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FOOTBALL

Kadioglu fires Turkey past Romania, to brink of World Cup berth

Turkey will face either Slovakia or Kosovo on Tuesday for a ticket to the World Cup

AFP
Istanbul

Turkey kept their hopes of a first World Cup appearance since 2002 alive as Ferdi Kadioglu scored a second-half winner in a 1-0 victory over Romania in their play-off semi-final yesterday.

Vincenzo Montella's Turkey will face either Slovakia or Kosovo, who were meeting late last night, away from home on Tuesday for a ticket to the expanded 48-team finals in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Brighton left-back Kadioglu netted the crucial goal in the 53rd minute and Romania, who last played at the World Cup in 1998, could not find an equaliser in Istanbul despite a late rally.

Turkey, quarter-finalists at Euro 2024, are bidding to reach the showpiece tournament for the first time since finishing third in South Korea and Japan 24 years ago.

The home side dominated the ball early but struggled to break down their hard-working opponents, with a Hakan Calhanoglu free-kick which flew over the crossbar the closest they came to scoring in the opening 45 minutes. Romania captain Ianis Hagi had a shot deflected over as his team looked to hit Turkey on the break.

Turkey took the lead, though, eight minutes into the second half as Arda Guler unlocked the Romania defence with a long, raking pass.

Kadioglu took an excellent first touch before calmly slotting a side-footed volley past onrushing goalkeeper Ionut Radu. Turkey sensed a second goal with the crowd firmly behind them and Juventus winger Kenan Yildiz crashed an excellent strike from outside the box off the top of the bar.

Romania managed to stay in the game, with Radu making a fine diving save to tip away a curling Guler effort. The visitors



Turkey's defender Ferdi Kadioglu celebrates after scoring against Romania during the FIFA World Cup play off European qualification knockout semi-final at Besiktas Park stadium, in Istanbul. (AFP)

almost made Turkey pay for those missed chances, as substitute Nicolae Stanciu curled a shot which bounced off the inside of the post and rolled agonisingly across the face of goal with 11 minutes left. But that was the closest Romania came to forcing extra time as Turkey moved within one match of qualifying for only a second World

Cup in 72 years.

On his pass for the goal and team spirit, Real Madrid midfielder Guler said: "We're very happy, we won a tough match. We want to continue with the second match and go to the World Cup. Ferdi made an incredible run. We talked about it at halftime— he said, 'When Arda gets the ball, I'll make

the run! He really did it. We're very happy. Our only goal is the World Cup. One match left. We want to give everything to go to the World Cup."

Confirming the halftime plan for the goal, Kadioglu said: "We had talked with Arda in the dressing room. When he got the ball, I was going to make that run."

Asian Cup 2027 draw postponed amid Middle East conflict

Kuala Lumpur: Next month's draw for the 2027 Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia has been indefinitely postponed, the continental football body said, amid the war in the Middle East.

No new date was immediately set by the Asian Football Confederation, which has also seen regional club competitions disrupted following the US and Israeli war on Iran.

The draw was supposed to take place on April 11 in Riyadh but has been postponed "after careful consideration to ensure the undisrupted attendance of all stakeholders", the AFC said. It added: "Further updates on the new arrangements for the final draw will be communicated in due course."

The 19th edition of the Asian Cup is scheduled to take place from January 7 to February 5 next year. Riyadh, Jeddah and Al Khobar are the host cities. The 24 teams will be divided into six groups of four. Qatar are the two-time Asian champions.

Meanwhile, following the earlier decision to convert all remaining knockout matches in the West Region to single-leg ties in centralised venues, the Asian Football Confederation confirmed the host Associations for the upcoming club competitions.

Dubai, the United Arab Emirates will provide the setting for the AFC Champions League Two single-leg quarter-finals and semi-finals on April 19 and 22. Meanwhile, the AFC Challenge League single-leg quarter-finals and semi-finals will be held on April 19 and 22 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

PSG's visit to Lens postponed to aid Champions League preparations

Paris: Paris Saint-Germain's crucial Ligue 1 clash with Lens scheduled for April 11 has been postponed until mid-May in order to give them extra rest in between the two legs of their Champions League quarter-final tie against Liverpool, the French league (LFP) announced.

PSG will host Liverpool on April 8 in the first leg and then travel to England for the return at Anfield on April 14. Their trip to Lens has now been pushed back to May 13, in between the last two weekends of the French season.

The decision by the league is a controversial one as Lens had expressed their opposition to the postponement. Lens are currently second in Ligue 1, one point behind PSG with seven games to play. PSG, the reigning European champions, have a game in hand.

"While expressing our disagreement with the unanimous decision taken by...the LFP to postpone the game against Paris Saint-Germain, Lens responsibly take note of it and emphasise our determination to keep pursuing our sporting objectives," the club said, having issued a strongly worded statement earlier in the week.

The LFP have also postponed Strasbourg's scheduled game the same weekend against Brest to May 13 to allow them extra rest in between the two legs of their UEFA Conference League quarter-final against Mainz of Germany.

