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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Salah to leave Liverpool at the end of the season

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Al Rayyan, Umm Salal enter QSL Cup semi-finals



Al Rayyan defeated Al Shahania 3-0 to book their place in the QSL Cup semi-finals, while Umm Salal also advanced to the last four with a 2-0 win over Al Bidda yesterday. Two goals from Ahmed Alaaeldin in the 36th and 66th minutes, along with Roger Guedes' strike in the 62nd minute, sealed victory for Rayyan. At the Suhaim bin Hamad Stadium, Umm Salal scored two late goals to dash Al Bidda's hopes, with Antonio Mance finding the net in the 73rd minute before Cristo Perez added another in the 87th minute.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Moreno named Rayyan's new coach

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rayyan appointed Vicente Moreno as their head coach following the departure of Artur Jorge to Brazilian side Cruzeiro. The club yesterday confirmed reaching an agreement with Al Wakrah, Moreno's former club, with the coach's approval marking the transition. "This move reflects the strong cooperation and relationship between the two clubs," Al Rayyan said in an statement.

Al Wakrah's management for facilitating the transfer and wished Moreno "every success in his new role," hoping he will fulfill the ambitions of both the club's management and fans.

Jorge, who joined Al Rayyan in January 2026, leaves the club currently sitting fourth in the Qatar Stars League, seven points behind leaders Al Sadd.

Al Rayyan aim to secure a semi-final spot and defend their QSL Cup title as they push for a strong finish this season. In the interim, assistant coach Abdulghafoor Murad guided the team to a 3-0 victory over Al Shahania in the QSL Cup quarter-finals yesterday.



Al Rayyan's new coach Vicente Moreno poses with the club's jersey.

FOOTBALL

Play-off hopefuls eye FIFA World Cup spot

Italy under pressure as they attempt to qualify for the first time since 2014

AFP
Paris, France

The final line-up for the 2026 World Cup will be decided over the next week, with 16 teams competing for the last four places allocated to European countries.

Twelve runners-up from the qualifying groups and four teams that earned spots through their UEFA Nations League results have a second chance to punch their ticket to football's global showpiece. Here is a look at the four play-off routes that will determine the remaining qualifiers for the first 48-team World Cup.

PATH A

Four-time World Cup winners Italy face immense pressure as they attempt to qualify for a first appearance at the tournament since 2014. After lifting the trophy in 2006, Italy's record at the World Cup has been dire. They suffered two successive group-stage exits before missing out entirely on the 2018 and 2022 editions.

In order to avoid another qualifying failure Italy must overcome Northern Ireland in Bergamo on Thursday, before a potential final against Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina on March 31.

"It's only normal that there's pressure - only if you had no blood in your veins would you not feel it," said Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso, who played in the 2006 final which the Azzurri won on penalties against France.

Northern Ireland are big underdogs against Italy but hope to end a 40-year absence from the World Cup. Wales host Bosnia in Cardiff in the other semi-final.

Manager Craig Bellamy said earlier this



Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso speaks at a press conference in Florence.

month that he "feels a responsibility" to lead Wales to a second straight finals. Their appearance in Qatar was the country's first at the World Cup in 64 years.

PATH B

Ukraine's footballers will hope to lift the morale of a war-torn country by competing at a first World Cup in 20 years. To get there, they need to beat Sweden on neutral ground in Valencia and then Poland or Albania.

Sweden picked up just two points in a dismal qualifying campaign but a team now

coached by former Chelsea and Brighton boss Graham Potter will get another shot on the strength of their Nations League performances.

However, Sweden will be without key man Alexander Isak as the Liverpool forward is not yet ready to return from a broken leg suffered in December.

Poland can count on Robert Lewandowski who is eyeing a third World Cup, but Albania - led by former Arsenal and Barcelona defender Sylvinho - believe they have what it takes to qualify for the first time.

PATH C

Kosovo stand two wins away from a first major tournament a decade on from their admission to UEFA and FIFA. They came second in their qualifying group after two wins over Sweden and a victory in Slovenia. "It's a massive opportunity for us. The whole country is buzzing with excitement. Everyone's over the moon," Kosovo captain Vedat Muriqi said.

Mallorca striker Muriqi sits second only to Kylian Mbappe in La Liga this season with 18 goals. The 31-year-old is also Kosovo's all-time record scorer. Slovakia, who last featured at the World Cup in 2010, host Kosovo in Bratislava while Turkey and Romania square off in Istanbul. Turkey have not played at the World Cup since a surprise third-place finish in 2002. Romania's most recent appearance was in 1998.

PATH D

Troy Parrott's heroics snatched the Republic of Ireland a play-off berth, but there is much still to be done if the Irish are to return to the World Cup stage.

Ireland, who haven't featured at the tournament since 2002, head to Prague to take on the Czech Republic in the semi-finals. The winner of that tie will host the final against Denmark or North Macedonia.

"There's a quiet confidence in the group growing together, it's great to see but we know there's a lot of hard work to come," said Ireland assistant John O'Shea. Denmark missed out on automatic qualification after a dramatic defeat in Scotland but will be expected to see off North Macedonia, whose lone tournament appearance came at Euro 2020. Kasper Schmeichel is absent for Denmark after revealing that he may have played his final game, with two surgeries required to repair his damaged shoulder.

