middle East. They are due to play group games in the United States, against New Zealand and Belgium in Los Angeles and in Seattle against Egypt.

However, Iranian football federation president Mehdi Taj indicated that as a result of the US-Israeli attacks on his country he wanted its matches moved to one of the other host nations - Canada and Mexico will host the World Cup with the United States.

Iran's football federation says it has opened talks with FIFA about potentially relocating its matches.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said on Tuesday that her country is prepared to host Iran's first-round matches if required.

"FIFA can't solve geopolitical conflicts, but we are committed to using the power of football and the World Cup to build bridges and promote peace as our thoughts are with those who are suffering as a consequence of the ongoing wars," Infantino added.

FOCUS

Stripped of Africa Cup of Nations title, Senegal to appeal CAF's decision

AFP
Dakar

The Senegalese Football Federation announced yesterday it has instructed its lawyers to lodge an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) after the national team were stripped of its Africa Cup of Nations title.

The Confederation of African Football (CAF) reversed Senegal's win Tuesday, awarding the title to Morocco two months after the final. "Senegal will remain standing and will legitimately defend this victory on the field which we acquired on the field with the talent of our players", the federation's president Abdoulaye Fall told a press conference. "We have given our lawyers a mandate to pursue this procedure at the level of the Court of Arbitration for Sport", he added.

The continent's showpiece football final, in Rabat on January 18, descended



Senegal and Morocco players clash during the Africa Cup of Nations final at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat on January 18, 2026. (AFP)

into chaos when several Senegalese players walked off the pitch in protest after the

hosts were awarded a penalty late in second-half stoppage time. Senegal's players

were coaxed back onto the pitch by captain Sadio Mane, but Morocco missed the penalty. Pape Gueye went on to score the goal in extra time that gave Senegal a 1-0 victory.

CAF said that having studied an appeal by Morocco, "the Senegal national team is declared to have forfeited the match" and the result was "officially recorded as 3-0" in favour of Morocco. Asked what would happen to the trophy in the meantime, Fall told reporters the team would "comply with the statutory and regulatory provisions of CAF".

The revocation of the win elicited a strong response from fans in Senegal, where authorities called for an "independent international investigation" into corruption. In a resolution issued by the federation's executive committee and read at the press conference, the federation said it would "use all possible legal, institutional and jurisdictional means to assert its rights and restore sporting fairness".

Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye appeared in his office in front of the Africa Cup of Nations trophy in a social media post Wednesday, expressing his "outrage" at CAF's decision. The Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF), meanwhile has said the decision "upholds the rules and ensures the stability necessary for the smooth running of international competitions".

Meanwhile, Morocco's new head coach Mohamed Ouahbi congratulated his country on CAF's "well-deserved" decision to strip Senegal of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations title in favour of his new side.

"First of all, I would like to congratulate all Moroccans, the staff, the players and the federation on the good news we got two days ago, which is well-deserved," said Ouahbi during the presentation of his first squad list for Morocco's next two friendly matches against Ecuador and Paraguay.

The 49-year-old replaced Walid Regragui earlier this month.

WORLD ATHLETICS INDOOR CHAMPIONSHIPS

Karalis hits prime form to threaten Duplantis surprise

Karalis cleared 6.17m at last month's Greek indoor championships

AFP
Torun, Poland

Armand 'Mondo' Duplantis will head into the World Athletics Indoor Championships, which run from today to Sunday, confidently eyeing a fourth pole vault title, but there is a rival lurking in the wings potentially capable of springing a surprise.

Emmanouil Karalis cleared 6.17m at last month's Greek indoor champs, overtaking Sergey Bubka to go second in the all-time list. While still some distance short of Duplantis' newly-set world record of 6.31m, Karalis is himself not lacking confidence heading into tomorrow's competition in Torun, Poland.

The question is whether the Greek could put a stick in the spokes of Duplantis' well-oiled machine that has seen the US-born Swede dominate the sport over the last six years.

"I'm dangerous if I'm enjoying myself," grinned Karalis, who had a half-decent attempt at 6.31m at the Greek champs.

Duplantis called the Karalis' successful 6.17m vault "amazing", adding his immediate reaction to it was "somewhere in the middle of shocked and not shocked".

"He's a huge talent and he's been jumping amazing the past year, year and a half or so, especially."

"But that jump was extra out of the ordinary. It was just really, really flawless and just really, really beautiful, honestly. That was very inspiring. And I'd be lying if I said it didn't fire me up a little bit, put some fire under my ass."

'Everyone wants to win'

Karalis said the lines between actual victory and performance satisfaction were sometimes blurred in an event demanding not only exceptional speed, strength and agility, but also a considerable level of technical nous.