The league justified the postponements by saying it wanted to do everything to aid French clubs involved in European competitions, thereby helping boost its coefficient and helping Ligue 1 keep four representatives in the Champions League.

SPOTLIGHT

Senegal victims of 'most blatant scam': Federation boss

AFP
Paris

Senegal football boss Abdoulaye Fall labelled the decision to strip the country of its 2025 Africa Cup of Nations title the "most blatant administrative scam in the history of our sport". But "Senegal refuses to accept this as inevitable", the country's football federation (FSF) president added during a press conference held in Paris to introduce the team of lawyers appointed to defend Senegal's "honour" before the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

On Wednesday, the FSF lodged an appeal with the CAS against the Confederation of African Football's (CAF) decision to overturn the result of the AFCON final after several Senegal players had walked off the pitch in protest at a penalty awarded to hosts Morocco, shortly after the west Africans had had a goal disallowed.

The full Senegal team then retook the field, before going on to win 1-0 in extra-time courtesy of a Pape Gueye goal. "It is not only the integrity of African football but the integrity of the world of football that will be judged before the CAS," said Juan de Dios Crespo-Perez, one of the Federation's lawyers and a specialist in sports law and the CAS.

"This is an attack on the federation, football, and sporting discipline," added Seydou Diagne, who heads up the team of lawyers. He outlined Senegal's case before the CAS, arguing that stripping them of their title would amount to "calling into question the referee's decision and brazenly violating



President of Senegalese football federation Abdoulaye Fall (second left) with lawyers Juan de Dios Crespo-Perez and Pierre Olivier Sur during the press conference in Paris yesterday. (Reuters)

Laws 5 and 6 of the game", which pertain to the referee and other match officials.

"After what Morocco has managed to get the CAF to do, whether through surprise or malice, if the CAS allows it to go ahead, the next World Cup will be played out in law firms in Paris or the United States," Diagne said. "There'll be no point in setting up football academies. To get stars on the shirt, you'll need lawyers," he added, referring to the stars that denote a country's victories in a particular tournament.

A third lawyer, Serge Vittoz of Switzerland, explained that proceedings before the Lausanne-based CAS usually last between nine and 12 months. "The idea is to request an expedited procedure. But for this expedited procedure to be put in place, everyone

must agree," he said. "If there is an expedited procedure, we could expect a decision within two months."

For its part, the Senegalese government last week called for an investigation into allegations of corruption within CAF. French lawyer Pierre-Olivier Sur has been tasked with "carrying out the necessary investigations that will one day allow me to tell you, and that day seems very close, that a complaint has been filed", said the former president of the Paris Bar.

In late January, following the chaotic final in Rabat which also featured disturbances in the crowd during the nearly 20-minute break caused by the Senegalese protest, CAF imposed a series of disciplinary sanctions for unsporting behaviour on

both countries' federations, but did not call into question the final result.

However, on March 17, CAF announced that it had upheld an appeal by the Moroccan football federation, saying that Senegal had infringed tournament regulations by walking off. As a result, it declared Senegal to have forfeited the match, turning its 1-0 victory on January 18 into a 3-0 defeat, making hosts Morocco the champions.

According to the group of lawyers, Morocco have not, however, received the medals, the CAF prize money or the trophy, as requested by the North African country. Indeed, Senegal intend to present this same trophy to their supporters on Saturday at the Stade de France during their friendly match against Peru.

CRICKET

Kohli, Suryavanshi to light up IPL as stampede dead remembered

AFP
New Delhi

The IPL roars back into action on Saturday supercharged by India's home T20 World Cup triumph, but with sombre memories of the 11 fans who died in a stampede celebrating Virat Kohli and Royal Challengers Bengaluru's title last season.

The richest league in cricket launches with RCB hosting Sunrisers Hyderabad at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, where June's title party turned to tragedy a day after Bengaluru's first IPL crown. Eleven supporters aged between 14 and 29 died outside the stadium in a crush.

The club, sold on Tuesday for nearly \$1.8bn to an Indian-US consortium, will leave 11 seats permanently empty at the sta-

dium while players will wear black armbands. Kohli, who has retired from Tests and T20 internationals, guided RCB to their maiden title on the 18th attempt and shows no sign of slowing down aged 37.

"He will be hungrier than ever, especially after lifting the IPL trophy last season," former India pace bowler Irfan Pathan told host broadcaster JioHotstar. "He will have the same kind of passion when he comes back this season. He will want to lift the trophy once again."

The spotlight will also be on teenage batting sensation Vaibhav Suryavanshi.

Suryavanshi, who turns 15 today, will open the batting for Rajasthan Royals this season.

The prodigy starred for India in their U19 World Cup win in Harare last month, smashing a record-breaking 175 off 80 balls in the final against England.

'Go hit, don't worry'
Suryavanshi burst onto the IPL scene last year as a 14-year-old, hitting a six off the first ball he faced on his debut.

A few days later he romped to a 35-ball century, the second fastest in IPL history. The Royals and fellow opener Yashasvi Jaiswal are keen to shield Suryavanshi from the glare of publicity.