Ahmed included in Qatar training camp



Doha: Issa Ahmed has earned a call-up to Qatar's national team training camp during the ongoing international break, as Al Annabi step up preparations for the FIFA World Cup 2026.

The inclusion comes as part of a 32-man squad named by head coach Julen Lopetegui, with the team set to assemble for a crucial camp aimed at fine-tuning preparations for the global showpiece to be held across the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Meanwhile, defender Homam Al-Amin will remain with his Spanish club Cultural y Deportiva Leonesa during the international window. The decision follows coordination between Lopetegui and the club, after Al-Amin recently joined the side on loan from Al Duhail SC for the remainder of the season.

Qatar's preparations had initially included high-profile friendlies against Serbia and Argentina as part of the Qatar Football Festival, but those fixtures were cancelled due to regional tensions.

At the World Cup, Qatar have been drawn in Group B alongside hosts Canada, Switzerland and a yet-to-be-determined European play-off winner.

SPOTLIGHT

Royal Challengers Bengaluru to go for \$1.7bn

AFP
Bengaluru, India

A consortium of investors, including US asset management giant Blackstone, yesterday announced the takeover of Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB), one of the founding clubs of Indian Premier League, for nearly \$1.8bn.

The announcement comes just days before the start of the lucrative T20 tournament on Saturday.

The franchise, which won the IPL for the first time last year, was sold by United Spirits Limited, the Indian unit of British beverage giant Diageo, for Rs166.6bn (\$1.77bn).

In a statement, the acquiring consortium said it was "proud to become custodians of RCB".

The group includes Bolt Ventures, run by leading sports investor David Blitzer, Indian media conglomerate *The Times of India* Group, along with Blackstone and Indian corporate giant Aditya Birla Group.

RCB's "championship-winning culture" and its connection to the southern city of Bengaluru and "one of the most passionate fanbases in world sport make this an extraordinary opportunity."

"We are committed to taking RCB to new heights, on the pitch and beyond."

Praveen Someshwar, chief executive at United Spirits Limited, said the deal was a milestone "as we sharpen focus on our core beverage business to unlock its true potential with sustained growth."

Earlier this year, RCB's women's team won their second Women's Premier League title.

IPL's RCB to keep 11 seats empty in honour of stampede dead

Indian Premier League champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru will keep 11 seats at their M Chinnaswamy Stadium empty in memory of the fans crushed to death in a stampede outside the stadium in June after RCB won the IPL for the first time.

The lucrative T20 tournament begins its 2026 season on Saturday

when RCB host Sunrisers Hyderabad.

The Bengaluru team, including star batsman Virat Kohli, will warm up for the game in tops sporting the number 11 and wear black arm bands for the match.

Along with the permanently empty seats, CEO Rajesh Menon said: "This is a tribute to our fans, who will always remain a part of our journey."

After the tragedy, authorities deemed the venue unsafe due to structural and crowd management deficiencies, and moved important fixtures elsewhere.

But earlier this month the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said that the stadium would host games, including RCB home fixtures.

Menon said crowd management measures have been "significantly strengthened", including setting up AI-led cameras.

"This system provides real-time alerts, including stand-specific crowd counts, to ensure better monitoring and control," he said.

The stampede took place a day after RCB won the final against Punjab Kings and returned to a



Royal Challengers Bengaluru players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Indian Premier League title against Punjab Kings in Ahmedabad, India, on June 4, 2025. (Reuters)

homecoming trophy parade. Hundreds of thousands gathered on the streets to welcome their hero Kohli and his victorious

teammates. More than 50 people were injured. Several officials, including a senior RCB executive, and repre-

sentatives of event organisers DNA and Karnataka State Cricket Association, were questioned by police. No one has been convicted.

COMMENT

Boycott slams England's Ashes review

The Yorkshireman criticises ECB decision to retain McCullum, Key

Reuters
London

Geoffrey Boycott bemoaned a lack of accountability in English cricket after the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) decided to retain head coach Brendon McCullum and managing director Rob Key following a review of the team's humbling 4-1 Ashes defeat in Australia.

The former England opener questioned ECB Chief Executive Richard Gould's credentials and said the "incompetent" Key and McCullum had "sabotaged" England's Ashes campaign.

"Like me, cricket supporters will be asking how McCullum and Key could make so many bad decisions on the Australian tour and yet the chief executive of English cricket decides there is no need to make any changes. Where is the accountability?" Boycott wrote in the *Telegraph*.

"I'm sure they promised him they would do better, but leopards don't change their spots, so it looks like we will get the same type of Test cricket."

Boycott said he admired McCullum for getting the team to play aggressive and exciting cricket but felt the players had grown complacent under the former New Zealand captain.

"In trying to create a free-spirited team, he has made them



England captain Ben Stokes cuts a forlorn look at a press conference following one of the Ashes Tests against Australia in December 2025. (AFP)

too comfortable and complacent. They know they will not get dropped, whatever their performances or conduct on or off the field.