"Every athlete that is here wants



Sweden's Armand Duplantis (left) celebrates with Greece's Emmanouil Karalis, Australia's Kurtis Marschall (right) after winning gold and breaking the pole vault world record during the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo on September 15, 2025. (Reuters)

to win. Everyone that is competing wants to win and win gold," he said.

"I also want to win, but still, my main goal is to do the best that I can. If I know I gave everything on that specific day and still wasn't able to win a medal, I'll be satisfied."

Karalis added: "You never know what's going to happen. That's why we're competing, and that's why we have world championships and meetings. I'm feeling good. I believe in myself, I believe in my abilities to jump high."

Karalis, who took silver behind Duplantis at the world indoors and outdoors in 2025, has com-

peted against the double Olympic champion and three-time world outdoor gold medalist in 41 competitions.

Only once has the 26-year-old Greek vaulter come out on top: the 2018 world indoors, where Karalis placed fifth and Duplantis seventh. Karalis expressed his hope he could replicate his mental positivity come Saturday.

"Most of it is mental," he said of vaulting.

"We knew that we were able to jump that 6.17m. It's a blessing to know that I can jump a bit higher than 6.17 hopefully."

Karalis has rubbed shoulders with Duplantis, who is the same

age, for more than 10 years on the close-knit circuit, firstly at youth level then senior.

"Our families know each other," said Karalis, who has been invited to Duplantis' wedding.

"We spent a lot of time together, vacations and good times, of course, in the field. Mondo is an amazing athlete, an amazing person. He's trying to get everyone together in the sport."

"Having a friend and an athlete like Mondo is a blessing for me. He made me think that if he can do it, why not I?"

"Hopefully we'll have 10 more years of competing together and with all the gang!"

FOCUS

Record-setter Hodgkinson hopes 'fourth time lucky' at world indoors athletics

AFP
Torun, Poland

Olympic champion Keely Hodgkinson will take to the track in Torun, Poland, this weekend aiming to nab an elusive world indoor 800m title off the back of a new world record. Untimely injuries have prevented the 24-year-old from taking part in the past three editions of the world indoors.

But the Briton, who earned Tokyo Olympic silver and Paris Olympic gold and who has two world outdoor silver medals and a bronze, now appears to be in perfect shape. Hodgkinson smashed the indoor 800m world record by almost a second last month and said Thursday she would have been "quite happy" had the outdoor season already kicked off. That would raise the mouth-watering possibility of her going after the oldest world record in athletics - the 1min 53.28sec for the outdoor 800m set by Jarmila Kratochvilova of the then-Czechoslovakia in 1983. There was no such talk of that in Torun, but Hodgkinson seemed in confident mood.

"I did think it was very much possible," she said of her indoor world record.

"When I started my preparations for this indoor season, I didn't really actually set any goals or anything. I just wanted to enjoy the process of getting

fit and seeing how far we could go in training. And the closer we got to the day, I was like, 'Yeah, this is on, I can do this!'"

'Chill time'

Months on the sidelines in rehab for knee and hamstring injuries had allowed Hodgkinson to learn a lot about herself, she said. "I had time off the track to just enjoy my life and just have some chill time, and I think it's made me a better athlete."

"It made competing for me that much more fun and exciting. So yeah, frustrating at the time, but I wouldn't change anything."

Turning to the world indoor title, Hodgkinson said: "It's the one medal I don't have. So that would be really great to box that one off. 'Until I've crossed the finish line, I'm not going to jinx anything. But yeah, I'm excited to be here, excited to compete."

"Fast times are obviously really great, but championships are just completely different, and having three rounds in three days is another thing. That's really tough. I've done it before, but I'd quite like to have a day off!"

"Competition looks great, and we'll see what happens."

Hodgkinson added that she was "very happy with where I am".

"I'm looking forward to it, and this last month, it's been great. I couldn't ask to be in a better position, to be honest!"



Great Britain's Keely Hodgkinson reacts after competing in the women's 800m heats during the World Athletics Championships 2025 in Tokyo. (AFP)

'Surreal' for F1 world champion Norris to have Tussauds waxwork

London: Formula One world champion Lando Norris has said it feels "surreal" he will soon be joining other sports stars and celebrities by having a waxwork likeness unveiled at London's Madame Tussauds. The 26-year-old British driver has been working with the design team at the nearly 200-year-old attraction to create a detailed replica of Norris from helmet to toe. Norris, born and raised in Somerset, southwest England, burst onto the Formula One stage in 2019 and last year the McLaren driver won his maiden Formula One world title. "It's pretty surreal to think I'll have a figure in Madame Tussauds, it's such a big honour," said Norris. "Working with the artists has been awesome, and seeing all the detail they've put into the figure is really impressive. I can't wait for fans to come and see the finished figure in London this summer."