"There will be hype and pressure naturally," said captain Riyan Parag.

"Jaiswal is more than capable of handling that. For Vaibhav, the role will be just to go, hit, and not to worry."

India's T20 World Cup win produced new heroes, including opener-wicketkeeper Sanju Samson and all-rounder Shivam Dube, who are both with five-time winners Chennai Super Kings (CSK).

Samson, named player of the World Cup after his 321 runs in In-

dia's last three matches propelled them to the title, begins his first season with Chennai.

Two-time World Cup-winning captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni, 44, will continue to defy age in CSK's yellow, batting at number seven under skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad.

Some overseas stars will miss the start, including Australia's pace trio Pat Cummins (Hyderabad), Mitchell Starc (Delhi) and Josh Hazlewood (RCB) because of fitness concerns and workload management.

England's Ben Duckett (Delhi) has withdrawn to focus on international cricket, leaving him facing a potential two-season IPL ban.

The final is scheduled for May 31, but only the fixtures for the first two weeks have been announced because of elections in several Indian states.



Royal Challengers Bengaluru batsman Virat Kohli

PAKISTAN SUPER LEAGUE

Qalandars thrash Kingsmen to start campaign in style

'Fakhar and Naeem were excellent in the powerplay with the batting'

Agencies
Lahore

Lahore Qalandars launched their Pakistan Super League (PSL) title defence in style with a commanding 69-run win over Hyderabad Kingsmen at Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore yesterday.

Powered by a fluent 53 from Fakhar Zaman and a late blitz, Qalandars posted a formidable 199 for 6 after being asked to bat. Fakhar struck 10 boundaries in his 39-ball knock, while Mohammad Naeem provided early momentum with a brisk 30.

The innings gained further impetus through Sikandar Raza, who smashed 24 off just 10 balls, and a stunning finish by skipper Shaheen Shah Afridi, whose unbeaten 12 off two deliveries lifted the total to the brink of 200. Haseebullah Khan also played a steady unbeaten hand of 40.

In reply, Kingsmen never found momentum and were bowled out for 130 in 20 overs. Saim Ayub (17) and Marnus Labuschagne (26) showed brief resistance, but regular wickets derailed the chase.

Qalandars' bowling attack shared the spoils, with Ubaid Shah, Raza and Haris Rauf picking up two wickets each.

Mustafizur Rahman also impressed with an economical spell, taking a wicket while conceding 19 runs from four overs. Zaman was named Man of the Match.

"To be honest, I wasn't at my best and the wicket wasn't easy to bat on. I was lucky to score those runs and the bowlers were excellent. I was talking to Naeem, the message sent to the dressing room was that the wicket wasn't easy. We needed wickets in hand



Lahore Qalandars' Fakhar Zaman plays a shot during the Pakistan Super League match against Hyderabad Kingsmen at Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

to score big in the death overs. Naeem made it easy for me - the plan was simple - he would take the attack to the bowlers and I wait for the bad balls. he's a special talent and I enjoyed batting with him," said Zaman.

Qalandars captain Shaheen Afridi was happy with his team's opening win.

"We enjoyed it, we've been together for the last week and have had good game time. Fakhar and

Naeem were excellent in the powerplay with the batting. We struggled a bit in the middle overs, but this is just the start of a tournament and we have plenty of firepower," said Afridi.

"Mustafizur and I started at the same time for the Qalandars and we're back together. Rauf has been good for us - we've made changes to the playing XI at times and it's worked. That's my job, when I'm batting, I try to build momentum

for the team. We wanted to take wickets and build the pressure," he said. Quetta Gladiators will take on Karachi Kings at the same venue today.

BRIEF SCORES
Lahore Qalandars 199 for 6 (Fakhar 53, Haseebullah 40, Hassan 2-30) **beat Hyderabad Kingsmen 130** (Labuschagne 26, Rauf 2-22, Ubaid 2-27, Raza 2-27) **by 69 runs.**

SPOTLIGHT

India to end home season with five Australia Tests

AFP
New Delhi

India will host Australia in a high-profile five-Test series starting January next year to end the 2026/27 home season, the country's cricket board announced yesterday.

"The season will culminate with the prestigious and much-anticipated Border-Gavaskar Trophy, featuring a five-match Test series against Australia, beginning on January 21, 2027, in Nagpur," the Board of Control for Cricket in India said.

"The contest will then move to Chennai, Guwahati, Ranchi and Ahmedabad," the board said. India suffered a 2-0 Test whitewash against South Africa at home last year and are placed sixth in the World Test Championship table led by Australia.

India's home season will begin with a white-ball series including three one-day matches and five T20 internationals against the West Indies starting September 27.

The cricketing powerhouse will host Sri Lanka in December 2026 for a white-ball series including three ODI and three T20I matches. Zimbabwe will be in India for three 50-over matches in January.