"It looks like a boys' club where, once you are in the team, it is hard to get out... Competition for places is the lifeblood of sport. Complacency in a team does not breed a good appetite to excel."

Former England captains Michael Vaughan and Mike

Atherton said Key and McCullum were lucky to retain their jobs. "There's not many management groups that deliver something so poor away from home in an Ashes series and get the chance to carry on," Vaughan told *BBC Test Match Special*. "They've had some exciting times, but they haven't won enough."

"What England fans are looking for now is, what change (will happen)?"

Atherton said English supporters would find "the lack of accountability hard to stomach".

"In most walks of life, such a litany of mistakes would result in some significant change," he wrote in the *Times*.

"There will be limited patience if the general public do not sense a shift in attitude this summer from players who, they felt, were too slapdash during a 4-1 Ashes defeat."

FOCUS

Stokes wants to play for wins after 'hardest period of captaincy'

AFP
London

Ben Stokes reckons the past three months have been the "hardest period" of his time as England captain but is determined the current leadership group can oversee a revival in the Test team's fortunes.

Earlier on Monday, the chief executive of the England and Wales Cricket Board, Richard Gould, confirmed Stokes, managing director Rob Key and coach Brendon McCullum would all stay in their posts despite the team's 4-1 loss on their five-Test tour of Australia, which ended in January.

Key denied suggestions Stokes and McCullum had fallen out in Australia, despite the pair offering contrasting messages during a desperately disappointing series loss.

Stokes, in an emotional Instagram post, said he was determined to learn from his mistakes following the lowest period of his near four-year spell as England Test captain, with Key and McCullum still the right men to be alongside him.

"Being England captain is the greatest honour a player can be given and I do not take it for granted," Stokes wrote.

"It has its highs and it has its lows, it makes you want to smile, it makes you want to cry. It completely and utterly consumes you and feels like it's the only thing in your life at times."

"The last 3 months has without a doubt been the hardest period of my captaincy journey, it's tested me in so many different ways and I'm sure every other captain has gone through this as well."

"Baz (McCullum), Rob and myself have the passion and desire to take this team forward, we are going to give you everything we have,

we know we made mistakes along the way and we have learnt from those mistakes, you learn more from failure than success."

In addition to England's poor performances on the field, there were reports of excessive drinking by players 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 midnight curfew has since been enforced, while the ECB are trying to recruit a new national selector after Luke Wright resigned for family reasons.

Stokes has not played since suffering a groin injury in the fifth Ashes Test in Sydney in January, but is set to feature for Durham in the County Championship ahead of this season's home Test programme.

England have three Tests against McCullum's native New Zealand in June before a trio of matches against Pakistan in August and September.

Stokes added: "I have learnt a lot about myself but the most important thing that I want the fans to know is that...."

"I F***** love cricket, I F***** love this team, I F***** love being England captain and I have got so much more to give to this role and I'm so happy that I get to do it with Baz and Rob."

"We all appreciate every single person who supports us," Stokes continued.

"We do what we do for many reasons but one of those reasons is to bring our supporters and fans happiness and a sense of pride and we will aim to do those things as much as we can in the future."

"See you all in June for the start of the Test Match summer," Stokes said.

BABAR, RIZWAN READY FOR 2026 PSL



Captain of Peshawar Zalmi Babar Azam chats with skipper of Rawalpindi Pindis Mohammad Rizwan during a dinner gathering hosted by Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) in Lahore. The eight-team Pakistan Super League begins tomorrow. The Mar 26-May 3 league will be played in front of empty stadiums in Lahore and Karachi, the PCB said on Monday. Hyderabad Kingsmen, Islamabad United, Karachi Kings, Lahore Qalandars, Multan Sultans and Quetta Gladiators are the other six teams in the league.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Duckett pulls out of IPL to focus on England career, risks two-season ban

Reuters
London

England opener Ben Duckett has withdrawn from the Indian Premier League (IPL) four days before the start of the tournament to focus on his international career, a decision that could leave him facing a two-season ban from the league.

The 31-year-old, who scored 202 runs at an average of 20.20 during the Ashes, was bought by Delhi Capitals for Rs20mn (\$213,167) at the auction.

Under IPL rules, any player who registers for the auction, is picked by a franchise and makes himself unavailable before the start of the season can be barred from participating in the tournament and the player auction for two seasons.

"I have made the extremely difficult decision to withdraw from the IPL. I have given this a lot of



thought and it has not been an easy choice," Duckett wrote on Instagram.

"Representing England is something I have dreamed of since I was a child, and I want to give everything I can to English cricket. To do that, I need to ensure I am in the best possible place physically and mentally ahead of the summer."

"I would like to sincerely apologise to everyone at Delhi. I was

genuinely very excited about the opportunity to represent the franchise, and I fully appreciate the time and planning that goes into building a squad."

"I am sorry for any disruption my decision may cause. I would also like to apologise to all the fans, as I know how much the team means to everyone in Delhi."

The IPL runs from March 28 to May 31.