Steve Blackburn, general manager at Madame Tussauds London added: "From the moment we started working with Lando, it was clear we were creating something really special, and our team have been working at full throttle to ensure an exact likeness. 'He's been fantastic throughout the process, patiently sitting still and not racing around as usual! 'We're busy ensuring his figure is podium-ready and are incredibly excited to welcome guests to meet Lando's likeness in the coming months.' The new figure of Norris will feature in Madame Tussauds London's Culture Capital zone, alongside fellow British F1 World Champ Lewis Hamilton, and other sports stars.

India to host 2028 world indoor athletics champs: Coe

Torun, Poland: The eastern Indian state of Odisha will host the world indoor championships in 2028, World Athletics president Sebastian Coe announced yesterday.

"The World Athletics Council this morning awarded the next two editions of the event, the world indoor championships, to Odisha in India in 2028 and Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2030," Coe said ahead of the world indoors in Torun, Poland.

"The future of the world indoor athletics championships is looking bright and assured." The selection of Odisha, formerly known as

Orissa, is the first time the world's most populous nation has hosted a major World Athletics event.

The city of Bhubaneswar in Odisha is home to the Kalinga Stadium Complex which boasts an indoor stadium.

Amdavad, the city also known as Ahmedabad - in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat - has been confirmed as host city for the 2030 Commonwealth Games, which will feature a full track and field programme. That is widely viewed as a stepping stone to bidding to host the 2036 Olympics, and erasing

memories of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi - an event marked by construction delays, substandard infrastructure and accusations of corruption.

When Amdavad was confirmed for the Commonwealths, Coe said at the time that India was "already expressing interest in hosting major global athletics events, and the long-term aspiration to host a World Athletics Championships - and one day the Olympic Games".

Coe said it was a "powerful sign of a nation thinking boldly about its sporting future". (AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

Asian Games cruise ship and wooden huts will be 'unique experience'

AFP
Tokyo

Athletes at the Asian Games in Japan will have "a unique experience" staying on a cruise ship and in wooden containers, an organising official told AFP six months out from the event, but acknowledged there were concerns about the plan.

About half of the expected 15,000 athletes and officials will live in the eye-catching temporary accommodation during the Games, which are in Nagoya and the wider Aichi area from September 19 to October 4 - coinciding with typhoon season in Japan.

The rest will stay in hotels, including in Tokyo, where swimming, diving and equestrian events are taking place. Organisers say using the cruise ship and container units are cheaper than building a traditional athletes' village, although they admit the unusual approach has raised eyebrows.

Kazuhiro Yagi, vice-secretary general of the Aichi-Nagoya Games organising committee, told AFP that the accommodation

would offer "an experience that's difficult to come by".

"If people were going to live there long-term, that would be a different story," he said. "But in this case it's a very limited period and athletes will spend much of their time training and then come back simply to rest. I would like them to go back home having had a unique experience," he added.

Between 4,000 and 5,000 athletes and officials will stay on the Italian cruise ship Costa Serena, which will be docked at Nagoya Port during the Games.

The vessel, which features 571 cabins, seven swimming pools, eight restaurants and nine bars, is being chartered at a cost of about 4.5b yen (\$28mn), said Yagi.

According to the official website, the ship has "an elegant, surprising, ironic and magnetic soul".

It is a sister ship of the Costa Concordia, which sank off Tuscany in 2012, killing 32 people. A further 2,000 athletes and officials will stay in wooden shipping container-style huts in Nagoya's Garden Pier area. Some of the units, which Yagi says are "essentially brand new", have already been installed.



The picture shows a view of the open deck of the Costa Serena cruise ship docked during its inauguration in Port Klang, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur on January 19, 2024. Athletes at the Asian Games in Japan will enjoy "a unique experience" staying on the cruise ship and in wooden containers. (AFP)

"I've heard some say the space is a bit tight, but from what I saw, they provide an adequately liveable environment," he said.

Yagi says athletes will be assigned to a particular type of accommodation based on their sport, not by country.

He also says organisers will be ready to deal with Japan's typhoon season.

"We don't expect extremely large waves but we must be prepared for emergencies," he said. "Forecast accuracy has improved and we can generally see a ty-

phoon's path about a week in advance now."

Yagi says preparations for the Games are on course, with the main athletics venue set to open next month. He says there has been a "marked improvement" in public awareness in Japan of the

event, and tickets started to go on sale for local residents last month.

Organisers hope to emulate the success of the world athletics championships, which were held in Tokyo last year in front of mostly sold-out crowds. "It was incredible, I was there when (pole vaulter Armand) Duplantis set the world record," said Yagi. "It was close to 11:00 pm but no one was leaving, everyone was clapping along."