India home fixtures 2026/27:

- West Indies in India:**
- September 27:** 1st ODI, Thiruvananthapuram
- September 30:** 2nd ODI, Guwahati
- October 3:** 3rd ODI, New Chandigarh
- October 6:** 1st T20I, Lucknow
- October 9:** 2nd T20I, Ranchi
- October 11:** 3rd T20I, Indore
- October 14:** 4th T20I, Hyderabad
- October 17:** 5th T20I, Bengaluru
- Sri Lanka in India:**
- December 13:** 1st ODI, New Delhi
- December 16:** 2nd ODI, Bengaluru
- December 19:** 3rd ODI, Ahmedabad
- December 22:** 1st T20I, Rajkot
- December 24:** 2nd T20I, Cuttack
- December 27:** 3rd T20I, Pune
- Zimbabwe in India:**
- January 3:** 1st ODI, Kolkata
- January 6:** 2nd ODI, Hyderabad
- January 9:** 3rd ODI, Mumbai
- Australia in India:**
- January 21-25:** 1st Test, Nagpur
- January 29-February 2:** 2nd Test, Chennai
- February 11-15:** 3rd Test, Guwahati
- February 19-23:** 4th Test, Ranchi
- February 27-March 3:** 5th Test, Ahmedabad

Former badminton Olympic gold winner Marin retires due to injury

Spanish Olympic badminton gold medal winner Carolina Marin retired from the sport yesterday after a long struggle with a knee injury. The 32-year-old won gold in the women's singles at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games, and remains the only player from a non-Asian country to do so. Three-time world champion Marin had hoped to compete in the European Championships in April in Huelva, her home city in Andalucia, but did not want to risk further damaging her knee. At the Paris Olympics in 2024 she reached the semi-finals but suffered a knee ligament injury during the match which forced her to withdraw, having already missed the 2020 Tokyo Olympics with another knee injury. "My journey in professional badminton has come to an end," said Marin in a post on Instagram. "I would have liked to see each other on court one last time, but I don't want to put my body at risk for it... "I wish my career had ended another way but in life things don't always go as we want and we have to accept that. "Deep down I did retire on court, in Paris in 2024, we just didn't know it at the time." As well as winning gold by overcoming India's PV Sindhu in the Rio final, the tenacious Marin triumphed three times at the World Championships, in 2014, 2015 and 2018.

CYCLING

Vernon wins wind-hit Tour of Catalonia stage, Pidcock climbs to second

AFP
Camprodon, Spain

British sprinter Ethan Vernon won stage four of the Tour of Catalonia yesterday after a high wind warning in the mountains caused a hasty switch from a summit finish to a flat one. Overall leader Dorian Godon of Ineos was outpaced to second place on the day, protecting his GC advantage, while Tom Pidcock was third and climbed to second overall.

"There was a massive headwind," Pidcock said. "So it wasn't as easy as all that. But third is good, a few bonus seconds, but it doesn't really matter does it?"

Organisers scrapped the planned summit finish to Vallter 2000 because of an extreme wind warning, with riders instead trun-

dling to the town of Camprodon for a bunch sprint. "This is a special race for me, I had my first pro win here and our sponsor is also based here," said Vernon.

"The change calmed everything down, we knew last night and made the plan to come out of the last roundabout in first place and then go for it."

Stage four should have been the first of three Pyrenees stages and two-time Tour de France champion Jonas Vingegaard and his rivals for the title will be doubly focused today and tomorrow. The final stage takes in seven circuits of Montjuic in Barcelona where the Tour de France starts in July.

Ethan Vernon celebrates winning the 4th stage of the Tour of Catalonia in Camprodon yesterday. (AFP)



MOTORSPORT

More committed to F1 than ever at 41, says Hamilton

'I DEDICATE ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING I HAVE TO THIS CHALLENGE'

AFP
Suzuka, Japan

Rejuvenated Lewis Hamilton said yesterday that he was more committed to Formula One "than ever" aged 41 and believes he trains harder than any other driver.

The seven-time world champion has made a strong start to the season with Ferrari and is fourth in the championship after two races, 18 points behind leader George Russell of Mercedes.

Hamilton finished third in China to claim a podium place for the first time since joining Ferrari ahead of the 2025 season, and he said he had been putting in the hard yards ahead of this week's Japanese Grand Prix.

"I was in Tokyo between this race and the last race, I've run like 100 kilometres," the Briton said.

"I know that none of the drivers I'm racing against have trained as hard as I am and giving it what I am, especially at my age.

"I love that, that I still have that drive to push myself," he added.

Hamilton boasted that he was returning to his hotel after a morning run just as other drivers were getting up.

"The commitment is there, more than ever," he said.

"I dedicate absolutely everything I have to this challenge."

Hamilton endured a nightmare first season with Ferrari last year, finishing sixth in the championship and suffering the indignity of becoming the first driver to be eliminated from Q1 at three consecutive grands prix.

His fortunes have changed markedly with new regulations and car designs this season, which have produced noticeably more overtaking in races than in recent years. Hamilton got the better of team-mate Charles Leclerc after a titanic tussle in Shanghai and he said he found battling drivers "much more fun".

"That's how racing should be," he said. "It should be back and forth, it shouldn't be one move is done and then that's it."



Ferrari's British driver Lewis Hamilton speaks to the media yesterday, ahead of the Formula One Japanese Grand Prix at the Suzuka circuit in Suzuka. (AFP)



McLaren's Lando Norris during a press conference yesterday. (Reuters)

NORRIS TALKS UP MCLAREN CHANCES AFTER DOUBLE CHINA DISASTER

Formula One world champion Lando Norris said yesterday he was confident he could still get into title contention after a disastrous start to the season, starting this week in Japan.

The McLaren driver is 36 points

behind championship leader George Russell of Mercedes after two grands prix and arrives in Suzuka after an embarrassing non-start in China.

Norris and McLaren have struggled to get to grips with sweeping new regulations, but he said the car had "a lot of potential" as he targets a positive result in Japan.

"What we are thinking of is getting on the podium first of all and then returning to winning races," said the Briton.

"The points then take care of themselves and we'll see what we can claw back, and we're confident in that.

"I have a good belief in the team and I think we can have the best car this year," he added.

Norris finished fifth in the season-opener in Australia and fourth in the sprint in China, but did not even make the grid for the grand prix in Shanghai.

Team-mate Oscar Piastri also did not start as both cars suffered separate technical issues.

Norris said McLaren now understood what the problems were but admitted that the double failure "hurt us as a team".

"What hurt most was the fact it was out of our control," he said.

"But we've worked hard to figure things out, to understand how it happened, why it happened, and of course we'll do everything we can to make sure it doesn't happen again."

FOCUS

'Get out': Verstappen bans reporter from press conference

AFP
Suzuka, Japan

Max Verstappen sparked a verbal confrontation ahead of the Japanese Grand Prix yesterday when he refused to start his press conference until a British journalist left the room.

The Red Bull star sat down to speak to reporters at the team's hospitality suite in Suzuka, but then said, "I'm not speaking before he's leaving", and gestured at Giles Richards, a journalist from the Guardian newspaper.

Richards asked Verstappen if his demand was because of a question he had asked the driver last season, to which the four-time world champion replied "yes" and told him to "get out".

He left and Verstappen continued with the press conference.

Richards later told AFP that the incident stemmed from a question he had asked Verstappen after the Dutchman missed out on a fifth world title to Lando Norris, by two points, at the Abu

Dhabi Grand Prix in December.

The question centred on the impact of a penalty that Verstappen had picked up for ramming Mercedes driver George Russell at the Spanish Grand Prix in June.

Richards subsequently wrote in the Guardian that he was "deeply disappointed" to have been ejected from the news conference.

"In more than a decade of covering the sport I have interviewed Verstappen perhaps a dozen times, all of them friendly and good humoured," he said.

"His outstanding talent garnered praise and admiration in those articles, criticism by contrast has been minimal and only when warranted."

Richards insisted that reporting as honestly and fairly as possible was his "single overarching aim".

"I still admire Verstappen and I hope we can enjoy a better relationship going forward," he said.

"Sometimes, difficult, awkward questions have to be asked. That's the job that comes with the privilege."



Red Bull's Max Verstappen signs his autograph in Japanese calligraphy for fans yesterday. (Reuters)

FIA introduces energy management tweaks for Japan qualifying

Formula One's governing body yesterday said it was tweaking its energy management rules for the Japanese Grand Prix qualifying to allow drivers to push harder.

The maximum energy teams will be allowed to harvest from their hybrid power units to recharge their batteries during Saturday's grid-deciding session will be reduced to 8 megajoules (MJ) from 9 MJ, the International Automobile Federation (FIA) said in a statement. The change, agreed following unanimous support of the sport's power unit manufacturers, means drivers will be able to push more and focus less on recovering energy. Speaking to reporters at the Suzuka circuit yesterday, they said they would only know how much of a difference it would make once they had driven their cars. "I think it will eliminate some things and it will shift around some other bits," said McLaren's reigning world champion Lando Norris. "It's not like it's going to change the whole world. Honestly, I need to go and drive on track first and understand it," he added.

ATHLETICS

Sprint star Gout 'ready to rock and roll' in Melbourne

AFP
Melbourne

Australian sprint sensation Gout Gout said yesterday he was "ready to rock and roll" as the teenager targets a lightning-fast 200m time in Melbourne this weekend.

The 18-year-old burst on the scene in 2024 when he clocked 20.04 seconds at the Australian All Schools Athletics Championships.

It shattered Peter Norman's national record of 20.06 from the 1968 Olympics and was the quickest time ever by a 16-year-old. It earned him comparisons to Usain Bolt and he has since run 20.02.

In his debut world championships at Tokyo last year, Gout crashed out in the semi-finals.

He gets another chance to showcase his ability at the World Continental Tour Gold-level Maurie Plant meet tomorrow.

It will be a rematch with compatriot Lachlan Kennedy. Kennedy upset Gout to win a pulsating 200m at the same event last year in 20.26. The race this time also features Irish sub-20 second man Benjamin Richardson. "I'm all clear, all healthy, I'm ready to rock and roll on Saturday," said Gout, who was troubled with a head cold earlier this month.

"I mean, the sprint is always



the sprint, you have to run as fast as you can. Knowing Lachie, he is such a great starter.

"I know I have to work hard from the beginning."

Gout, who was born in Australia after his parents migrated from South Sudan, has attracted global attention since hitting the headlines two years ago.

He has now finished school and expects to have more time to train to truly fulfil his potential.

"Training is definitely going to be a lot more professional in a way, knowing that I can train a lot more efficiently," he said.

"(I can) get a lot more reps and get in the gym a bit more. That's definitely going to be a major factor."

Other notable athletes in Melbourne include Olympic pole vault champion Nina Kennedy and British Olympic 1500m bronze medallist Georgia Hunter Bell.

TENNIS

Sinner rips Tiafoe to reach semis

AFP
Miami

Jannik Sinner dominated Frances Tiafoe for a 6-2, 6-2 victory yesterday to reach the semi-finals of the ATP and WTA Miami Open.

The world number two from Italy, a four-time Grand Slam champion, cruised over the 19th-seeded American in one hour and 11 minutes at Hard Rock Stadium, home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

Sinner, hoping to complete a "Sunshine Double" with March titles at Miami and Indian Wells, stretched his ATP Masters 1000 set win streak to 30, having not dropped a set at the level since last October in Shanghai.

Sinner advanced to a semi-final against the winner of a later match between world number four Alexander Zverev of Germany and 19th-ranked Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina.

Tiafoe netted a backhand to surrender a break to Sinner in the opening game of the match and the American swatted a forehand long in the fifth game to hand Sinner a 4-1 edge. The Italian held twice to take the set in 31 minutes, Sinner losing only four points on his serve in the set.

In the second set, Tiafoe saved a break point and held serve in the opening game but Sinner broke in the third for a 2-1 lead when the American netted a forehand.

Sinner broke again, this time at love for a 5-2 lead when Tiafoe smacked a forehand wide, and held to take the match, improving to 5-1 all-time against Tiafoe.



Jannik Sinner of Italy plays a forehand shot against Frances Tiafoe of the United States during their Miami Open quarterfinal yesterday. (AFP)

Sinner fired 33 winners against 15 unforced errors.

In later women's semi-finals, world number one Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus faces second-ranked Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan and US fourth seed Coco Gauff meets Czech 13th seed Carolina Muchova.

Rybakina beat Sabalenka in January's Australian Open final and their rematch will be the first time outside the WTA Finals that the world's two top-ranked players meet before a final since Martina

Hingis and Jana Novotna in the 1998 US Open semifinals.

Defending champion Sabalenka hopes to complete the "Sunshine Double" with March titles at Miami and Indian Wells, where she defeated Rybakina in the final.

Sabalenka leads Rybakina 9-7 in their all-time rivalry.

Rybakina, who seeks her 100th match victory at the Masters 1000 level, was the Miami runner-up in 2023 and 2024 but has yet to lift the trophy.

Gauff is 5-0 in career meet-

ings with Muchova, most recently winning in the round of 16 at the Australian Open.

Gauff, the reigning French Open champion and 2023 US Open winner, seeks her sixth WTA Masters 1000 final and at 22 would be the third-youngest to achieve the feat behind Caroline Wozniacki and Iga Swiatek.

Muchova, the 2023 French Open runner-up, seeks her eighth career WTA final and third title after 2019 in Seoul and last month in Qatar.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar Basketball Cup draw promises competitive matches

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Basketball Federation (QBF) conducted the draw for the 13th edition of the Qatar Men's Basketball Cup during a press conference at its headquarters in Al Gharafa. The tournament will be played in a knock-out format through to the final, setting up a series of competitive matchups among participating teams.

Quarterfinal action begins on April 8, with Al Sadd facing Al Ahli at 7pm, followed by Al Rayyan taking on Al Khor at 9pm at Al Rayyan Club Hall. On April 9, Al Wakrah will meet Qatar Club at 6pm, while Al Gharafa face Al Shamal at 8pm at Al Gharafa Hall. Al Arabi will await the winner of the Al Sadd vs Al Ahli clash in a playoff match scheduled for April 11 to determine the final semifinalist. The



FROM LEFT: Qatar Basketball Federation Secretary-General Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari, Assistant Secretary-General Ahmed Yousef al-Darwish and Technical Secretary Essam Lotfi address a press conference.

semifinals will be held on April 13, with the winners advancing to the final on April 16, when the champion of the 13th edition will be crowned.

QBF Secretary-General Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari said the early announcement of the schedule reflects the federation's commitment to proper planning and organisa-

tion. Assistant Secretary-General Ahmed Yousef al-Darwish noted that the knock-out format ensures equal opportunities for all teams and maintains competitive balance throughout the tournament.

Historically, Al Gharafa and Al Arabi hold the record for most Qatar Cup titles with four each, while Al Rayyan, Al Wakrah and Al Sadd have each won the competition once.

QBF UNVEILS NEW LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIP SHIELD

QBF has unveiled the new design of the Basketball League championship shield as part of efforts to enhance the league's identity and reflect the continued development of the sport in the country. The new shield and medals were revealed during a press conference attended by federation officials and representatives of the nine participating clubs. The announcement comes as the league season reaches

the playoff stage, with Al Rayyan set to face Al Ahli and Al Arabi meeting Al Sadd in the semifinals.

QBF Secretary-General Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari said the new design forms part of a broader strategy to modernise local competitions and strengthen the competitive environment. Assistant Secretary-General Ahmed Yousef al-Darwish added that the updated shield combines the league's history with a modern identity suited to the current stage of development. This season marks the 45th edition of the Basketball League since its launch in the 1981-1982 season, when Al Arabi were crowned the inaugural champions.

Al Rayyan remain the most successful club in league history with 18 titles, followed by Al Arabi with 10 and Qatar Club with seven. Al Sadd, Al Gharafa, Al Shamal and former side Al Jaish have each won two titles, while Al Ahli lifted their only championship in the 2000-2001 season.

FOOTBALL

Germany bank on team spirit to end World Cup woes

Germans have made group stage exits at 2018 and 2022 World Cups

AFP
Berlin

Germany's collective strength will be key to their World Cup chances later this year, coach Julian Nagelsmann said ahead of the four-time world champions' international friendlies in the coming week.

Germany were long known as a 'Tourniermannschaft', or tournament team, due to decades of success on the biggest stages. The term recognised Germany's history of performing at major tournaments regardless of form or individual quality, but took a hit with group stage exits at the 2018 and 2022 World Cups.

And while they may have some talented individuals, Germany probably do not have a squad to match those of England, Spain or France. "If you have the best squad in the world, you can just play your game," said Nagelsmann, whose team play Switzerland in Basel today and then host Ghana in Stuttgart on Monday. "We have a very, very good squad, but we didn't have the best squad in the world at the Euros in 2024 or last year. We need to achieve a level of variability where we can help a very, very good squad deliver a very, very good performance."

At the heart of Nagelsmann's squad for the two upcoming friendlies are seven Bayern Munich players - the most he has selected from the German giants for an international squad. Bayern midfielder Jamal Musiala would have been the eighth but was left out to continue his injury recovery.

Since taking over in 2023, Nagelsmann has picked on form rather than reputation and has spoken about the need to pick a coherent team built on players who are willing to work hard, rather than the best individuals. In recent squads, this has meant a heavy reliance on players from 2023-24 double winners Bayer Leverkusen or German cup holders Stuttgart.

With Bayern back to their best this season - having won 36 and lost just two of 42 games played in all competitions - it is no surprise to see so many players in this squad. One of those



Germany's head coach Julian Nagelsmann (centre) look on as midfielders Leon Goretzka (left) and Joshua Kimmich train in Herzogenaurach, southern Germany. (AFP)

is Germany captain Joshua Kimmich. "It helps the national team when many Bayern players are on the pitch, because we're a well-oiled machine and we train together every day," he said. "We have certain automatisms."

Germany's Bayern core is complemented by a Premier League attacking trident of Kai Havertz, Florian Wirtz and Nick Woltemade, along with in-form Stuttgart striker Deniz Undav, who has 18 goals in 23 Bundesliga games this season.

Often deployed by Nagelsmann as a forward, Havertz embodies the type of flexibility the coach is looking for. Speaking on Wednesday, Havertz said that he was happy to play

wherever he was needed. "I feel very comfortable in all attacking roles. I'm a very versatile player. I've played in various positions for the national team and Arsenal," Havertz told reporters.

Praising the atmosphere in camp, Havertz said that Germany would use the March friendlies to put the finishing touches on what is already a strong collective.

"(Team spirit) is obviously the most important element - no team can function without cohesion," he said. "We're on the right track there. That's extremely important at a World Cup... I'm very confident the World Cup will be a success."

Man City's Rodri keeps door open to Real Madrid move

Madrid: Manchester City midfielder Rodri has kept the door open to a possible move to Real Madrid as he enters the final year of his contract with the Premier League club, saying he cannot turn down the world's top teams and that a return to La Liga would appeal to him.

The 29-year-old Madrid native began his senior career at Villarreal before signing for Atletico Madrid in 2018. He moved to City a year later and has since enjoyed a highly successful spell in England, winning the Champions League once and four Premier League titles among a host of major honours.

"Would I like to play in Spain again, in La Liga, in Madrid? I'd like to return, yes, obviously," Rodri told Onda Cero's Radioestadio Noche programme ahead of Spain's friendly against Serbia today. "I have a year left on my contract; there will come a point when we'll have to sit down and talk."

Rodri, who is working his way back to top form after rupturing his anterior cruciate ligament in 2024, said having played for Atletico would not prevent him from making a move to their city rivals. Former Atletico players to have made that switch include goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois and forward Alvaro Morata. "There are other players who have gone down that path - not straight away, but in time. You can't turn down the best clubs in the world," Rodri added.

Rodri also played down any suggestion of rivalry with Vinicius Jr after Real boycotted the 2024 Ballon d'Or ceremony, when the City midfielder won the award ahead of the Brazilian winger. "I think they wanted to pit Vinicius and me against each other, but not at all," Rodri said. "I have great respect for him and for everything he did that year too. In the end, it's other people - third parties - who decide who wins the Ballon d'Or."

World Cup concerns are exaggerated, says FIFA vice-president

Atlanta: Widespread political and security concerns surrounding the upcoming World Cup are nothing new and will be forgotten once the first ball is kicked, FIFA vice-president Victor Montagliani said Wednesday.

This summer's football tournament is being hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada, and the buildup has been complicated by the war in the Middle East, President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown and gang violence in Mexico, among other factors.

Iran has said it will not play its scheduled fixtures in the US after Trump warned Iranian players would be at risk, while travelling fans from various countries have voiced difficulties over obtaining visas and fears of being targeted by immigration agents.

But Montagliani, who heads football's North and Central American and Caribbean confederation CONCACAF, said the concerns were no different to those that preceded previous editions. "The reality of the World Cup - every World Cup FIFA has put on - there's always been geopolitical issues. Always," he told

the Business of Football conference in Atlanta. "Go back to '78, Argentina, the junta and all that stuff," he added, referring to the edition that took place during the South American country's brutal military dictatorship.

Rights groups say around 30,000 people died or disappeared under the dictatorship, one of Latin America's bloodiest. "Right now it's just magnified because everything else in the world is magnified, whether it's social media, or whether it's how the media reports things," said Montagliani. "But it doesn't change our job... It's a reality of doing business. We deal with it. We will deal with it. And at the end of the day, like every other World Cup, on June 11, when the ball starts rolling, somehow everybody forgets about everything else and starts worrying about the game," he added.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino has come under scrutiny for his close relationship with Trump, which has included attending a Gaza peace summit brokered by the US president. Infantino awarded Trump a newly created FIFA Peace Prize at the World Cup draw ceremony in December.

FOCUS

No more excuses: World Cup pressure is on for host USA

AFP
Austin

The last time the United States hosted the World Cup, Bill Clinton was in the White House, Nirvana was on the radio, and most Americans couldn't name a single player on their national team.

Thirty-two years later, the tournament is back - co-hosted with Mexico and Canada - and so is the question that has haunted American football ever since: is this finally the moment the sport breaks through? The short answer, according to nearly everyone inside the game, is: it had better be.

"We can no longer have low expectations," said Alexi Lalas, the red-bearded defender who became one of the unlikely faces of the 1994 tournament and is now a TV commentator. "The opportunities and the infrastructure we've built since 1994 have gone into producing better football players - anything less than the round of 16 is ultimately a failure."

The USA take the next step towards the World Cup when they face Belgium in a friendly tomorrow. Speaking at the South



The USA take the next step towards the World Cup when they face Belgium tomorrow.

by Southwest conference in Austin, players, executives and broadcasters painted a picture of a sport at an inflection point.

Much has changed in three decades. When FIFA awarded the 1994 World Cup to the United States, it came with a condition: the Americans had to establish a top-tier professional league. It was, at the

time, a leap of faith. That faith has been rewarded - slowly, and then all at once. Major League Soccer has attracted superstars like Lionel Messi and has better average attendance than many leagues in Europe.

"It's actually the third most popular sport in the US - it beats baseball," said Bettina Garibaldi, Chief Marketing and

Communications Officer for the FIFA World Cup 26 New York New Jersey Host Committee. "That officially came out as of January. So you can see how much the sport, in and of itself, is growing."

In the decades since the 1994 finals, US football fans have begun to show a keen interest in the game around the world.

Premier League side Manchester City's club's ownership of New York City FC means that fan conversion - from casual World Cup viewer to committed supporter - has direct commercial stakes.

The 1994 World Cup did something that no marketing campaign could have engineered: it made Americans care, at least briefly, about a sport their country had long ignored. Packed stadiums carried a shock of excitement that reverberated through youth programs for years afterward. Five years later, the women's team delivered something more lasting. The 1999 Women's World Cup, played on home soil and culminating in Brandi Chastain's iconic penalty-kick celebration, proved that football could capture a nation's imagination.

But enthusiasm and expectation only go so far. Former US player Jozy Altidore is clear-eyed about what still needs to

change. "Academies abroad are by far more robust," he said. "It's almost like a factory - Messi leaves Barcelona, here comes (Lamine) Yamal. It's not an accident."

Building that kind of pipeline in the United States requires more than money. Altidore said the key was building environments that challenged players rather than coddled them. "That's the only way to find out what makes you a special player."

He argued that real infrastructure means grassroots investment, not just elite facilities. "It's more than just football balls and cleats. It's everything attached to it."

Stu Holden, the former midfielder turned broadcaster, said expectations have legitimately shifted. "We've invested so much more in the game, and our expectations should not be that of the past," he said. "It's based in realism now that we should expect this group can get to a fourth and final."

Carli Lloyd, the two-time World Cup winner who knows better than most what a tournament on home soil can mean, frames the stakes differently. "The measure of success with this team... is going to be how much they inspire the country. That is the power that they have - and that is in their control."