TENNIS

Sinner, Sabalenka march on as more seeds crash out

'SHE'S A TOUGH OPPONENT AND I'M SUPER HAPPY WITH THE LEVEL I PLAYED AT TODAY'

AFP
Miami

Jannik Sinner and Aryna Sabalenka kept their "Sunshine Double" dreams alive with emphatic victories at the ATP/WTA Miami Open on Monday as defending men's champion Jakub Mensik joined a slew of seeds who crashed out.

Sinner and Sabalenka are bidding to join an elite band of players who have won Indian Wells and the Miami Open back-to-back, and arrived in Florida brimming with confidence after their respective victories in the California desert earlier this month.

Women's world number one Sabalenka, defending the Miami title she won for the first time last year, cruised into the quarter-finals with a 6-3, 6-4 demolition of China's 2024 Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen.

Sinner, who is chasing a second victory in Miami after lifting the title in 2024, was similarly comfortable in his third-round clash with French 30th seed Corentin Moutet, winning 6-1, 6-4 to advance to the last 16.

Sabalenka is aiming to become only the fifth woman to complete the Indian Wells-Miami double after Steffi Graf, Kim Clijsters, Victoria Azarenka and Iga Swiatek.

On Monday's form, few would bet against the big-hitting four-time Grand Slam champion from Belarus, who comfortably disposed of 23rd seed Zheng in 1hr 25min.

"She's a tough opponent and I'm super happy with the level I played at today," Sabalenka said in her on-court interview. "I can definitely say that it felt like home."

"I feel like I'm getting better, serving better, getting used to these conditions, which are tricky. But I'm getting more and more comfortable with every match," added Sabalenka, who faces unseeded American Hailey Baptiste in the quarter-finals.

Baptiste was one of three American women to advance to the last eight on Monday.

Fourth seed Coco Gauff downed Romanian veteran Sorana Cirstea 6-4, 3-6, 6-2, while fifth seed Jes-



Jannik Sinner of Italy returns a shot to Corentin Moutet of France during their Miami Open match at Hard Rock Stadium. (AFP)

sica Pegula beat another Romanian, Jacqueline Cristian 6-4, 6-1.

Canada's Victoria Mboko, seeded 10, upset Russian eighth seed Mirra Andreeva 7-6 (7/4), 4-6, 6-0 to set up a quarter-final with Czech 13th seed Karolina Muchova, who strolled past Alexandra Eala of the Philippines 6-0, 6-2.

In the men's draw, Italian second seed Sinner was always in control against France's Moutet

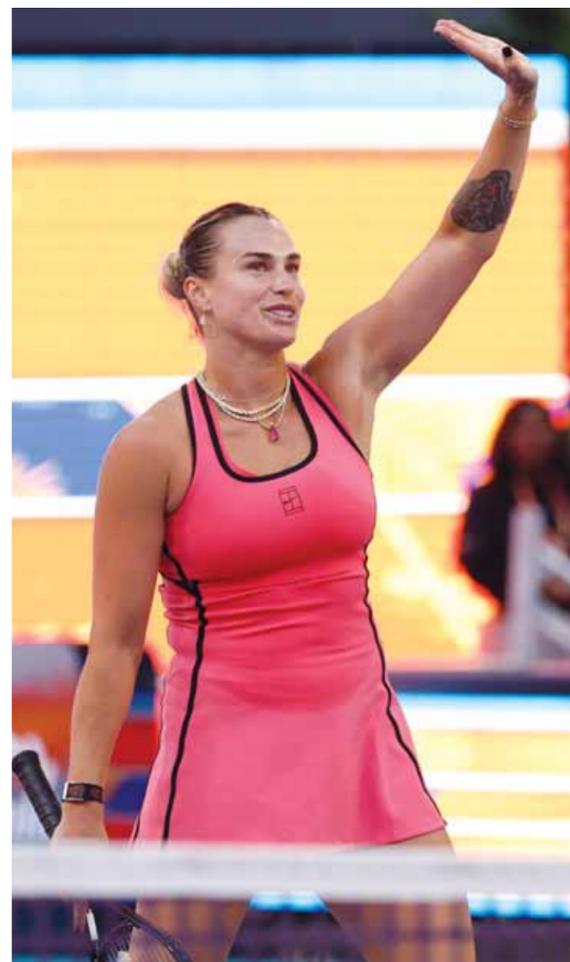
on the Hard Rock Stadium's main court.

Sinner will face unseeded American Alex Michelsen in the last 16. Michelsen defeated Chile's Alejandro Tabilo 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 earlier Monday.

But while Sinner sailed through, defending champion Jakub Mensik was among the latest crop of seeds to tumble out, losing a gruelling three-setter against 19th

seed Frances Tiafoe 7-6 (7/4), 4-6, 7-6 (13/11). A 2hr 55min slug-fest was decided by a marathon third set tiebreak when Czech 20-year-old Mensik saved six match points before finally succumbing.

US hope Tiafoe, who himself saved two match points in the final tiebreak, sealed victory after converting his seventh match point when a Mensik return of serve drifted wide. Tiafoe will face



Aryna Sabalenka waves to the crowd after her Miami Open match against Qinwen Zheng at Hard Rock Stadium. (Geoff Burke-Imagn Images)

France's Terence Atmane in the last 16. Atmane powered into the fourth round with a 6-3, 1-6, 6-3 upset of Canadian seventh seed Felix Auger-Aliassime on Monday.