"The collective gasp when he broke the record was awe-inspiring, it really made me realise again how wonderful sport is."

Japanese organisers are keeping a close eye on the situation in the Middle East, and say that at present the war there is not likely to have an impact on the Games.

Yagi says there are no special plans for the Iran team, or North Korea, which is reportedly preparing to send a delegation of more than 260 athletes and officials.

With just months to go, he says preparations are going "according to plan". "We are working to further reinforce coordination with the relevant organisations so that we can welcome the Games with everything in perfect order," he said.

HORSE RACING

Nasser Al Shahania claims Eraida Cup with late surge



Connections of Nasser Al Shahania celebrate after the six-year-old won the Eraida Cup. PICTURES: Juhaim

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Nasser Al Shahania produced a determined late surge to land the Eraida Cup and headline a compelling eight-race programme at Al Rayyan Racecourse on Wednesday night.

The meeting also witnessed a series of standout performances, most notably a four-timer from Faleh Bughenaim. The feature, a Purebred Arabian Handicap over 2200m, saw Nasser Al Shahania

deliver a polished display for Al Shahania Stud and trainer Rudy Nerbonne.

Ridden by Lukas Delozier, the six-year-old was settled towards the rear as the early pace changed hands several times, with Medan and later Lattam ensuring a true test. Sweeping into contention approaching the home turn, Nasser Al Shahania quickened smartly to strike the front, soon joined by stablemate Caid Du Soleil. The pair drew clear to settle matters between them, and in a sustained duel inside the final 200m, Nasser Al Shahania found enough to hold his

challenger by half a length, with a clear gap back to third, underlining the authority of the performance.

Earlier on the card, Bughenaim dominated proceedings with a superb four-timer. His sequence began aboard Nahar, who returned to winning form with a controlled success in the second race, before Delirious Dream provided a quick follow-up with a well-timed late run to open his account for the campaign. The treble arrived courtesy of Big Song, who produced a sharp turn of foot to secure his first victory in Qatar, and Bughenaim capped a remarkable



Jockey Lukas Delozier guided Nasser Al Shahania to the Eraida Cup win at the Al Rayyan Racecourse.

Rayyan - Eraida Cup WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

- 1 - Eraida Cup, Purebred Arabian Handicap (80-100)**
Nasser Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
- 2 - Local Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate**
Al Wazeer, Alban de Mieulle, Abdulla Rashid al-Hajri
- 3 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-45)**
Nahar, Hamad al-Jehani, Faleh Bughenaim
- 4 - Thoroughbred Handicap**

- (0-60)**
Delirious Dream, Owaida Salem al-Hajri, Faleh Bughenaim
- 5 - Thoroughbred Graduation Plate**
Big Song, Ibrahim Saeed Ibrahim al-Malki, Faleh Bughenaim
- 6 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80)**
Mohimma, Jean de Mieulle, Faleh Bughenaim
- 7 - Purebred Arabian Open Race**
Taftan, Hamad al-Jehani, Arnaud de Lepine
- 8 - Purebred Arabian Conditions**
Jenkille Hipolyte, Eng. Osama Omer al-Dafea, Arnaud de Lepine

RESULTS
60th Al Uqda Race Meeting in Al

CYCLING

Pogacar aims for elusive Milan-San Remo crown

'I think it suits me well but also suits a lot of the other top guys'

AFP
Milan

Tadej Pogacar and Mathieu van der Poel are set to face off for the first time this season tomorrow as cycling's pre-eminent one-day riders vie for glory at the 298km long Milan-San Remo.

The first "Monument" race of the year homes into view with both world champion Pogacar and last year's winner Van der Poel already showing hot form in Italy.

Pogacar claimed his fourth victory, and third in as many years, at Strade Bianche earlier this month, while Van der Poel won two stages in the Tirreno-Adriatico last week.

The 27-year-old sat out both Paris-Nice and Tirreno-Adriatico in preparation for Milan-San Remo, a rare race in which he can't just blow away the competition with long-range attacks.

Milan-San Remo and Paris-Roubaix are the two Monuments still missing from Pogacar's stellar list of career achievements which includes winning the Tour De France and the world championship the last two years.

"It's no secret that Milan-San Remo is a race I would love to win," said Pogacar after his UAE team named the seven-man line up for Saturday.

"I think it suits me well but also suits a lot of the other top guys. I see that as a good challenge."

And Pogacar is in the mood, recently clocking a time on Strava of eight minutes and 51 seconds up the Cipressa climb, six seconds faster than his own official record



for the key ascent. The Cipressa is the penultimate climb 22 kilometres from the finish, which will come after hours of largely flat riding from Pavia and just before the final push up Poggio di San Remo.

