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TENNIS | Page 3

Korda sends Alcaraz to another early exit in Miami



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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

England coach McCullum survives review into Ashes drubbing

Page 2

Team Qatar triumphs in 992 AM category at Mugello



Doha: Team Qatar delivered an outstanding performance at the opening round of the 2026 European Le Mans Series, securing a remarkable victory in the 992 AM category at the prestigious race held at Mugello Circuit. The Qatari trio of Abdulla al-Khelaifi, Ahmad al-Emadi, and Faesal Al-Yafei showcased exceptional teamwork, consistency, and racecraft throughout the demanding endurance event.

The race format was uniquely divided into two parts. Part 1, held on Saturday, featured 5 hour 30 minutes of intense racing, during which Team Qatar set the tone early by taking the lead in the 992 AM category. Demonstrating strong pace and strategic precision, the team maintained their advantage heading into the overnight break.

On Sunday, Part 2 resumed with the remaining 6 hours 30 minutes of racing. Despite the challenges of endurance competition, including tire management, and sustained focus, the Team Qatar drivers



executed a flawless continuation of their performance. They successfully defended their position, ultimately crossing the finish line in P1, sealing a well-deserved victory. This achievement marks a significant

milestone for Team Qatar, highlighting the drivers' growing presence on the international endurance racing scene and reinforcing Qatar's reputation in global motorsport.

Al Rayyan, Al Arabi register wins in Qatar Basketball League semi-final playoffs



Al Rayyan and Al Arabi secured impressive victories in the Qatar Basketball League semi-final playoffs yesterday at Al Gharafa Indoor Hall. In the opening match, Al Rayyan cruised past Al Ahli with a commanding 93-69 win. Rion Cortez Brown led the scoring with 25 points, while Rolands Freimanis and Aladji Bobo Magassa contributed 17 and 14 points respectively in a dominant team performance. The second match saw Al Arabi defeat Al Sadd 95-78, powered by a game-high 28 points from Mustafa Rashed. Abdulrahman Saad and Elmedin Kikanovic provided strong support, adding 21 and 20 points respectively to seal the victory.



FOOTBALL

Gattuso focuses on mental strength before playoff

Injured Chiesa dropped by Italy before World Cup playoff semi-final against Northern Ireland



Italy players train at the Coverciano training base in southeastern Florence yesterday.

Reuters
Rome

Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso has called for composure ahead of Italy's World Cup playoff semi-final against Northern Ireland on Thursday, urging his players to block out the trauma of past failures.

With the spectre of failed 2018 and 2022 qualification campaigns looming over the squad, Gattuso knows his players must overcome the mental weakness that has plagued Italy's World Cup ambitions.

Seeking to avoid a third consecutive qualification failure, the Italians have managed only one victory at a World Cup, a 2-1 group-stage win over England 12 years ago, since lifting the trophy in 2006 for the fourth time.

"We must be able to make the players feel lighter," Gattuso told reporters at Italy's Coverciano training base yesterday. "Italy didn't play in the last two World Cups... but there is no need to suffocate them. These are players who have won the Euros and played in Champions League finals. They are accustomed to these games."

"There are no excuses; we must only think about Thursday's game," Gattuso said. "We must have the right mentality and serenity. We respect the opponents... but we must be clear-headed and smell the danger."

Should they get past North-

ern Ireland they would face a final against Wales or Bosnia & Herzegovina on March 31 to qualify for the showpiece tournament in North America.

Gattuso confirmed that Liverpool forward Federico Chiesa had left the camp. "He had a few physical problems, and we decided it was useless for him to stay here," Gattuso said. "When I heard that he had problems and doubts, I had to make a decision. He didn't feel up for it, so he decided to return home. When one wants to return home, it's right to let him do it."

The FIGC did not specify the 28-year-old's injury, the latest in a long list which has hampered the career of one of Italy's brightest talents. Chiesa, a back-up player at Liverpool, was a star of Italy's Euro 2020 triumph but he has npt played for his country since the dismal defence of their European title in 2024.

But then why are other injured players like Sandro Tonali, Gianluca Scamacca and Alessandro Bastoni staying with the team? Especially after Gattuso announced when he took over in June that injured players would remain with the squad to improve team spirit.

"Because not every player has the same frame of mind," Gattuso said. "When I hear that someone is wavering that's when I know I need to make a choice. We decided it together. He felt he wasn't up to it and he went home. I need to accept it."

Bologna's Nicolo Cambiaghi has been called up to replace Chiesa,

while Inter Milan defender Alessandro Bastoni and Atalanta striker Gianluca Scamacca are both trying to shake off knocks ahead of Thursday's match.

Gattuso revealed he personally chose the 23,000-seat Stadio di Bergamo over the San Siro for the clash, admitting he feared the "caustic" atmosphere of a larger stadium if the team struggled early. "At a 60,000-seat stadium like San Siro, they might start booing after a few wrong passes," Gattuso explained. "I want to create a real cauldron-like atmosphere. Thursday's game is the only target. All the rest is the past."

Despite winning the delayed Euros in 2021, Italy have not even qualified for a World Cup since 2014, which feels staggering for a nation of their stature.

Now, Gennaro Gattuso, a midfielder from the 2006 side who has managed 10 clubs in 12 years, has been tasked with ending the wait to return to the biggest stage.

He leads his side against Northern Ireland in a play-off semi-final on Thursday, 26 March, with the winners taking on Wales or Bosnia-Herzegovina on 31 March for a place at this summer's tournament. Italy's bid to reach the 2026 World Cup was only one game in when Luciano Spalletti announced he had been sacked as manager in June 2025. Claudio Ranieri was considered but talks did not progress, and former AC Milan midfielder Gattuso was seen as the most realistic option.

CRICKET

England head coach McCullum survives Ashes series review

ECB BACKS MCCULLUM, STOKES REMAINS TEST CAPTAIN

AFP
London

England coach **Brendon McCullum** will keep his job despite the team's Ashes debacle, with cricket chief Richard Gould insisting he can "adapt and evolve".

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) promised a "thorough review" after Ben Stokes's team were demolished 4-1 on their five-Test tour of Australia, which ended in January.

In addition to their poor performances on the pitch, there were reports of excessive drinking by players while they were on a break, raising concerns about the dressing-room culture.

Revelations followed that vice-captain Harry Brook had been involved in an altercation with a nightclub bouncer on the pre-Ashes visit to New Zealand.

A 4-0 loss in Australia four years earlier led to the departures of Chris Silverwood and Ashley Giles but this time the ECB has backed its leadership team following its review.

It means captain Stokes, McCullum, and England managing director of men's cricket Rob Key will all keep their jobs.

McCullum, 44, at the helm since 2022, has been responsible for England's aggressive "Bazball" approach to red-ball cricket, which has produced some spectacular performances.

But his methods have failed to yield a series win against India or Australia - England's main rivals in the Test arena.

The New Zealander's contract, which is reportedly worth more than £1mn (\$1.3mn) a year, runs for another 18 months.

ECB chief executive Gould told a briefing at Lord's yesterday that there was a resolve among the



leadership group to put things right.

"There was a lot of consideration as to what is the right mix of leadership and who do we want and who do we need," he said. "I think what we've seen is a determination from all those involved to adapt and evolve, to understand that there are different ways of doing things and through the disappointment and difficulties of the Ashes to learn from that."

"And so, you know, we've got a lot of people, yes, hurt by what went on during the Ashes, but equally determined to now put things right and looking forward to seeking revenge in 2027 (when Australia tour England)."

Key, speaking alongside Gould, said there had often been a "lack

of consequence for sub-standard performance" in terms of underperforming players.

But Gould, the son of former Wimbledon and Wales football manager Bobby Gould, defended the lack of change in senior team management by saying such decisions were not a "popularity campaign".

"My old man was a football manager, sacking was part of the job," he said.

"It didn't necessarily do the right thing. Moving people on can sometimes be the easy thing to do. That's not the route that we're going to take."

"I've seen the driving ambition and determination that we're lucky enough to have within our leadership group to take the les-

sons from the Ashes and move forward."

Key, a former England Test batsman, insisted he was hurting as much as any fan after the Ashes loss.

"I wouldn't underestimate some of the pain that we've been through," said Key, adding: "Brendon, myself, Ben, it's been as tough a time as I think I've had... You don't do these jobs to be the most popular person in the world. You do it to try and make a difference."

"I felt personally that there's still a lot to do."

England host New Zealand and Pakistan in two three-Test series this season, starting with the series opener against the Black Caps from June 4.

FOCUS

Australia board to keep hands off pitches despite Ashes debacle

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia's cricket board will resist calls to exert greater control over the nation's Test wickets despite a pair of two-day matches during the Ashes that cost the local game millions of dollars.

The first Ashes test against England at Perth Stadium and the fourth at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) were decided in two days, prompting widespread criticism of the pitches' preparation.

While the Perth wicket was rated highly by the International Cricket Council's match referee, the MCG pitch was given an "unsatisfactory" rating for being too much in favour of the bowlers after 36 wickets fell.

Test wickets are prepared independently by ground staff at the venues but after day one of the Melbourne Test, Cricket Australia (CA) CEO Todd Greenberg said it would be "hard not to get more involved" in them, saying two-day matches were bad for business.

Yesterday, however, CA's head of operations Peter Roach said the governing body would keep its distance, saying Australia's vast size and different conditions made it impractical to centralise pitch preparation.

"It's inconceivable that we could ever control much more than we do now," Roach told reporters yesterday.

"In England, you could put in a central curator to go around or New Zealand, or South Africa, because the wickets and the clays and the climates are so similar."

"In Australia, because they're so different, you could put the best curator in Australia to a different venue and all of a sudden they're an also-ran for a while."

"Because they wouldn't know the characteristics and the climate and how those pitches respond to that."

Test matches last up to five days, with most finishing within four. But two-day tests are very much a rarity.

The lost days of cricket in Perth and Melbourne were a huge financial blow for Australian cricket, leaving CA nearly A\$15mn (\$10.43mn) out of pocket due to ticket refunds and other costs, local media reported.

Roach spoke to media after CA unveiled Australia's home summer schedule, which includes a first-ever four-Test series against neighbouring New Zealand starting in Perth on December 9, followed by tests in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney.

Cricket World Cup smashed viewing figures: ICC

Viewer figures of the T20 Cricket World Cup final smashed digital streaming records with 72.5mn peak users at the same time in India alone, the International Cricket Council said yesterday.

Cricket commands an unrivalled following in the world's most populous country with 1.4bn people.

"The event was a showcase of just how much the sport is loved in cricket's most passionate market," ICC Chief Executive Officer Sanjog Gupta said, in a commentary published in WPP Media's Sporting Nation. More viewers watched the game on traditional broadcasters, as well as around the world.

India, co-hosts and pre-tournament favourites, lifted the T20 World Cup for a record third time in the March 8 match, sweeping aside New Zealand by 96 runs.

"The final... hit 72.5mn digital concurrent users, breaking the global streaming record," Gupta added, according to figures from Indian streaming partner JioHotstar. That broke the previous record set three days earlier - the nerve-shredding semi-final in Mumbai when India beat England by seven runs. That match drew 619mn views on streaming platform JioHotstar, according to the company, including a 65mn peak at the same time. Total viewing figures for the final are yet to be released.

ATHLETICS

Hodgkinson in 'shape of her life' with eye on Kratochvilova's record

AFP
Torun, Poland

Keely Hodgkinson's rivals will be grateful there is not a world outdoor champs or an Olympic Games this season as the Briton boasted of being in "the shape of her life" after wrapping up world indoor 800m gold.

The 24-year-old left the competition for dead in an impressive gun-to-tape performance in Torun, Poland, on Sunday that saw her win in a blistering 1min 55.30sec.

Her time was not only a championship record but also the second fastest time run over the distance indoors, Hodgkinson herself having set a new world indoor 800m record last month.

All eyes will now turn on Hodgkinson's plans for the outdoor season which offers up European and Commonwealth titles on home soil and ends with World Athletics' Ultimate Championships in Budapest in September.

Given her new world indoor record, there is the mouth-watering possibility of a potential tilt at the oldest world record in athletics - the 1min 53.28sec for the outdoor 800m set by Jarmila Kratochvilova of the then-Czechoslovakia in 1983.

- Golden training partner - "It feels so, so nice being able to run and win. This is my first world title," said Hodgkinson, whose victory came fast on the heels of that of training partner Georgia Hunter Bell in the women's 1,500m.

"I have been in so many finals, I have been a favourite so many times and I had not won so to do that and prove to myself that I can do it, remove the pressure and win the gold, it's nice," she said, having



Gold medallist Britain's Keely Hodgkinson celebrates on the 800m podium at the World Indoor Athletics in Torun, Poland. (Reuters)

accrued 11 international medals but also been denied three times at the world outdoors, winning two silvers and a bronze.

"My word this year has been 'domination' - so when I'm in the shape of my life, why leave it to chance? If you want to beat me, you're going to have to work hard. I never, ever go down without a fight."

Hodgkinson and Hunter Bell are coached by the husband and wife team of Trevor Painter and Jenny Meadows, the latter having won world outdoor bronze (2009) and indoor silver (2010) over 800m.

"Me and Georgia, we work hard and we push each other at every practice - we are both in the shape of our lives," Hodgkinson said.

"It's great to have someone who can challenge me in training. I am really grateful for our friendship, our rivalry and our training."

"I had no doubts about Georgia. She's an incredible athlete. We've both been training so well, and we've just enjoyed everything. We can work so well together, and we have an amazing friendship."

After her dominant 800m victory, Hodgkinson was soon back

on the track as part of Britain's 4x400m relay team in the championship-ending event.

Running the anchor leg, she had been left too much to do to push for the podium and the team eventually finished fifth.

But tellingly, Hodgkinson produced the quickest leg of any athlete in the event with a 50.10sec split.

"I am actually so impressed with myself about that. I really wanted to do it!" said Hodgkinson, who announced herself on the international stage by winning a first major title at the European indoors in Torun in 2021 before going on to claim silver on her Olympic debut in Tokyo later that summer.

"I wouldn't have gone for the 4x400 if I didn't think I had it in my legs... I wouldn't do something if I didn't think I was capable."

Hodgkinson added: "I managed to have such a clean winter with no interruption."

"It has been such a fun few days. I'm really grateful to be here and to be healthy. I'm glad I could show what I know I can do."

CYCLING

Ineos's Godon wins Tour of Catalonia opener by a whisker



Ineos's French rider Dorian Godon celebrates after winning the first stage of Tour of Catalonia yesterday. Belgian rider Remco Evenepoel finished in second following a photo-finish. (@VoltaCatalunya)

AFP
Sant Feliu de Guixols, Spain

Ineos's French rider Dorian Godon won stage 1 of the Tour of Catalonia yesterday as Belgian Remco Evenepoel came second in a photo finish and Tom Pidcock was third.

The 105th edition of this seven-day tour is packed with stars, with Jonas Vingegaard favourite to win after his masterclass at Paris-Nice.

The opener was a hilly 172km race that left the coastal resort of Sant Feliu de Guixols, took in Girona, a category 1 climb and then sped back to the Costa Brava coast. Godon said he had been planning a win here for years.

"I did my studies in Girona and live there now and often said I'd win a stage like this one day," said the newly-signed Ineos rider. Godon appeared to have made his run too early. "It would have

been better to wait a bit, the last 50m seemed to last an hour," he said after holding off a counter bid from Evenepoel.

Another hero of the day Kiwi second-tier rider Josh Burnett, was the last of the breakaway to be caught, 10km from the finish as the cast of stars jostled to keep up with a high closing pace. Burnett did enough, however, to win the combativity award.

Other contenders such as Joao Almeida of UAE, Evenepoel's Red Bull teammate Florian Lipowitz, Oscar Onley of Ineos, and Lidl trio Giulio Ciccone, Derek Gee and Mattias Skjelmose all came home safely a few seconds off the pace. Stages four, five and six will be contested in the Pyrenees, while the finale takes in seven circuits of Montjuic in Barcelona where the Tour de France starts in July.

Colombian icon Quintana to retire at end of 2026
Colombian cyclist Nairo Quin-

tana announced he will retire at the end of the 2026 season, bringing a glittering 17-year career to a close.

Quintana, who turned 36 in February, is an icon in Colombia as much for his easygoing manner as for winning the Giro d'Italia in 2014 and the Vuelta a Espana in 2016. He came second on the Tour de France behind Chris Froome in 2013 and 2015 and was third in 2016.

"This is my last season as a professional cyclist and every race will be a last dance. I want to say: it is over. It is all over. And I am going home to my family," Quintana said, said the Colombian. Speaking ahead of next week's Tour of Catalonia the Movistar rider said his one-year extension with the Spanish team would be his last year.

He raced 20 Grand Tours but was generally in the shadow of the cycling superpower Team Sky.

TENNIS

Korda sends Alcaraz to another early exit in Miami

'I took the scenic route, that's for sure - a little more stress than I would want but happy with how I played'

AFP
Miami

Sebastian Korda stared down Carlos Alcaraz on Sunday, sending the world number one crashing out of the Miami Open third round 6-3, 5-7, 6-4.

Korda, ranked 36th in the world, notched his first victory over a world number one, sending Alcaraz to his second straight early exit in Miami following defeat to 55th-ranked Belgian David Goffin in the second round last year.

Since that defeat, Alcaraz had built a remarkable 73-6 record, including a 16-0 start to 2026 that included an Australian Open triumph to complete a career Grand Slam and a title in Doha. It looked like Korda had missed his chance to spring the upset when he served for the match at 5-4 in the second set and was broken at love.

Alcaraz won the next two games to force a third set, part of a run of five straight games for the Spaniard. But Korda didn't buckle, and it was the American who seized a break for 4-3 in the third when Alcaraz served a forehand wide.

He held his next service game with confidence, slamming down an overhead winner on game point and after Alcaraz held serve Korda served for the match again, this time making no mistake.

"It feels great," said Korda, who has been ranked as high as 15th in the world but has endured two seasons disrupted by injuries.

"I took the scenic route, that's for sure - a little more stress than I would want but happy with how I played, happy with how I stayed with it."

Alcaraz said Korda played an "incredible" match. "A lot of tight, tight moments that I just didn't make the most of it," Alcaraz said. "I think he was better on those points, on those moments. I would say that was the key of the match." Korda will face Spanish qualifier Martin Landaluce for a place in the quarter-finals after Landaluce ousted 14th-seeded Russian Karen Khachanov 6-3, 7-6 (7/2).

Sabalenska marches on
World number one Aryna Sabalenka kept her title defense on track with a 6-4, 6-2 victory over 72nd-ranked American Caty



Sebastian Korda celebrates after defeating Carlos Alcaraz in the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium.

PICTURE: Geoff Burke-Imagn Images



Aryna Sabalenka serves against Caty McNally during their Miami Open match. (AFP)

McNally that was tougher than the score indicated. They were on serve after exchanging four breaks in the opening set when Sabalenka gained the decisive break in the final game.

The Belarusian star, trying to complete the "Sunshine Double" after capturing her first Indian Wells title last week, wasted one chance to break in the second set before ramping up her return pressure to break McNally's on her last two

service games. "She played really great tennis," Sabalenka said, adding that her hold for 5-4 in the opening set, in a game that went to deuce five times, was key.

"(I'm) super happy to close this match in straight sets," said Sabalenka, who booked a meeting with China's Olympic gold medalist Zheng Qinwen a 6-2, 6-4 winner over Madison Keys.

It was Zheng's first win over a top-20 player since elbow surgery

last July. World number two Elena Rybakina, who beat Sabalenka in the Australian Open final but fell to her in the Indian Wells title match, moved smoothly into the last 16 with a 6-3, 6-4 victory over Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk.

SWIATEK SPLITS WITH COACH
World number three Iga Swiatek has ended her coaching partnership with Wim Fissette, she said yesterday, following a disappointing start to the season that culminated in a shock early exit at the Miami Open.

The 24-year-old, who hired the Belgian in October 2024, said she had decided to take a different path after a 17-month stint that included her maiden Wimbledon title last year. However, Thursday's loss to world number 50 and Polish compatriot Magda Linette at the Miami Open proved a turning point for the six-times Grand Slam winner.

"Miami was challenging for me. I feel disappointment, bitterness and responsibility for my performance on the court," Swiatek wrote in a social media post.

Alcaraz eyes clay court season after early Miami exit



Carlos Alcaraz leaves the court after losing to Sebastian Korda in Miami. (AFP)

World number one Carlos Alcaraz remained confident his game is improving despite a third-round exit at the Miami Open, and after a few days to reset he'll be turning his attention to the clay court season.

"Probably I'm going to go back home," Alcaraz said after falling in three sets to 36th-ranked American Sebastian Korda on Sunday.

"Chilling with my family, with my friends a couple of days. I don't know how much my team are going to allow me to have rest and a day off. The clay season is around the corner. My mind right now is to take some days off, to reset my mind, reset the batteries, be ready and in good shape for the clay season."

Korda became the lowest-ranked man to defeat Alcaraz since 55th-ranked David Goffin ousted him in the second round at Miami last year. The Spaniard had built a 73-6 record in the year since then, including a 16-0 run to start 2026 that included an Australian Open title that made the 22-year-old the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam.

He added a title in Doha before a semi-final defeat at Indian Wells, and he knows that every lower-ranked player comes out swinging freely against him.

"Obviously when you're winning tournaments and you have great record win/lose, everything is easier in the way of pressure to the opponents," he said. "I'm feeling they have more to win than to lose in those matches... they're playing without pressure."

Alcaraz is trying to make sure he doesn't respond by piling pressure on himself. "I'm not thinking about my pressure," he said. "I don't feel it at all. I'm trying to play my best."

That includes constant work to improve his game, and despite Sunday's result he's confident he's on the right track.

"I would say what I was practicing, you know, I think I just did it really well," he said. "Some couple things in previous tournaments that I just didn't feel comfortable, I think in this tournament, I started to feel better and better."

"I think the process has been good. Besides the loss today, I think I'm still in the right way."

GOLF

England's Fitzpatrick birdies 18th to win PGA Valspar title

AFP
Miami

England's Matthew Fitzpatrick sank a 14-foot birdie putt on Sunday's final hole to win the US PGA Tour Valspar Championship, defeating American David Lipsky by one stroke.

The 31-year-old from Sheffield birdied two of the last four holes to shoot a bogey-free three-under-par 68 and finish on 11-under 273.

A week after settling for a runner-up finish at The Players Championship after a last-hole bogey, Fitzpatrick took the \$1.638 million top prize from the \$9.1 million event at Innisbrook's Copperhead course in Palm Harbor, Florida.

"The big thing was, I felt like I was playing well. Going into this week, wanted to continue that and I felt like I had confidence in myself to do so," Fitzpatrick said.

"To do that for four rounds was special this week." Fitzpatrick, the only player in the final seven pairs to break 70 on Sunday, became the third Englishman to win the title after Paul Casey and Luke Donald.

It was the third US PGA Tour title for Fitzpatrick after the 2022 US Open and 2023 Heritage tournament and came just four months after defeating Rory McIlroy in a playoff to win the DP World Tour Championship.

Lipsky missed out on what would have been his first victory in 145 PGA Tour career starts but matched his best showing.

"Overall, I'm really happy with how patient I was," Lipsky said.

Four shared the lead on the back nine at nine-under but Brandt Snedeker suffered a three-putt double bogey at the par-four 12th to fall back, leaving Lipsky, Fitzpatrick and England's Jordan Smith at the top.

Smith, whose only prior top-10 PGA finish was a share of ninth at the 2017 PGA Championship, fired a 66 to finish third on 275.

Fitzpatrick sank a 30-foot birdie putt at the par-three 15th to seize the lead at 10-under but Lipsky made a seven-foot birdie putt at the par-five 14th to match him again at the top and they parred to the 18th hole.

Fitzpatrick landed his approach 14 feet from the hole and sank the intense birdie putt, delivering a



Matt Fitzpatrick of England poses with the trophy after winning the Valspar Championship in Palm Harbor, Florida. (AFP)

right fist pump as he seized the lead. "It wasn't an ideal putt," he said. "It was a nice right-to-lefter but... I wouldn't say I was overly keen on it given my putting performance today. To get it done like that was special."

Lipsky missed a 32-foot birdie putt from just off the green and Fitzpatrick had the crown.

South Korea's Im Sung-jae began the day with a two-stroke lead over Snedeker and Lipsky, but Im made bogeys on five of his first 10 holes to fall back.

Leading final-round scores (par 71):

- 273 - Matthew Fitzpatrick (ENG) 68-69-68-68
- 274 - David Lipsky (USA) 69-65-70-70
- 275 - Jordan Smith (ENG) 69-68-72-66
- 276 - Marco Penge (ENG) 69-68-68-71, Xander Schauffele (USA) 68-72-71-65, Im Sung-Jae (KOR) 64-69-69-74
- 277 - Kim Seong-hyeon (KOR) 72-68-67-70, Stephan Jäger (GER) 71-72-68-66, Emiliano Grillo (ARG) 71-70-71-65, Patrick Cantlay (USA) 70-69-71-67
- 278 - A.J. Ewart (CAN) 71-72-68-67, Matthieu Pavon (FRA) 70-70-70-68, Jordan Spieth (USA) 69-70-71-68

FOCUS

Kim claims LPGA Founders Cup

AFP
San Francisco

South Korea's Kim Hyo-joo held off a final day charge from Nelly Korda to clinch a one-shot victory at the LPGA Tour's Fortinet Founders Cup tournament in California on Sunday.

Kim, who started the day five shots clear of Korda, carded a closing one-over-par 73 to finish on 16 under at the Sharon Heights Golf & Country Club in Menlo Park, outside San Francisco.

Korda fired a three-under-par 69 in a valiant bid that came up just short, leaving her on 15 under for the tournament.

The victory marked Kim's second victory in the tournament after she won the Founders when it was held in Arizona in 2015.

The 30-year-old Kim had watched final round partner Korda whittle away at her five-shot advantage with a blistering front nine.

Korda, who was playing after tennis-playing younger brother Sebastian dumped world number one Carlos Alcaraz out of the Miami Open earlier Sunday, rattled off six birdies in the first 10 holes to pull level with Kim at 17 under just after the turn.

But just when it seemed as if Korda was building unstoppable momentum, the 27-year-old two-time major champion wobbled, and she failed to make a birdie in her final eight holes to surrender the initiative.

Kim regained her one-shot lead on the 11th hole with a birdie after Korda found a bunker with her second shot and could only par.

Both players then bogeyed the 12th, and Kim retained her lead

on the par-three 13th when she parred after hitting the pin with her second shot.

Korda gave herself a chance to level on the 14th after hitting a lob wedge second shot to eight feet. Kim though was equal to the challenge, and when she curled in a long birdie putt the pressure was back on Korda.

Korda was unable to make birdie, and suddenly Kim had a two-shot cushion with four holes to play.

Korda trimmed the lead to one on the 16th when Kim bogeyed, and then looked poised to square it on the 17th when Kim's tee shot flew through the back of the green.

But Kim produced a sensational up and down from the rough to make par, and when Korda three-putted, the Korean was leading by two heading to 18 and she duly closed out victory despite a bogey on the last.

Alker wins playoff to defend title at Cologuard Classic

New Zealand's Steven Alker shot a final round 6-under-par 65, then won a playoff against Ireland's Pdraig Harrington to capture his second straight Cologuard Classic on Sunday afternoon in Tucson, Ariz. As the event's first-ever back-to-back champion, Alker achieved a remarkable comeback by rallying from nine shots behind entering play Saturday. It was also the second straight playoff at the event, with Alker defeating Jason Caron on an additional hole a year ago. "Yeah, it's great. It kind of feels like deja vu, to be honest, the way it played out," Alker said. "Yeah, happy to have a chance to win the golf tournament and ultimately it all worked out."

Alker quickly made the comeback a possibility by tying a La Paloma Country Club course record with his 9-under 62 on Saturday, then he picked up where he left off with three birdies over his first six holes. An 11-time winner on the Champions Tour,

Alker added birdies on Holes 9, 11 and 16, then held off Harrington with a birdie in the playoff to win his first tournament since last year's Simmons Bank Championship. An unfortunately timed bogey for Harrington on the par-4 18th necessitated the extra session, after Harrington had grabbed a one-stroke lead with his birdie on the par-3 17th. Harrington had six birdies and two bogeys, but settled for par in a do-or-die situation during the playoff, again on the 18th. His first putt from the green couldn't connect, giving Alker the win. Zach Johnson (67) and Tommy Gainey (68) played well on the 16th, each finishing under par on that hole to reach 13 under for the tournament, within two strokes of the leaders. Neither golfer could make up further ground over the final two holes and finished tied for third. Saturday co-leader Thongchai Jaidee of Thailand finished alone in fifth place (12 under) after his 1-under 70.

PREVIEW

Rayyan start new era after Jorge exit as young talent take spotlight in QSL Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rayyan will begin life after the departure of coach Artur Jorge when they face Al Shahania in the quarter-finals of the QSL Cup today, with several clubs set to rely on youngsters and players not involved in national team duty.

The competition traditionally provides opportunities for emerging talents and fringe players during international windows, and this edition is expected to follow the same pattern as teams balance development with their push for silverware.

Brazilian giants Cruzeiro confirmed the appointment of Jorge as manager on Sunday, almost 18 months after the Portuguese guided Botafogo to continental success. The 54-year-old announced his departure from Al Rayyan over the weekend before securing a deal that runs until the end of 2027. His exit leaves Rayyan entering the knockout stage in transition, with the club expected to give opportunities to younger squad members.

"Today marks the end of a very special chapter in my career," Jorge said upon leaving Al-Rayyan. "It was an honour to represent Al Rayyan with seriousness and dedication. A great club, and with very good people. Throughout this period, I had the privilege of working with high level professionals and sharing the day-to-day life with a group of players who always demonstrated commitment."

Rayyan, who qualified directly for the last-eight stage after finishing top of their group with 25 points, will take on Al Shahania at Al Khor Stadium today at 6:15pm. Al Shahania booked their place in the quarter-finals after



Al Rayyan qualified directly for the last-eight stage after finishing top of their group.

edging Al Shamal 1-0 in the play-off round.

Also today, Umm Salal will meet Al Bidda at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium at 8:15pm. Umm Salal head into the tie with renewed confidence following improved performances under coach Ruben Albes, while Al Bidda will look to continue their impressive run and test themselves against top-flight opposition.

Tomorrow, Muaither will face Al Markhiya at 6:15pm, with both sides aiming to build momentum as they chase promotion back to the top division next season. Later the same evening, Al Arabi will take on Al Waab at Al Khor Stadium at 8:15pm, with Arabi seeking to underline their credentials while Waab aim to extend their fairytale run in the tournament.

Griezmann given go-ahead to talk with Orlando City

Miami: France's World Cup-winning striker **Antoine Griezmann** is to hold talks with Major League Soccer's Orlando City, having been permitted by his present side Atletico Madrid to go to the US during the international break, a source close to the player told AFP.

Should both parties agree a deal, the 35-year-old would move to Orlando this summer after seeing out the present campaign with the La Liga outfit.

Griezmann "has been authorised by his club to travel to Orlando during his days off in order to make progress in the discussions linked to his future," said the source.

A move to the MLS has been rumoured for years, with the 2018 World Cup winner known to be an admirer of other American sports leagues such as the NBA and NFL. Atletico had shut the door on their all-time record goalscorer -- he has scored 211 goals over two spells - moving this season with the MLS transfer window opening on March 26.

Griezmann, who also played in the 2022 World Cup final defeat by Argentina, retired from the French national side in 2024 having made 137 appearances, scoring 44 goals. Griezmann signed an extension last year to his present contract, taking him up to June 2027, but is no longer an automatic first choice for Atletico.

Despite falling down the pecking order he has scored 13 times this season and can entertain

hopes of ending his time with Atletico with one last hurrah. They play Real Sociedad, the club he began his professional career with, in the final of the Copa del Rey on April 18, just after facing Barcelona in their two-legged Champions League quarter-final.

Griezmann inspired Atletico in his first spell to 2018 Europa League glory, but missed out on the biggest prizes, losing in the 2016 Champions League final and finishing runners-up in the title race in 2018 and 2019. Orlando are badly in need of a cutting edge up front as in the present MLS campaign they have won just one of their five matches, losing the other four.



PREMIER LEAGUE

Man City's Cup glory adds twist to title race

Leaders Arsenal hold a nine-point advantage over City, who have a game in hand

AFP
London

As Pep Guardiola celebrated with his jubilant players after Sunday's League Cup final triumph against Arsenal, the Manchester City boss was confronted with a burning question.

Nico O'Reilly's second-half double had just sealed a 2-0 win in the Wembley showpiece, handing City a psychological boost at the expense of their Premier League title rivals. But will Guardiola's record fifth League Cup serve as a catalyst to catch Arsenal in the title race?

The City boss, who hadn't masterminded a victory over his old assistant Mikel Arteta since 2023, knows beating Arsenal in a one-off showpiece occasion is difficult enough. Finding a way to overhaul Premier League leaders Arsenal, who hold a nine-point advantage over second-placed City, is an even more daunting proposition.

"I would like to have nine points in front of Arsenal," Guardiola said. "I said to the players: 'Today, we are going to see what our level is'. They are the best so far, no doubt about that, so let's prove ourselves and in the second half, I could not believe we could do it against Arsenal. But this win will have no impact (on the title race). It is a different competition."

City have a game in hand on Arsenal and host the Gunners at the Etihad Stadium in April. Yet Guardiola acknowledged even winning those two matches won't be enough for City unless Arsenal slip up elsewhere. "They will be more controlled when they come to the Etihad. Maybe for that game it will help us, but the Premier League



Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola celebrates with daughter Maria after his side won the League Cup at the Wembley Stadium in London on Sunday. (Reuters)

is in their hands," he said. "Is that team going to drop points? We will try to win our games and then see what happens."

After recent damaging draws in the league against lowly West Ham and Nottingham Forest, as well as a limp Champions League last-16 exit against Real Madrid, City badly needed a trophy to lift the

mood at the Etihad.

They went without silverware last term, but Guardiola believes this can be the start of a new era for a club with 19 trophies in all competitions since he arrived a decade ago. "When you start to win and the generation is young you can continue that. I need to know how they behave in certain

moments," Guardiola said of a team expensively revamped in the last 18 months.

"I can smell something that can flourish. Winning helps to anticipate the process. We are much better than last season but still we are not the team we should be. That requires time. Hopefully by the end of next season we will be."

Arsenal went into the final as firm favourites as they chased a first trophy in six years. But they departed still waiting for the second major prize of the Arteta era, assailed with questions about their manager's selections and tactics, as well as a recurring habit of choking on the big stage.

Runners-up in the Premier League for the last three seasons, Arsenal cannot afford to let the Wembley defeat impact the rest of their treble-chasing campaign. Arteta's decision to pick Kepa Arrizabalaga instead of regular goalkeeper David Raya backfired when the understudy fumbled Rayan Cherki's cross as O'Reilly bagged City's first goal.

Arteta's conservative game-plan also came under fire, but the Arsenal boss vowed his team would use the pain as fuel to win the Premier League for the first time since 2004. "We need to have some perspective on it. We are going to use this disappointment and this fire in the belly to have the most amazing two months that we have ever had together," said Arteta, whose side are in the Champions League and FA Cup quarter-finals.

"That's on us and we'll manage that energy in the right way. Now we have to go through that pain and disappointment. The good thing is that we have a very recent history with reacting in these moments, and I'm sure that we're going to do it again."

Zidane to take over as France coach this summer: report

Paris: French football icon Zinedine Zidane has agreed to take over his national team's head coaching duties following this summer's FIFA World Cup, *ESPN* reported. Zidane, 53, reportedly reached a verbal agreement with the Federation Francaise de Football to replace Didier Deschamps, who has held the role since 2012.

Zidane, who managed La Liga powerhouse Real Madrid for two stints (2016-18, 2019-21), has long been expected to eventually become the skipper for France.

As a player, the dynamic midfielder won the 1998 Ballon d'Or and was a three-time FIFA World Player of the Year (1998, 2000 and 2003). He helped France win the World Cup in 1998 and finish second in 2006. He was infamously sent off during the final of the latter World Cup when he headbutted Italy's Marco Materazzi in the chest.

STRUGGLING SEVILLA PART WAYS WITH COACH ALMEYDA

Sevilla announced the sacking of their coach Matias Almeyda as the seven-time Europa League champions find themselves floundering in 15th place in La Liga. The Andalusian club, who are three points above the relegation zone, issued a brief statement thanking the 52-year-old former Argentina international, who had only arrived in Sevilla last July.

The statement made no mention of a replacement or a potential interim coach, ahead of the upcoming two-week international break. Almeyda, who began his coaching career at River Plate in 2011, managed AEK Athens from 2022 to 2025 before being appointed by Sevilla on a three-year contract.

WHITE GETS FIRST ENGLAND CALL-UP SINCE 2022

Arsenal defender Ben White has been called up to the England squad for the first time since the 2022 World Cup. The 28-year-old right-back has not featured for the national team since leaving the camp in Qatar for personal reasons. He subsequently made himself unavailable for selection for the remainder of Gareth Southgate's spell in charge.

But he is back in the fold for friendlies against Uruguay and Japan, after Bayer Leverkusen's Jarell Quansah withdrew from Thomas Tuchel's 35-man squad with an injury. White has won four England caps, last featuring in a 3-0 win against Ivory Coast in March 2022. There is still no place in the squad for Real Madrid defender Trent Alexander-Arnold, who is also a right-back. White's Gunners teammate Eberechi Eze is also out of the camp and has been replaced by Newcastle winger Harvey Barnes. 28, who won his only previous cap six years ago.

FOCUS

Tottenham face key call as relegation threat grows

AFP
London

Tottenham are running out of time to save themselves from the almost unthinkable nightmare of Premier League relegation, with interim boss Igor Tudor's future in doubt just weeks after taking charge.

Spurs, who have been in the English top flight for nearly half a century, collapsed to a 3-0 defeat against relegation rivals Nottingham Forest at home on Sunday. Before the match, fans had gathered on the streets of north London in their thousands to show their support for the beleaguered team in scenes more reminiscent of a trophy parade. There was also a fizzing atmosphere inside the club's gleaming stadium as Spurs dominated for large periods of the first half. But Igor Jesus put the visitors ahead on the cusp of half-time and Tottenham unravelled after the break, conceding twice more

as the stands rapidly emptied. The defeat stretched Tottenham's winless Premier League run to 13 games, leaving them 17th in the table, just one point and one place above West Ham, who are in the drop zone. Tottenham are the ninth-wealthiest club in the world, according to Deloitte's latest rankings, underlining the extraordinary nature of their current predicament.

Sunday's miserable result piled the pressure on former Juventus boss Tudor, who has lost five of his seven matches in charge in all competitions since replacing Thomas Frank. Club bosses now have a huge decision to make during the international break. Do they stick or twist as they seek to avoid an embarrassing and shocking first relegation since 1977?

Tottenham have taken just 30 points from 31 Premier League games this season. Accounting for the modern tally of three points for a win, it is their joint-lowest return at this stage of a league campaign, along with 1914/15. It is a bleak situation for

a club that celebrated Europa League glory last season under Ange Postecoglou, who was nevertheless shown the door after his team finished 17th in the Premier League.

Tudor was unavailable for post-match media duties on Sunday after being informed of his father's death, with that unenviable task falling to his assistant, Bruno Saltor. Much-travelled former Croatia international Tudor was parachuted in last month with a brief to save Tottenham's season but he has been powerless to stop their slide.

A bullish Saltor said he was "100 percent" confident Spurs could survive, pointing to the recent 1-1 draw at Liverpool and a midweek win against Atletico Madrid in the Champions League, despite an aggregate loss.

But ex-Tottenham midfielder Danny Murphy said it was "impossible" for Tudor to stay and believes the club, considered a member of the Premier League's "Big Six", will take the plunge. "I think it's really dif-

ficult for the players to play in an environment that's so deflated and toxic," he said. "The only way you can change that is either winning games, which they're not doing, or change a manager - what the fans want. If they keep him in charge, it's five league games without a win. A new guy comes in, gets one win, all of sudden, it can turn quickly. I think it's a risk worth taking and I think they'll take it."

Former Spurs goalkeeper Paul Robinson said the creditable 1-1 draw against Liverpool "papered over the cracks". "It was the worst result they could have, because a point was not good and it kept him in a job," he said. Tottenham's only crumb of comfort on Sunday was a defeat for West Ham at Aston Villa, but they cannot rely on gifts from the Hammers, who have shown positive signs in recent weeks. Spurs are not in action again until April 12, when they face a tricky trip to Sunderland. Before then the hierarchy have a decision to make that could decide the club's immediate future.