Auger-Aliassime joined a lengthening list of seeds who have stumbled in the early rounds in Miami that includes Indian Wells runner-up Daniil Medvedev, who was shown the door earlier Monday in a 6-0, 4-6, 7-5 loss to Ar-

gentina's Francisco Cerundolo. Medvedev's exit followed the departures of world number one Carlos Alcaraz, Australian fifth seed Alex De Minaur and eighth seed Ben Shelton. Another French player, 31st seed Ugo Humbert, beat Kazakhstan's Alexander Shevchenko 6-4, 7-6 (7/2).

Third seed Alexander Zverev got past Croatian veteran Marin Cilic 6-2, 5-7, 6-4.

GOLF

Woods set to return to action in TGL finals with Masters looming

Reuters
Los Angeles

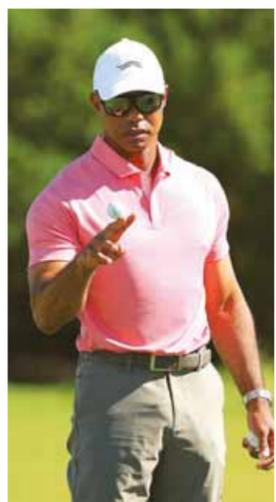
Tiger Woods will return to competitive golf, minus most of the walking, when he tees it up for Jupiter Links Golf Club on the last night of the TGL finals on Tuesday in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.

Sahith Theegala birdied the final hole, giving Los Angeles Golf Club two points and a 6-5 comeback win over Jupiter Links Golf Club in the first match of title series on Monday. The best-of-three set concludes Tuesday night with the second match and, if necessary, the decisive match.

Woods has been serving as an adviser and unofficial cheerleader for his TGL team while working his way back from lumbar disk replacement surgery in October and a left Achilles tendon rupture that occurred last spring.

The back operation was the seventh Woods, 50, has undergone.

The last time Woods participated in a full-fledged golf event was when he missed the cut at the 2024 Open Championship at Roy-



al Troon in Scotland. Asked last week about playing at the Masters next month, Woods said,

"I said I've been working on it. Sometimes I have good days, sometimes I have bad days. Disk replacement is not a lot of fun.

"... So as I said, I've had a lot of procedures prior to that, so the body doesn't quite heal like it was when I was 24. Doesn't quite bounce back. So I have good days when I can pretty much do anything, and other days where it's hard to just to move around."

On Monday, Jupiter's team of Max Homa, Tom Kim and Kevin Kisner led 3-2 after nine holes of triples play against Los Angeles' team of Justin Rose, Tommy Fleetwood and Theegala.

In singles, Rose beat Homa and then Fleetwood topped Kim to put L.A. up 4-3. Theegala topped Kisner and then Rose defeated Homa as Jupiter went back in front 5-4.

After Fleetwood and Kim halved their hole, it came down to Theegala vs. Kisner. With the hammer thrown, doubling the value of the hole, Theegala reached the green in two on par-5 15th hole, and he got the birdie. Kisner's chip-in attempt from off the green would have halved the hole and given Jupiter the victory if it went in, but it came up short.

In the inaugural TGL finals last year, the Atlanta Drive GC swept New York Golf Club 2-0.

Cort closes 'year of struggles' with stage 2 win

Uno-X rider Magnus Cort shook off a difficult year to win stage 2 of the Tour of Catalonia on Tuesday after a long-range breakaway was caught just ahead of the home straight.

The Dane with the handlebar moustache is best known for a star turn during the 2022 Tour de France when he was cheered all the way through stage three in his homeland while leading that stage in the polka dot jersey.

Cort said he hadn't raced well since setting off sick on last year's the Tour de France. "It's been a year of struggles so I'm just so happy," he said.

On Tuesday, he took the lead with 100m to go, beating Noa Isidore into second and Francesco Busatto into third in an uphill dash for the line. Nestled behind this trio, French national champion Dorian Godon of Ineos Grenadiers maintained the overall lead after finishing fourth, with 110 riders getting the same time at the finish line.

Remco Evenepoel and Tom Pidcock remain third

and fourth in the overall. Stage 2 started in the former home town of Catalan surrealist painter Salvador Dali, also famed for his moustache, in Figueres, for a rolling 167km run to Banyoles. It was a similar stage to Monday's but with the climb just 25km from the finish line and then downhill all the way.

"I had heart palpitations with all that downhill," said the 33-year-old Cort.

"There are lots of stages like this in Catalonia, hilly stages that finish with a sprint, so that suits me." It didn't suit Irish sprinter Sam Bennett, who finished almost 25mins off the pace.

Wednesday's run should see Godon and Cort locked in a struggle for the overall lead again with a hilly 160km run from Mont-roig del Camp to Vilaseca.

Favourite Jonas Vingegaard will likely go to the attack on stages four, five and six in the Pyrenees. Sunday's finale takes in seven circuits of Montjuic in Barcelona where the Tour de France starts in July.