'MATTER OF TIME'

Pogacar is almost certain to attack on the Cipressa as he did last year when he tried to shake off Van der Poel and home hope Filippo Ganna, only to finish third behind both in the final charge for the line on Via Roma.

"You need to be there for the Cipressa. Not at 100 percent but

at 110 percent. It's all about positioning. Then you need to do it all again for a second time on the Poggio and be even better," Pogacar said.

"The climbs are super fast. We go up the climbs at like 40kph... One important thing for Milan-San Remo is that it's not just about going uphill on the Poggio, there's the descent too. After it there's not far to go to the finish line.

"It's a really particular race. In a way it's a really beautiful race, very interesting to race."

Van der Poel is probably the man to beat. "I feel good and have had good

preparation. I am satisfied with my legs and the feeling this week; that is all I needed," Van der Poel told Sporza on Saturday.

The Flying Dutchman, an eight-time Monument winner and cross-discipline world champion, is convinced that Pogacar will eventually crack the race which hasn't been decided by a bunch sprint since Arnaud Demare's victory in 2016.

"Last year he was already very close. If I'm one percent off, Tadej will be gone on the Cipressa," added Van der Poel.

"It's only a matter of time before he wins it."

CRICKET

England cricket chiefs to front up to media over Ashes flop

AFP
London

English cricket chiefs Rob Key and Richard Gould will speak to the media at Lord's on Monday regarding a post-Ashes review into the team's series loss in Australia.

Key, the managing director of men's cricket, will appear alongside England and Wales Cricket Board chief executive Gould to discuss events on and off the field during a woeful 4-1 reverse over five Tests 'Down Under' in 2025/26.

In addition to their poor on-field performance, concerns about the culture of an England squad led by Ben Stokes and coached by former New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum emerged during a break in Noosa, an Australian resort, where there were reports of excessive drinking by players.

This was followed by revelations that vice-captain Harry Brook had had an altercation with a nightclub bouncer on the pre-Ashes visit to New Zealand.

The ECB briefly attempted

to block England contracted players from fielding questions about the tour at pre-season county media days, in the hope this would first allow team management to discuss the circumstances of a deeply disappointing trip. But following a public outcry, the ECB quickly reversed its position with the England trio of Ollie Pope, Jamie Smith and Gus Atkinson all taking part in Surrey's event at the Oval earlier this week.

While no formal review is expected to be published, Key and Gould are set to offer major conclusions ahead of a home season which could lead to a reset for the under-fire coaching regime.

The position of McCullum, who reiterated his post Ashes desire to continue as England coach following the white ball team's semi-final exit at the recent T20 World Cup, remains a major talking point. McCullum has been angered by suggestions he runs a "casual operation" with the England hierarchy also facing widespread criticisms regarding the team's warm-up schedule, preparation and overall selection policy.

IPL lags Hundred, SA20 in player welfare, rights assessment: WCA

The Indian Premier League (IPL) is a financial juggernaut that spawned a slew of franchise leagues around the world but the elite T20 competition still has room to improve in terms of players' rights and welfare, according to an assessment by the global players body.

The World Cricketers' Association (WCA) rankings released yesterday put the IPL (62.6) third of 10 leagues, behind England's The Hundred (75.2) and South Africa's SA20 (68). The world's richest 20-overs tournament received maximum points for average payment and payment reliability but lagged in areas such as "right to organise" and "dispute resolutions". Devajit Saikia, secretary of the Indian cricket board which runs the IPL, was not immediately available for comment. WCA Chief Executive Tom Moffat said in a statement yesterday that while cricket had benefited from the increasing numbers of domestic competitions in recent years, it was important to ensure players were taken care of. "The growth of the domestic leagues landscape has been overwhelmingly positive for our sport, but it has the potential to be even better," he said. "We want all sanctioned leagues to be successful, and to provide fair protections and standards for people within them." The IPL came in for criticism in January when Bangladesh player Mustafizur Rahman was dropped by Kolkata Knight Riders amid tensions between the South Asian neighbours. The Indian board's policy of banning contracted male players from appearing in other franchise leagues around the world has also come in for criticism.

BOTTOMLINE

Wimbledon's controversial expansion plan gets legal boost

AFP
London

Wimbledon's controversial expansion plan received a major boost yesterday after a judge at London's High Court ruled the proposed development of the current site is not subject to restrictions on how the land can be used.

Officials at the All England Club, which owns Wimbledon and has been hosting a tournament there since 1877, want to triple the size of the site for the grass-

court Grand Slam. The proposals would see the construction of 38 new tennis courts and an 8,000-seat stadium on the grounds of the former Wimbledon Park Golf Club, which would allow it to host All England Club qualifiers on site instead of across south London at Roehampton.

Wimbledon's plans were approved by the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2024.

Campaign group Save Wimbledon Park (SWP), however, told the High Court in January that a statutory trust exists under 19th century legislation, meaning the land must be used "for the pur-



pose of being used as public walks or pleasure grounds" and therefore the development could not go ahead. Lawyers for the club said the land was never subject to a trust and, if it was, it did not

survive the club's purchase of the freehold in 1993. And Justice Thompsell ruled Thursday the land was "never appropriated or dedicated to the use of public recreation" and instead "was used as a private golf club", adding the All England Club was "unencumbered by any statutory trust".

He said: "It never became the subject of a statutory trust and therefore the 1986 lease and the 1993 transfer of the freehold were each made free of such trust.

"Even if the above proposition is wrong, it is clear that the land was never used or laid out for public recreation."

SWP lost a High Court challenge over the authority's decision to approve the scheme in July last year but has since been given the green light to challenge that ruling at the Court of Appeal, which is expected to be heard at a later date. The group said it would also seek to challenge Thursday's ruling at the Court of Appeal, given the "nationally important issues of law involved in the case".

Jeremy Hudson, a director of SWP, said: "Wimbledon can do better because there are existing, alternative plans which show that their scheme can be accommodated on their current site."

Debbie Jevans, chair of the All England Club, welcomed Thursday's judgment by saying: "The ruling represents a significant milestone for our plans, which will, as well as delivering 27 acres of beautiful new public parkland on previously private land, allow us to maintain Wimbledon's position as one of the world's most successful sporting events."

"Hosting our qualifying competition in SW19 will bring us into line with the other grand slams, and by increasing the practice facilities for the world's best players, we will bring fans even closer to the sport's best athletes."

SPOTLIGHT

Messi scores 900th career goal, joins Ronaldo in elite club

Messi has scored 672 goals for Barca, 81 for Miami, 32 for PSG and 115 for Argentina

AFP

Fort Lauderdale, United States

Argentine superstar Lionel Messi bagged the 900th goal of his glittering career on Wednesday but could not prevent Inter Miami from crashing out of the CONCACAF Champions Cup on away goals after a 1-1 draw with Nashville.

Messi, 38, scored his milestone goal after just seven minutes to put Miami 1-0 up in the second leg of their last-16 clash in the regional club competition.

But Nashville's Cristian Espinoza lashed in a 74th-minute equalizer to make it 1-1 on aggregate, and after holding Miami at bay for the remainder of the game, the visitors from Tennessee advanced to the quarter-finals on the away goals rule.

Miami's exit was a bittersweet ending to what had promised to be a night of celebration after Messi's early opener in what was the club's final game at their Chase Stadium home in Fort Lauderdale.

Messi's strike took the Argentine's tally to 81 goals for the MLS champions following his move to Florida in 2023.

The eight-time Ballon D'Or winner previously scored 672 goals for Spanish giants Barcelona, 32 for France's Paris Saint-Germain, and a further 115 international goals for Argentina.

Goal number 900 came some 21 years after Messi's first goal in senior football, when he scored for Barcelona in a 2-0 win over Albacete in 2005 as a fresh-faced 17-year-old. Messi, widely regarded as the greatest player in football history, still has some



Inter Miami's Lionel Messi celebrates after scoring during the CONCACAF Champions Cup round of 16 match against SC in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (AFP)

way to go before he catches his great rival Cristiano Ronaldo, the 41-year-old Portuguese superstar who is on 965 career goals. Speaking ahead of Messi's 900th goal, Miami manager and former Argentina and

Barcelona team-mate Javier Mascherano described the star's goals total as "insane." "I've been lucky enough to see most, or many, of the goals he's scored, much closer than you all, and that's a privilege,"

Mascherano said. "The number we're talking about (900) is insane, and that's why Leo is one of a kind."

Wednesday's match carried added significance for Inter Miami, marking a farewell to the team's Chase Stadium. The venue has served as Inter Miami's home since the club entered Major League Soccer in 2020. The team will move into a new purpose-built 26,700-seat facility next month.

Messi is strongly expected to play in his sixth World Cup later this year, when Argentina defend their title in the 48-team tournament being staged in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The Argentine star has already extended his Inter Miami contract through to the end of the 2028 season.

Messi's prolific goalscoring has been a hallmark of his career. His 672 goals for Barcelona came in just 778 games -- an average of 0.86 per game -- helping the Catalan club win 35 trophies before departure to Paris Saint-Germain in 2021. In France, he scored 32 goals in 75 matches, winning three trophies including two league titles.

In Miami, his 81 goals have come in just 96 appearances, helping the team win the 2023 Leagues Cup and the 2025 MLS Cup. His 115 international goals have come in 196 matches, including two in the 2022 World Cup final victory over France.

Messi's goals tally leaves him second only to Ronaldo according to most recognised statistical records. Brazilian legend Pele is often said to have scored more than 1,000 goals but those numbers have been the subject of debate. Most statisticians put Pele's total for Brazil, Santos and New York Cosmos at 762.

Real Madrid keeper Courtois likely to miss Bayern quarter-final

Paris: Real Madrid are likely to be without injured goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois for both legs of their Champions League quarter-final against Bayern Munich, according to the Spanish press. The club said in a statement the Belgian international, who was substituted at half-time in Tuesday's last 16 tie against Manchester City, had been diagnosed with a muscular injury "to the right quadriceps".

Real did not specify how long the thigh injury would sideline him but sports daily AS said Courtois, 33, could be out for six weeks, which would cause him to miss the quarter-final matches against Bayern on April 7 and April 15. His likely replacement is the Ukrainian Andriy Lunin.

MBAPPE LEADS FRANCE SQUAD FOR BRAZIL, COLOMBIA FRIENDLIES

Kylian Mbappe, who has only just returned to action after a knee injury, will lead the France squad into friendly matches this month against Brazil and Colombia in the United States.

Coach Didier Deschamps included the Real Madrid superstar in his squad for the games, after Mbappe appeared off the bench for his club in the Champions League win against Manchester City earlier this week.

The France captain had missed his club's previous five matches, but is likely to lead the line for his country against Brazil in Foxborough, Massachusetts, on March 26 and Colombia, near Washington DC, three days later.

Liverpool's Hugo Ekitike and Manchester City's Rayan Cherki are among the other attacking players included by Deschamps, while goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier makes the squad despite losing his place at Paris Saint-Germain. The friendly matches are the last before Deschamps names his squad for the World Cup on May 13.

FIFA PROJECTS \$14BN REVENUE FOR 2027-2030 CYCLE

FIFA has forecast record revenue of \$14bn for the 2027-2030 cycle, the governing body said after a Council meeting, underlining the financial power of the men's World Cup as president Gianni Infantino. The projected income, unanimously approved as part of FIFA's Annual Report 2025, will be reinvested in the game, with development funding under the FIFA Forward programme set to reach \$2.7bn over the next cycle -- an eightfold increase compared to the period prior to 2016.

"This is not just about numbers, but about concrete outcomes," Infantino said, adding that a successful World Cup translates into more opportunities for men, women and youth players, improved infrastructure and greater access to technology across FIFA's member associations.

FIFA said the World Cup remains its main source of income, enabling what Infantino described as "unprecedented resources" to be channelled back into global development.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Kane says Bayern 'don't fear anyone' ahead of Real clash



Harry Kane scored twice as Bayern won 4-1 against Atalanta on Wednesday. (Reuters)

AFP
Munich

Harry Kane said Bayern Munich had nothing to fear in taking on Real Madrid after setting up a quarter-final clash with the European giants by beating Atalanta on Wednesday.

Kane, who sat on the bench in the first leg, scored twice as Bayern won 4-1 on Wednesday, wrapping up a 10-2 aggregate victory to book a date with the 15-time European Cup winners. "We don't fear anyone," the England captain said of the Real match-up. "We know it'll be tough, but with the confidence from this game and the season so far, we just need to keep doing what we're doing."

Kane's brace brought his career total to 50 goals in 66 Champions League games. This season, he has 47 goals in 39 games in all competitions -- more than he has ever scored for a club in a single season. Nine points clear in the Bundesliga with eight games to play, Bayern have lost just two of

41 games in all competitions this season.

In his first season in Germany, Kane lost over two legs in the semi-finals against Real, who beat Bayern's rivals Borussia Dortmund in the final at Wembley.

Kane, who wore the captain's armband at Bayern for the first time in the Champions League, suggested his side had learned from the defeat and knew how to take on Real.

"Whenever you play Real Madrid in the Champions League, you have to expect a tough opposition, you have to be ready for a fight," Kane said. "You have to be ready to try and play in a certain way, and we'll be ready for that."

Bayern have not beaten the Spanish giants since the semi-finals of the 2011-12 competition. "Both clubs are giant," Bayern manager Vincent Kompany said. "Who's the best right now isn't important -- the history of both clubs is huge. It'll be very special. Honestly speaking, with Madrid, when the leg goes higher, then they get better. That's why I'm expecting an absolute top game. It'll be good for the fans -- the neutral fans as well -- but at the end we want to win."

FOCUS

PSG will not relish Liverpool reunion: Slot

AFP

Liverpool

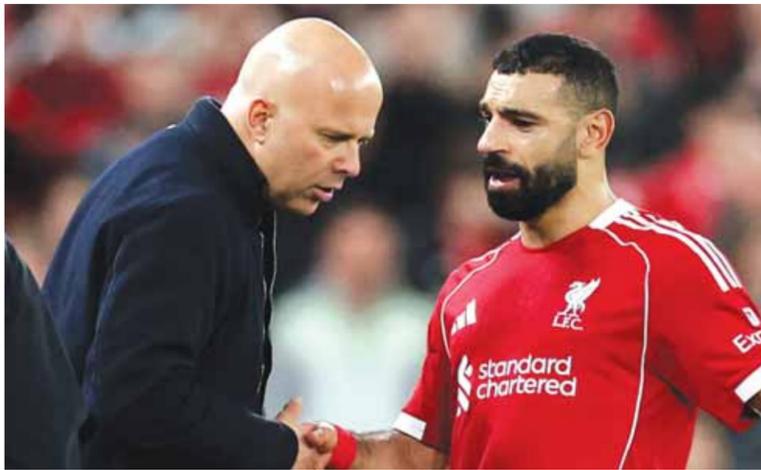
Arne Slot believes Liverpool fired a warning shot to Paris Saint-Germain of what they are capable of in a 4-0 thrashing of Galatasaray on Wednesday which set up a Champions League quarter-final against the holders.

PSG edged past Slot's side on penalties on their way to winning the competition for the first time in the last 16 last season. Liverpool were riding high at the top of the Premier League when the sides last met, but have endured a much more difficult second season under Slot.

The Reds sit fifth in the English top flight and had to come from behind against Galatasaray after losing the first leg 1-0 in Istanbul. However, there was little doubt over the outcome once Dominik Szoboszlai levelled the tie on 25 minutes at Anfield on Wednesday.

Hugo Ekitike, Ryan Gravenberch and Mohamed Salah struck in the second half, while Salah also missed a penalty as Liverpool responded in style from being booed off after Sunday's 1-1 draw against struggling Tottenham. "They haven't dropped their standards. It was hardly possible for them to improve, but they've been very impressive till now," said Slot on facing the French champions. But I think after tonight they will not look forward to playing against us too."

Liverpool won 1-0 at the Parc des Princes last season, completely against the run of play. But the roles were reversed as PSG triumphed 1-0



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah speaks to manager Arne Slot after being substituted during the UEFA Champions League last 16 clash against Galatasaray at Anfield. (Reuters)

at Anfield despite a much-improved Liverpool display in the second leg. "We were completely outplayed away from home. I think we played a great game here at Anfield and in the end we lost on penalties," added Slot.

Slot's decision to rest a number of key players from the start against Spurs at the weekend paid off. Salah was one of those to return to the starting line-up and netted his 50th Champions League goal after the disappointment of miss-

ing from the spot and a series of other huge chances.

"I think it says a lot about his mentality. He missed a penalty just before half-time and that was, of course, a difficult moment because after 45 minutes being 1-0 up was ridiculous if you looked at the run of play," said Slot. "Then to come out second half and perform like that. A great assist to Hugo and the goal he scored was a trademark of him."

SPOTLIGHT

Fernandez 'completely committed' to Chelsea, insists Rosenior

AFP
London

Enzo Fernandez has told Liam Rosenior he is happy at Chelsea and "how passionate he is for this football club" after the midfielder made comments earlier this week suggesting he may not be Stamford Bridge next season.

The Argentina international cast doubt on his future when speaking to a broadcaster moments after Chelsea's 3-0 home defeat by title-holders Paris Saint-Germain, which sealed an 8-2 aggregate loss in the last 16 of the Champions League.

Fernandez has five years to run on the contract he signed when joining for a then-British record fee of £107mn (\$143mn) in 2023. But he hinted the final eight Premier League games of the season plus the remainder of Chelsea's FA Cup run could constitute his final appearances for the west London side. But Chelsea boss Rosenior, who spoke to Fernandez yesterday, insisted he has no

concerns about the 25-year-old's commitment to the Blues. "I had a great conversation with Enzo at length this morning at the training ground," said Rosenior. "Not just about the comments, but the future and how much we want to win the coming games. I would say he made it really clear to me how happy he is here, how much he wants to win for the team, and how passionate he is for this football club."

Rosenior added: "He said also the translation and emotion got misconstrued. He is completely committed to this football club."

Chelsea, meanwhile, say they have identified the person responsible for leaking Rosenior's team selections ahead of both games against PSG. "We know (who it was)," said Rosenior. "It's not come from any place of malicious intent, to me or the team. We have dealt with the situation."

Rosenior added Trevoh Chalobah's ankle injury sustained against PSG is not as bad as first feared but is likely to keep the 26-year-old defender out for six weeks.