FOCUS

World Snooker Championship to stay at Crucible until at least 2045

AFP
London

Sheffield's Crucible will remain home to the World Snooker Championship until at least 2045, ending fears that the sport's flagship event would quit the celebrated venue.

An agreement between the World Snooker Tour (WST) and Sheffield City Council means the event will be held at the theatre for the next two decades, with an option to extend to 2050.

A planned £455m (\$600m) redevelopment will provide the potential to add an additional 500 seats, but means the event must temporarily relocate in 2029, and possibly 2030, while work is in progress.

Traditionalists had feared the global showpiece could vacate the Sheffield theatre, which has staged every world championship since 1977, and possibly even Britain itself, once its lease expired in 2027.

WST chief Barry Hearn previously described the sport's long-term home, which has a capacity of 980, as "no longer fit for purpose".

China and Saudi Arabia were suggested as possible alternatives to stage the tournament.

"I thought we didn't have a home at one stage - I can't tell you how pleased I am," said Hearn, president of Matchroom Sport.

"Snooker's dream was to stay at the Crucible. This is the lifeblood of our sport."

Retired seven-time world

champion Stephen Hendry said: "There is simply nowhere else like the Crucible or anywhere else that could replicate that atmosphere or the sense of history."

"It was always my favourite place to play and I still love going to Sheffield. I am thrilled that we are staying there long term."

The investment has come primarily from a combination of council and government funding, and will be used to improve the theatre as a year-round venue.

"We have a deep cultural and sporting heritage here in the UK - sport, art and culture are the very best of us," said British Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

"It's what makes us proud not only of the country, but the places that we're from."

This year's World Snooker Championship starts on April 18.

With baby on way, Scheffler WDs from Houston Open

World No. 1 Scottie Scheffler has withdrawn from this week's Texas Children's Houston Open due to the imminent birth of his second child, Golf Channel reported.

Scheffler and his wife, Meredith, welcomed a son, Bennett, on May 8, 2024, a few weeks after Scheffler's second Masters victory. Scheffler was expected to tee it up in his home state.

The four-time major winner has played this event six times with four top 10 finishes.

He finished in a tie for second in both 2024 and 2025. Min Woo Lee of Australia is the defending champion.

PGA Tour Communications announced that Bud Cauley also withdrew from the tournament in Houston, with Matt Kuchar and Seamus Power of Ireland being added into the field.

Austin Smotherman, Cam Davis of Australia, Ryo Hisatsune of Japan and Michael Kim withdrew from the tournament on Sunday. Those four golfers were replaced by Jimmy Stanger, Jesper Svensson of Sweden, and Danny Willett and Paul Waring, both of England.

On Monday, Doug Ghim entered the tournament after Matt McCarty withdrew.

SPOTLIGHT

Mbappe says injury is behind him, ready for World Cup

AFP
Paris

French superstar Kylian Mbappe says the knee injury that kept him sidelined for almost two months is "behind him" and there had never been a concern he would miss this year's World Cup. The 27-year-old Real Madrid striker admitted he had not been at his best mentally during the 54-day absence – the longest of his career. "There was a lot of frustration, anger and anxiety," the French captain said.

Mbappe, who along with the French squad flew to the United States for friendlies against Brazil on Thursday and then Colombia Sunday, came on as a substitute for a few minutes in last week's Champions League last-16 match at Manchester City.

He also played over 25 minutes for Real – for whom he is top scorer this campaign with 38 goals in 34 appearances – in the 3-2 derby win over Atletico on Sunday. "It is behind me," he said of the injury. "I put myself under a regime where I wanted to return gently but with a hunger to play. I

hope I am going to be able to play during the international break and make a difference."

The France captain – a World Cup winner in 2018 and runner-up in 2022 – said he had been annoyed by the rumour mill suggesting his injury was more serious than it actually was. He had avoided undergoing surgery after scans he had in Paris at the beginning of March revealed he would not require an intervention. "Lots of people gave their own diagnosis, I heard many false things," said Mbappe, who was appearing at an event of an insurance company he invested in in Paris on Monday.

Mbappe said there had never been a doubt about the injury preventing him from playing at what will be his third World Cup finals in June. "No, that was never a topic of discussion," he said. "At worst I could have had a partial rupture (of the ligament) which would have ruled me out till April. There was never a debate about the World Cup or the climax to the season with Real Madrid."

In spite of the sprain and the resulting pain the former PSG star played part of

January and February, admitting he and Real "had tried to manage it as best as possible". "One has to look at the positive, today, I have no pain and we are still in the hunt for trophies, that is what is most important," he said. "We will have time afterwards to assess how it was handled. I am not going to go into the details, I will say I was not at my best in handling this period, I was not the happiest of players but I am delighted that is behind me now. All (the pain) is gone."

Mbappe said he was looking forward to pitting his wits against the Brazilians, who are managed by Carlo Ancelotti, who coached the Frenchman in his first season at Real. "It might be a friendly but when you play Brazil, the greatest footballing nation with five World Cup wins, it is unbelievable to play against them," he said.

"It is a team who could win the World Cup, it is good to compare how we are at the moment with them. Even if we cannot take a lot of learnings out of this get together, we can nevertheless take some. One thing is for sure we are not going there for a holiday, we are going there as a step in our preparations for the World Cup."



France's Kylian Mbappe arrives for training in Clairefontaine, France yesterday. (Reuters)

PREMIER LEAGUE

Salah to leave Liverpool at the end of the season

Forward won two league titles and a Champions League with Reds

AFP
London

Mohamed Salah will leave Premier League champions Liverpool at the end of the season, the Egypt forward announced as he started a farewell to what the club said were nine "illustrious" years at Anfield.

The 33-year-old arrived at Anfield from Roma in 2017 before making 435 appearances for Liverpool, scoring 255 goals to leave him third on the Reds' all-time leading goalscorers chart. He has also won the Premier League Golden Boot award on four occasions while starring for Liverpool in both their 2019/20 and 2024/25 title triumphs as well as lifting the 2019 Champions League trophy.

His Liverpool honours also include a Club World Cup, UEFA Super Cup, FA Cup and two League Cups. But the currently injured Salah has scored just five Premier League goals so far this season, compared with 29 in last term's title-winning campaign.

And his Anfield future became the subject of intense speculation after a dramatic bust-up with Liverpool manager Arne Slot in December. He accused Liverpool of throwing him "under the bus" after he was benched for three games in a row and said he had no relationship with the Dutch boss.

Salah, in a video on social media featuring highlights of his time with Liverpool, said: "Hello everyone. Unfortunately, the day has come. This is the first part of my farewell. I will be leaving Liverpool at the end of the season. I wanted to start by saying that I never imagined how deeply this club, this city, these people would become part of my life. Liverpool is not just a football club. It's a passion, it's a history, it's a spirit. I can't explain in words to anyone not of this club."

Salah, a free agent at the end of the season, added: "We celebrated victory, we won the most important trophies and we fought together through the hardest time in our life. I



Mohamed Salah arrived at Liverpool from Roma in 2017 before making 435 appearances, scoring 255 goals to leave him third on the Reds' all-time leading goalscorers chart. (Reuters)

want to thank everyone who was part of this club throughout my time here, especially the team-mates past and present.

"And to the fans, I don't have enough words. The support you showed me through the best time of my career, and you stood by me in the toughest times. It's something I will never forget and I will take with me always. Leaving is never easy. You gave me the best time of my life. I will be always one of you. This club will always be my home, to me and to my family. Thank you for everything. Because of all of you, I will never walk alone," insisted Salah in a reference to the Liverpool fans' chant.

Liverpool said on their website: "Mohamed Salah is to bring the curtain down on his illustrious career with Liverpool at the end of the 2025-26 season. The forward has reached

an agreement with the Reds that will see him close a remarkable nine-year chapter at Anfield. With plenty still left to play for this season, Salah is firmly focused on trying to achieve the best possible finish to the campaign for Liverpool and, therefore, the time to fully celebrate his legacy and achievements will follow later in the year when he bids farewell to Anfield," they added.

Salah was forced off at Anfield last week after scoring in Liverpool's 4-0 victory against Galatasaray, which sealed their place in the Champions League quarter-finals. In-form Salah had scored in three of his past four starts after an uncharacteristic lean spell but missed last weekend's 2-1 loss at Brighton, a blow to fifth-placed Liverpool's hopes of qualifying for next season's Champions League.

Palestinian FA calls for Israeli ban after FIFA discrimination report

Al Bireh, Palestinian Territories: The Palestinian Football Association (PFA) called for the Israeli Football Association (IFA) to receive a ban after a FIFA report found "multiple breaches" of its anti-discrimination obligations.

"We maintain our right and continue our efforts to ensure that the Israeli Football Association is expelled from all international institutions," PFA chief Jibril Rajoub, who also heads the Palestinian Olympic Committee, said during a press conference in the occupied West Bank city of Al Bireh.

FIFA fined the IFA 150,000 Swiss francs (\$190,700) for the breaches last week, "a significant decision" according to Rajoub, who said the penalty still "falls short of the minimum required".

Rajoub cited the IFA's "racist nature", alleged criminal activity by some Israeli sports officials, and the inclusion of football clubs from Israeli West Bank settlements in the Israeli federation as grounds for a ban.

A recent report by the disciplinary committee of world football's governing body found that the IFA "failed to take meaningful action against Beitar Jerusalem" for "persistent and well-documented racist behaviour".

Rajoub, who is also Secretary General of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas' Fatah party's central committee, said that Beitar Jerusalem is "an extreme example

of racism, fascism, and discrimination" but that such attitudes are commonplace in Israeli football clubs.

On the alleged criminal activity of Israeli sports officials, Rajoub said he was referring to instances of players killed during two years of war in Gaza, and the destruction of many of the Palestinian territory's sports facilities during the same war.

"Some figures within Israeli sports either participated in or openly supported what has been happening," Rajoub said, stating that 1,007 athletes and coaches were killed in Gaza and 265 sports facilities damaged since the war started in October 2023.

Media restrictions and limited access in Gaza have prevented journalists from independently verifying casualty figures or freely covering the fighting. At least five football clubs based in Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank are members of the Israeli Football Association.

After a separate investigation, FIFA announced no action would be taken against the IFA over allegations that Israeli clubs based in the occupied West Bank were taking part in Israel's leagues. The UN has repeatedly condemned Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, as illegal under international law. Israel is part of UEFA, European football's governing body.

ACL Elite West knockouts moved to Jeddah as single-leg ties

Doha: The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) confirmed that all remaining knockout matches in its club competitions across the West Region will be played as single-leg ties at centralised venues, citing ongoing tensions in West Asia.

The decision follows the temporary postponement of fixtures earlier this month. The AFC said the revised format will apply to all remaining knockout fixtures, with matches now to be decided over a single leg rather than the traditional home-and-away format. The Round of 16 in the AFC Champions League (ACL) Elite West Region will be held on

April 13 and 14 at King Abdullah Sports City and Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium in Jeddah. The fixtures will precede the AFC Champions League Elite Finals, scheduled from April 16 to 25 in the same city.

To ease scheduling pressures, the AFC also confirmed that the quarterfinals and semifinals of the AFC Champions League Two and AFC Challenge League will be played as single-leg ties on April 19 and 22, with venues to be announced. In the Round of 16 of the ACL Elite, Qatar's Al Sadd SC will take on Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal SFC, while Al Duhail SC face Al Ahli Saudi FC.

Lens push back against PSG request to postpone Ligue 1 clash

Paris: Lens have pushed back against Paris St Germain's request to postpone their top-of-the-table Ligue 1 clash scheduled for April 11, after PSG sought additional preparation time ahead of their Champions League quarter-finals against Liverpool.

PSG, the reigning European champions, host Liverpool three days before the Lens fixture at Stade Bollaert-Delelis before travelling to Anfield for the second leg on April 14.

Liverpool, meanwhile, are also in domestic action that weekend, hosting Fulham in the Premier League on April 11 - the date on which PSG were due to face Lens. Leaders PSG and Lens are separated by one point in Ligue 1, with Luis Enrique's side also having a game in hand.

France's Ligue de Football Professionnel (LFP) confirmed that PSG had formally requested the postponement, but Lens made their opposition clear.

Strasbourg have also asked for their Ligue 1 match against Brest to be postponed in order to prepare for their Europa Conference League quarter-final against Mainz.

"In a spirit of responsibility and restraint, Racing Club de Lens made it clear to Paris Saint-Germain, from the very first enquiries, that it did not wish to see this date changed..." Lens said in a statement on Monday. "It seems to us, in fact, that a worrying sentiment is taking hold: that of a French league gradually being relegated to the status of an adjustment variable at the whim of certain parties' European imperatives. A peculiar conception of sporting fairness, for which it is difficult to find an equivalent in other major continental competitions."

Lens said the dispute raised wider questions about the status of domestic competition. "Beyond this specific case, the

question raised is a more fundamental one: that of the respect due to the competition itself. For one is entitled to wonder when, on its own turf, the league sometimes seems to be relegated to second place behind other ambitions, however legitimate they may be," the club added.

PSG were granted a similar request this season during their Champions League round-of-16 tie against Chelsea, when their Ligue 1 match against Nantes was postponed, giving them five days off between the two legs.

"Any changes to the fixture list fall exclusively within the remit of the French football authorities, in accordance with the rules in force and the principle of fairness between clubs," a source close to PSG told Reuters. "In this context, PSG and Strasbourg have requested that their match be rescheduled in order to prepare as effectively as possible for this key fixture of their season."

Atletico's Griezmann to join Orlando at end of season

Paris: Antoine Griezmann will leave Atletico Madrid for MLS side Orlando City at the end of the season, the two clubs announced. Atletico's all-time record goalscorer has agreed a two-year deal with Orlando and will become the latest veteran star to move to North America.

"The forward travelled to Orlando, with the club's permission, during the two days of rest granted to the first team, to finalise his contract with the Florida side," Atletico said in a statement.

The 35-year-old Griezmann will be hoping to sign off in style and cap his 10th season as an Atletico player with a second major trophy at the Rojiblanco, after the 2018 Europa League. "Let's leave the future in the future for now: because I'm not leaving yet," he said in an Instagram post. "I have months left with this shirt, months to give my all in this stadium and away, to lift that Copa del Rey and to dream of going as far as possible in the Champions League."



Atletico will face La Liga rivals Barcelona in the Champions League quarter-finals next month and take on Real Sociedad in the Copa del Rey final on April 18 in Seville. Griezmann, who won the 2018 World Cup with France, retired from international football in 2024 after scoring 44 goals in 137 caps for Les Bleus. He has netted 211 times for Atletico, surpassing the previous record of 173 set by Luis Aragonés.

Griezmann joined Atletico in

2014 from Real Sociedad and has made 488 appearances for the club, who he left for Barcelona in 2019 before returning two years later, initially on loan. Griezmann has scored 13 goals in 43 appearances for Diego Simeone's Atletico this season.

The MLS will add Griezmann to the ranks of well-known players to have made the switch from Europe in recent seasons, including his former Barcelona teammates Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez.