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FOOTBALL

Italy stay in World Cup hunt as Wales, Ireland suffer heartbreak

Sweden will play Poland in Stockholm for one of four remaining European tickets

AFP
Paris

Italy will face Bosnia and Herzegovina for a place at the 2026 World Cup after beating Northern Ireland 2-0 on Thursday, as Wales and the Republic of Ireland suffered agonising penalty shootout defeats in their qualifying play-off semi-finals.

Sandro Tonali and Moise Kean struck second-half goals in Bergamo to keep four-time World Cup winners Italy on track to end a 12-year absence from the tournament. Italy missed the last two editions in Russia and Qatar but Tonali's powerful drive and an excellent finish from Kean nudged Genaro Gattuso's team a step closer to a return to international football's biggest stage.

"We had to work hard because it was not easy tonight," said Gattuso. "We knew this game would be tough, all we can do now is try to recharge the batteries."

Italy will take on Bosnia in Zenica next Tuesday. A late header from 40-year-old Edin Dzeko cancelled out Dan James' superb opener for Wales and forced extra time in Cardiff, where Bosnia scraped through 4-2 on penalties after a 1-1 draw.

"We're lost for words. We prepared as well as we could have and I thought we played well," Wales captain Ethan Ampadu said. "We can hold our heads up high because we fought for everything, sometimes in life things don't go your way."

Viktor Gyokeres scored a hat-trick in Sweden's 3-1 win over Ukraine. Arsenal striker Gyokeres netted his first goals of the qualifying campaign to lead Sweden to the brink of the finals, despite a dismal group stage in which they picked up just two points in six matches.

Sweden got another chance as a result of their UEFA Nations League performances and Gyokeres turned in from close range early on against Ukraine, unable to play at home because of the war with Russia and instead having to move the tie to neutral ground in Valencia, Spain.

Gyokeres tucked away his second six minutes after the break and converted a penalty to complete his treble and seal vic-



Italy's Sandro Tonali celebrates after scoring against Northern Ireland at the Gewiss stadium in Bergamo, Italy, on Thursday. (AFP)

tory for Graham Potter's team, with Matvii Ponomarenko grabbing a late consolation for Ukraine.

Sweden will play Poland in Stockholm for one of four remaining European tickets to the World Cup. Robert Lewandowski helped Poland come from behind to scrape past Albania 2-1 after Arber Hoxha gave the visitors the lead in Warsaw.

Lewandowski headed in from a corner to bring Poland level with his 89th goal for his country before Piotr Zielinski grabbed the winner.

Czech Republic goalkeeper Matej Kovar saved two penalties in a shootout to steer his team past Ireland in Prague. Ireland looked well placed for a first trip to the World Cup since 2002 as Troy Parrott's penalty and own goal by Kovar put them 2-0 ahead.

Patrik Schick pulled a goal back from the spot and Ladislav Krejci powered in a header on 86 minutes to level at 2-2 and send the semi-final to extra time. Finn Azaz and Alan Browne both missed in the shootout as the Czechs lined up a showdown at home to a rampant Denmark.

"Just pain. We all feel pain. When you go this far it's a flip of a coin. Just pain we feel being that close," Ireland boss Heimir Hallgrimsson said.

The Danes eased to a 4-0 victory over North Macedonia in Copenhagen with all the goals coming in the second half. Mikkel Damsgaard broke the deadlock and Gustav Isaksen scored twice in as many minutes before Christian Norgaard added a fourth.

Kosovo are on the brink of a first appearance at any major tournament following

a wild 4-3 win away to Slovakia. Slovakia twice led in Bratislava through goals from Martin Valjent and Lukas Haraslin, but Kosovo fought back with efforts from Veldin Hodza and Pismik Asllani.

Kosovo, who were only admitted to UEFA and FIFA competitions a decade ago, then went in front courtesy of Florent Muslija and got another goal from Kreshnik Hajrizi. David Strelec's stoppage-time strike wasn't enough to deny Kosovo, who will host Turkey for the right to go to the World Cup.

Ferdi Kadioglu scored a second-half winner for Turkey in a 1-0 victory over Romania in their play-off semi-final in Istanbul.

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.

Diamond League athletics meet in Doha still slated for May 8: Organisers

Paris: The opening meet of the Diamond League season in the Qatari capital of Doha is scheduled to go ahead as planned on May 8 despite the war in the Middle East, organisers of the elite athletics circuit said.

"The Diamond League continues to monitor the situation in Doha, working in close coordination with meeting organisers, the Qatar Athletics Federation, the relevant authorities in Qatar and World Athletics," they said in a statement. "The safety of athletes and spectators is our primary concern, and we are also exploring alternative options with all stakeholders. A final decision will be made no later than a month before the scheduled date."

The Diamond League is the elite one-day meeting series in track and field, Doha opening a season that features 14 other meets in 13 different countries across four different continents.

Several major sporting events in the Middle East have been postponed or cancelled because of the war the United States and Israel launched on Iran, including the Formula One Grands Prix in Bahrain and Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia. Both were scheduled for mid-April and have been cancelled.

In football, the Finalissima, which was to pit European champions Spain against Copa America winners Argentina on March 27 in Qatar, has also been cancelled.

The Qatar MotoGP, initially scheduled for the weekend of April 12, has been postponed to November 8, while a gymnastics World Cup event scheduled to take place in Doha in April was also cancelled. However, today's horse racing meeting in Dubai, carrying prize money of \$30.5mn and featuring the Dubai World Cup, is going ahead.

Al Wakrah appoint Sierra as head coach



Doha: Al Wakrah have announced the appointment of Chile's Jose Luis Sierra as head coach, succeeding Spaniard Vicente Moreno, who recently departed to take charge of Al Rayyan. The club did not disclose the duration of Sierra's deal. The 57-year-old began his coaching career in 2010 with Chilean side Union Espanola, where he remained until 2015 before moving to Colo-Colo for a one-season spell.

Sierra then embarked on his first experience in the Gulf region, taking charge of Saudi club Al Ittihad from 2016 to 2018, guiding them to both the Crown Prince Cup and King Cup titles. He later coached UAE side Al Ahli's youth team for one season before returning to Al Ittihad for another stint.

The Chilean tactician subsequently managed Palestino during the 2020-2021 season.

Most recently, Sierra coached Saudi club Al Ta'ee in the 2021-2022 season before leading compatriot side Al Wahda from 2022 to 2025. Al Wakrah currently sit eighth in the Qatar Stars League standings with 23 points from 19 matches this season.

SPOTLIGHT

Bolivia, Jamaica close in on World Cup after playoff wins

AFP
Monterrey, Mexico

Bolivia and Jamaica moved to within one win of returning to the World Cup after decades-long absences on Thursday after securing opening victories in FIFA's intercontinental playoff tournament in Mexico.

Bolivia, chasing their first World Cup appearance since the 1994 finals in the United States, came from behind to defeat Suriname 2-1 in Monterrey. The South Americans' victory sends them into a winner-takes-all playoff against Iraq next Tuesday, with the victor advancing to a World Cup group of death alongside France, Norway and Senegal.

Jamaica, who are aiming to qualify for the World Cup for only the second time in history following a lone appearance at the 1998 finals in France, defeated New Caledonia 1-0 in Thursday's other game in Guadalajara. The Reggae Boyz will now play the Democratic Republic of Congo next Tuesday for the right to a berth in World Cup K alongside Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal, Colombia and Uzbekistan.

Jamaica, whose squad is drawn largely from the lower divisions of English football, will head into their clash with Congo knowing that they will need an improved



Bolivia's Miguel Terceros (second left) celebrates with teammates Juan Godoy (left), Robson Matheus and Ramiro Vaca scoring a penalty during the FIFA World Cup qualifiers semi-final playoff match against Suriname in Guadalupe, Mexico. (AFP)

performance to punch their ticket to the World Cup after a laboured win over New Caledonia, the tiny French territory in the South Pacific.

Despite dominating possession and territory for long periods at the Estadio Akron near Guadalajara, Jamaica struggled to create clear-cut chances. The only goal of a

drab encounter came when Wrexham forward Bailey-Tye Cadamarteri bundled in a close-range rebound after New Caledonia goalkeeper Rocky Nyikeine could only parry a well-struck free-kick from Ronaldo Webster in the 18th minute.

Bolivia produced a second-half fight-back to shatter Suriname's unlikely dream

of World Cup qualification. A 79th-minute penalty from Santos striker Miguel Terceros following an equalizer from teenage substitute Moises Paniagua gave Bolivia victory.

Suriname, who had been bidding to become the lowest ranked team in history to qualify for the World Cup, took the lead in the 48th minute when Liam van Gelderen bundled home at Monterrey's BBVA Stadium. That goal looked like being enough to secure victory for the former Dutch colony, who are ranked 123rd in the world and made up mostly of players from the Netherlands of Surinamese descent.

But Bolivia began to dominate as the second half drew on and were thrown a lifeline when the 18-year-old Paniagua's low shot made it 1-1 after 72 minutes. Six minutes later an adventurous burst down the right flank from Bolivia fullback Diego Medina sowed panic in the Suriname defense. Medina's low cross found substitute Juan Sinforiano Godoy, who was tripped by Suriname defender Myenty Abena.

Australian referee Alireza Faghani pointed to the spot and after a brief delay, Terceros stepped up to drill in the spot kick and make it 2-1. It marked another heroic moment in Bolivia's World Cup qualifying campaign for the 21-year-old striker. Terceros also scored the goal in a 1-0 win over Brazil that saw them squeeze into this week's playoffs.

SPOTLIGHT

Parents sacrificed all for Suryavanshi

AFP
Motipur, India

Vaibhav Suryavanshi's parents told AFP how they made a practice pitch in their village in India's poorest state to spark the teenage cricket prodigy's stunning rise - and now his younger brother hones his skills on it.

Suryavanshi was the talk of world cricket after making history in the Indian Premier League last year aged just 14 in a dazzling debut season.

The supremely talented left-handed batsman, who turned 15 yesterday, belted a six on the first ball he faced for Rajasthan Royals.

Days later the school boy smacked a 35-ball century, the second fastest in the T20 competition's history after Chris Gayle (30 balls).

"He is fearless," Manish Ojha, one of Suryavanshi's first coaches, told AFP ahead of the new IPL

season starting today. "That is his nature."

Suryavanshi's stunning introduction to elite cricket was no flash in the pan.

He then hammered 175 off just 80 balls - an innings laced with a staggering 30 boundaries - in February, helping India thump England by 100 runs in the Under-19 ODI World Cup final in Harare.

He was named player of the match and player of the tournament, having finished with 439 runs in seven innings at an average of 62.71.

The teenager's rise has been swift since first picking up a bat when he was barely five.

He made his domestic debut aged 12 for his home state of Bihar in the Ranji Trophy in January 2024, then was selected for India's under-19 squad against a touring Australia team.

He promptly hit a 58-ball century, the second-fastest ton in youth Tests after England's Moeen Ali in 2005.



Rajasthan Royals' Indian cricket player Vaibhav Suryavanshi (right) speaks with the team's head coach Rahul Dravid before the start of the Indian Premier League (IPL) match against Mumbai Indians at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur on May 1, 2025. (AFP)

Ojha praised Suryavanshi's ability to replicate what he learned in the nets, including the one his par-

ability to execute plans on match days," said Ojha.

CRICKET IS HIS LIFE

Suryavanshi's blistering march to teenage superstardom from India's poorest state has involved significant sacrifice from his middle-class parents. For years his father accompanied him every other day from their home in the village of Motipur to Ojha's cricket academy in Bihar's capital city, Patna, a one-way journey of roughly two-and-a-half hours.

"My small business failed because of my full-time focus on training Vaibhav," Sanjeev Suryavanshi told AFP outside the family's two-storey house.

For his mother it involved getting up before everyone.

"It was not easy to wake up at 3:00 am to cook for him so that he could take homemade food with him," said Aarti Singh.

The sacrifices paid off when a 13-year-old Suryavanshi in 2024 became the youngest-ever player

to be sold in an IPL auction. Rajasthan Royals snapped him up for \$130,500 - more than a hundred times the average per capita annual income in Bihar. Born on March 27, 2011, Suryavanshi is the first IPL cricketer born after the tournament's inception in 2008. In a Rajasthan Royals media interaction earlier this month, Suryavanshi cheekily said he hoped to score "two-three thousand runs" in this year's tournament, before playing down "personal goals".

"The idea is to follow the process and help the team win," said Suryavanshi, whose media duties are limited by the team to protect him. Back home in Motipur, father Sanjeev said the family is now eagerly waiting for Suryavanshi to don senior India colours.

"He has been playing extraordinary cricket so far," a proud Sanjeev said, as he watched his youngest son Ashirwad, 11, practise on the same modest pitch he had built near their home. "Cricket is Vaibhav's life, dream and faith."

CRICKET

RCB shift focus to defending title, says coach Flower

INDIA GREAT VIRAT KOHLI REMAINS BIGGEST CROWD PULLER

Reuters
Bengaluru

Royal Challengers Bengaluru are looking ahead to the challenges of the 2026 Indian Premier League as defending champions for the first time, shifting the focus from last season's emotional end to the demands of a new campaign, coach Andy Flower said.

RCB, who lifted their maiden IPL title last year after a long trophy drought, return to their home ground at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium today for the tournament opener against Sunrisers Hyderabad.

Flower was proud of last year's triumph, but said it was followed by an emotional period after celebrations were overshadowed by a stampede outside the stadium that claimed 11 lives.

"It was very satisfying professionally for everyone, of course, but a really emotional time for all sorts of reasons at the end of last season," Flower told reporters.

"It's another time, so it's time to move on from that."

Flower said the team is conscious of the responsibility that comes with defending the title and representing the franchise that draws massive support across the world.

"When we go into these jobs and represent our owners and our franchise and each other, that always carries a responsibility and an accountability about how we conduct ourselves," Flower said.

RCB and local authorities have tightened crowd-management protocols after last year's incident and have put in place enhanced



RCB's English signing Jacob Bethell during training yesterday.

entry monitoring, phased dispersal plans and additional medical and security personnel for the opening match.

The RCB players will wear black armbands today as a mark of respect, with 11 seats left vacant in memory of those who lost their

lives last year. India great Virat Kohli remains the biggest crowd puller and emotional ballast for the team. The 37-year-old spent extended time in the nets, striking the ball cleanly and repeatedly clearing the ropes.

Flower praised his fitness and mindset, describing the former captain as "super fit" and highly motivated despite managing his workload. "He looks very lean, hungry and determined," Flower said.

"Mentally and emotionally he's in a really good space, and watching him strike the ball in training, he looks right on top of his game."

RCB will also be banking on domestic talents under captain Rajat Patidar, while their opponents Hyderabad will look to their explosive batting group led by stand-in captain Ishan Kishan.

Hyderabad have power hitters in Australia's Travis Head, India opener Abhishek Sharma, Kishan and England all-rounder Liam Livingstone, but will miss Australia pacer Pat Cummins, who is still building fitness.

"The only challenge for him was the bowling loads. So once he got the all-clear from Cricket Australia to build those bowling loads, it's obviously a bit of a painstaking process to get the loads up to where he feels confident and strong about bowling," Hyderabad coach Daniel Vettori said.

"Probably in the next 10 to 12 days (we will know) when he can return to play."

Hyderabad had a lively nets session ahead of the opener, with Kishan, Head and Sharma striking balls sharply to the boundary during batting practice.

PSL

Moeen's all-round heroics, rapid Hasan hand Kings 14-run win



Karachi King's English player Moeen Ali plays a shot during the PSL match against Quetta Gladiators in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

Agencies
Lahore

Karachi Kings registered a 14-run win against Quetta Gladiators on the back of all-round performance of Moeen Ali and Hasan Ali's four wickets to open their account in the Pakistan Super League 11 yesterday.

Chasing 182 to win, Quetta got off to a flying start courtesy Shamyil Hussain's 21-ball half-century but Hasan Ali's sixth haul of four wickets in PSL and Moeen's neat spell of 4-0-26-1 delivered the triumph for Karachi Kings.

Shamyil and Saud gathered 79 runs off the first 7.1 overs to put the chase well on track for Quetta. PSL debutant Shamyil threw the gauntlet with five fours and four sixes to stamp his authority in a 24-ball 52-run knock.

The young left-hander ransacked 19 runs off Mir Hamza's sixth over hitting three fours and brought up his half-century in style with a six.

Karachi Kings staged a comeback right after the end of field restrictions with Adam Zampa bowling a four-run over, while Salman Ali Agha removed Shamyil in the subsequent over giving away four as well.

Zampa removed Khawaja Mohammad Nafay in the ninth over followed by player of the match Moeen snapping Saud (33, 25b,

6x4s) as Gladiators managed 95-3 at the halfway mark.

Needing 87 off 60, Gladiators were squeezed by Kings' disciplined bowling with the equation coming down to 35 off the last two overs.

Hasan eked out the vital scalp of Rilee Rossouw (25, 21b, 3x4s) in the 16th over to end a 29-run fourth-wicket stand.

He picked up the wickets of Hasan Nawaz (19, 24b, 2x4s), Tom Curran and Ahmed Daniyal in the penultimate over to almost seal the game for Kings finishing with 4-27 and took his tally to 129 wickets in PSL history - six best of Shaheen Shah Afridi's 123.

Earlier, Moeen helped Karachi Kings to a fine total of 181-7 in 20 overs with a rapid 29-ball 48 not out following David Warner and Salman Ali Agha's thirties.

Salman struck a four and six off Tom Curran in the second over across four balls, while Warner slammed four back-to-back boundaries against Alzarri Joseph in the next over. Moeen walked in at 100-4 after 10.3 overs and kept the innings intact. He hit four fours and three sixes on his return to the PSL after playing nine matches for Multan Sultans in the 2020 season.

BRIEF SCORES
Karachi Kings 181 for 7 (Moeen 48*, Warner 35, Daniyal 3-36)
beat Quetta Gladiators 167 for 7 (Shamyil 52, Shaker 33, Hasan Ali 4-27) by 14 runs

CYCLING

Impressive Vingegaard takes Tour of Catalonia lead with stage five victory



Team Visma-Lease a bike's Danish rider Jonas Vingegaard celebrates winning the fifth stage of the 2026 Volta a Catalunya, a 155.5 km race between La Seu d'Urgell and La Molina ski resort in Alp, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
La Molina, Spain

Jonas Vingegaard powered to a solo victory on stage five of the Tour of Catalonia yesterday to move into the overall lead.

The two-time Tour de France winner and race favourite attacked and quickly dropped double Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel before catching the break and charging into the lead on the final climb in the Pyrenees mountains.

Austrian Felix Gall came in second, 51 seconds behind the Dane, with France's Lenny Martinez pipping German Florian Lipowitz to complete the podium 10 seconds later.

Visma-Lease a Bike rider

Vingegaard leads overall by 57 seconds from Gall and is 1min 09sec ahead of third-place Martinez.

Having already won the prestigious Paris-Nice stage race earlier this month - claiming two stages along the way - Vingegaard is well-placed to continue his successful start to the season as he builds up to a tilt at the Giro d'Italia-Tour de France double.

"Actually it was quite a hard stage... I didn't feel the very, very best in the beginning," said Vingegaard, who praised his teammates including Sepp Kuss for helping with his triumph.

"It was good teamwork today," he continued. "I felt really strong on the last climb and in the end I'm really happy with the gap I made today."

Riders were set to travel 155 kil-

ometres from La Seu d'Urgell to La Molina, facing five categorised climbs in the race's Queen Stage.

However, the route was shortened again because of high winds, as it was on Thursday, albeit less dramatically, with the tough final climb of Coll de Pal clipped by 2.2 kilometres.

Several riders fell in a crash on the descent of Collada Sobirana with 25 kilometres to go, including Joao Almeida and Tom Pidcock, although they were able to continue.

Giulio Ciccone went solo at the front with around 17 kilometres remaining, leaving the other breakaway riders Marc Soler and Davide Piganzoli behind to be swallowed up by the peloton.

Ciccone was just over a minute ahead with 10 kilometres to go, followed by a small chase group.

Favourite Vingegaard attacked with around 7km to go to try and bridge the gap to the chasers, along with Evenepoel, but the Dane was able to drop the Belgian.

Vingegaard's group caught Ciccone and the favourite took control, accelerating again with about 6km left.

This time, nobody was able to follow and he steadily increased his lead all the way to the finish.

Evenepoel, who crashed in stage three, finished over a minute-and-a-half behind Vingegaard and now trails the Dane by one minute 38 secs overall. Briton Pidcock, who started the day second overall, could not recover after his crash and lost more than 29 minutes, while overnight leader Dorian Godon, a sprinter, finished just 30 sec ahead of the Brit.

FORMULA ONE

McLaren's Piastri emerges fastest in Suzuka practice

Antonelli second, Russell third for Mercedes while Leclerc, Hamilton fifth and sixth in both sessions



McLaren's Australian driver Oscar Piastri drives during the first practice session ahead of the Japanese Grand Prix at the Suzuka circuit, Mie prefecture, yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Suzuka

McLaren's Oscar Piastri recorded the fastest time in second free practice for the Japanese Grand Prix yesterday, ahead of Mercedes pair Kimi Antonelli and George Russell.

The 24-year-old Australian, who failed to start either of the two main Grands Prix so far this season, lapped the 5.8 km Suzuka circuit in one minute, 30.133 seconds.

Antonelli, fired up from his first Formula One win at the last race in China, was 0.092 seconds off the pace with championship leader Russell third, 0.205 seconds adrift.

The Mercedes pair had led the times in the first session with Russell fastest ahead of the 19-year-old Italian.

They are separated by four points at the top of the championship standings

having won one race each, with Russell also taking the sprint win in China.

The pair have locked out the front row in every qualifying session so far, have finished both Sunday races in one-two formation and could hand Mercedes their first hat-trick of season-opening one-two finishes since 2019.

Piastri's pace-setting effort capped an encouraging day for McLaren after both their cars failed to start in China.

"The feeling is positive," said Piastri. "We've gathered some valuable data that puts us in a solid position."

His world champion teammate Lando Norris was third quickest in first practice and fourth in the afternoon.

Piastri was fourth fastest in the earlier session.

Reliability concerns at McLaren linger, however, with Norris spending large parts of both sessions with his car being worked on in the garage.

"I got some laps, probably not enough," said Norris. "We're on the back

foot. I just have to try and make the most of it."

Ferrari, the closest challengers to Mercedes in the opening two rounds, had Charles Leclerc and Lewis Hamilton fifth and sixth in both sessions.

HAMILTON LACKING CONFIDENCE IN CAR

Hamilton, the seven-times world champion who was revitalised after ending his podium drought with a third-place finish in China, complained of lacking confidence in the car.

"I think it's just balance," said the Briton. "So we've just got to work hard overnight to try and figure out how we can set the car up better."

Four-times world champion Max Verstappen, who asked a reporter to "get out" of his Red Bull media briefing on Thursday, ended the day 10th on the timesheets.

Audi's Nico Hulkenberg posted the seventh-quickest time in the second

session ahead of Williams driver Alex Albon and the Haas of Oliver Bearman.

Fernando Alonso, who handed his Aston Martin over to the team's third driver Jak Crawford for the opening session, was only 19th fastest at what is a home event for the team's power unit partner Honda.

The Spaniard arrived late to Japan after being at the birth of his first child.

There were no major incidents in either of the two sessions.

Audi's Gabriel Bortoleto and Cadillac's Sergio Perez joined the session late with work being done on their cars. Rookie Arvid Lindblad of Racing Bulls put just one lap on the board.

Albon had an eventful day in his Williams when the Thai racer went off into the gravel at the high-speed Degner corners and later collided with the Cadillac of Mexican Sergio Perez in the opening session.

He also briefly stopped on track in the second session due to throttle problems.



McLaren's Oscar Piastri in the garage before practice yesterday. (Reuters)

TENNIS

Sabalenka and Gauff to meet in Miami Open final

AFP
Miami

World number one and defending champion Aryna Sabalenka subdued second-ranked rival Elena Rybakina 6-4, 6-3 on Thursday to book a Miami Open title clash with American Coco Gauff.

Sabalenka, who fell to Rybakina in the Australian Open final before turning the tables on the Kazakh in the Indian Wells title match this earlier this month, broke the big-serving Rybakina twice in each set to come out on top in the blockbuster semi-final and keep her bid for the "Sunshine Double" of Indian Wells and Miami on track.

Men's world number two Jan-nik Sinner, who like Sabalenka lifted his first Indian Wells title two weeks ago, also advanced, dominating American Frances Tiafoe 6-2, 6-2 to reach the men's semi-finals.

Their victories mean both the ATP and WTA could see a "Sunshine Double" in the same year for the first time since Novak Djokovic and Victoria Azarenka swept the two prestigious hardcourt tournaments back in 2016.

Sabalenka, who had to save a match point in overcoming Rybakina in the Indian Wells final, applied ruthless pressure on Rybakina's serve while delivering a sterling service performance that featured nine aces - including four in a row across the seventh and ninth games of the opening set.

"I think I did everything right," the Belarusian said.

Sabalenka seized the first break for a 3-1 lead in the opening. Rybakina broke back, but Sabalenka broke again to pocket the set and took control in the second with a break for 2-0 in a game which Rybakina led 40-0.

Trailing 0-4, Rybakina clawed back a break for 4-1 but Sabalenka wouldn't flinch again. Rybakina saved one match point on her own



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus hits a forehand against Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan in the semi-finals at the Miami Open. (Mike Frey-Imagn Images)

serve before Sabalenka served it out with a love game punctuated by a fierce forehand winner.

It was just one of the commanding victories at Hard Rock Stadium, home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins, on Thursday.

Four-time Grand Slam champion Sinner needed just 71 minutes to dispatch Tiafoe and set up a semi-final meeting with fourth-ranked German Alexander Zverev - who swept past 19th-ranked Argentinian Francisco Cerundolo 6-1, 6-2 in just 65 minutes.

Fourth-ranked Gauff, who had needed three sets in each of her prior four matches, overwhelmed Czech Karolina Muchova 6-1, 6-1 to secure her place in the women's final.

'GOOD SERVING DAY'

Gauff surrendered a break on a double fault in the opening game against Muchova then won the next 10 games.

She broke Muchova again to

finish the match after 89 minutes, booking her final berth less than three weeks after she retired from her third-round match at Indian Wells with a nerve issue affecting her left arm.

"I think I feel the improvements are happening - especially with my forehand - I was happy with how it's been this whole tournament," Gauff said.

Sinner stretched his ATP Masters 1000 set win streak to 30, having not dropped a set at the level since last October in Shanghai.

Sinner, the 2024 Miami champion, fired 14 aces and 33 winners in all against 15 unforced errors.

"It was a good serving day for sure," said Sinner, who is vying to become the first man to win both Indian Wells and Miami in the same year since Roger Federer in 2017. He'll face a familiar semi-final foe in Zverev, having beaten the German in straight sets in the same round at Indian Wells.



Coco Gauff of the US reacts after a point against Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic in the semi-finals at the Miami Open. (Reuters)

ANNOUNCEMENT

Djokovic withdraws from Monte-Carlo Masters

Reuters
Monte Carlo

Two-times champion Novak Djokovic has withdrawn from the Monte-Carlo Masters, tournament organisers said yesterday.

The 38-year-old Serb pulled out of the clay-court event after also withdrawing from the ongoing Miami Open with a right shoulder injury.

Djokovic last competed at Indian Wells earlier this month, where he was beaten by defending champion Jack Draper in the round of 16.

The 24-times Grand Slam winner captured the Monte-Carlo Masters titles in 2013 and 2015.

American world number seven Taylor Fritz also withdrew from the tournament due to injury on Thursday. The 2026 edition of the Monte-Carlo Masters is scheduled to run from April 5-12, with world number one Carlos Alcaraz set to defend his title.

ALCARAZ SET FOR BERNABEU EXPERIENCE

World number one Carlos Alcaraz could realise a long-held dream by stepping onto the turf of Real

Madrid's Bernabeu Stadium, after Madrid Open organisers announced yesterday plans to install a practice court inside the iconic soccer venue.

The Bernabeu, which has increasingly embraced its role as a multi-purpose arena beyond soccer, will host a temporary clay practice court for tournament players from April 23 to 30.

The facility will serve as a supplementary training venue during the Madrid Open, a tournament the 22-year-old Alcaraz - a life-long Real Madrid fan - has won twice, in 2023 and 2024.

While the Caja Magica will remain the tournament's primary training hub, the Bernabeu setup offers players an opportunity to experience tennis in one of sport's most storied stadiums.

Unlike the public practice sessions at the Caja Magica, however, training at the Bernabeu will be closed to fans. The Bernabeu's transformation into a multi-sport venue has gathered pace in recent months. In November, it staged Spain's first official regular-season NFL game, when the Miami Dolphins faced the Washington Commanders. The 2026 edition of the Madrid Open runs from April 20 to May 3.

TRUMP SAYS TIGER WOODS 'WON'T BE PLAYING' IN MASTERS

Washington: US President Donald Trump delivered some breaking news in the golf world, claiming Tiger Woods will not play in the Masters next month. "I love Tiger but he won't be there," Trump said during a phone interview Thursday with Fox News. "He will be there, but he won't be playing in it." Woods, 50, has remained mum about his plans for the April 9-12 tournament at Augusta National due to ongoing health concerns. The five-time Masters champion has not played in an official event since July of 2024. Earlier this week, there were renewed hopes that Woods might chase his sixth green jacket when he made his TGL season debut for

Jupiter Links in Tuesday's finals. Woods, who ruptured his left Achilles tendon last spring and underwent lumbar disk replacement surgery in October, was asked about his playing status for the Masters at a TGL match on March 17. "I've been working on it," he said. "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." Woods is an 82-time winner on the PGA Tour, tied for the all-time lead with Sam Snead.

SHOWJUMPING

Puck claims top honours, Qatar's al-Naemi shines at Al Shaqab Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Austria's Gerfried Puck delivered a standout performance in the CSI5* Jump-Off feature class at the Al Shaqab Cup, topping the 155cm contest at the Longines Arena at Al Shaqab. Puck guided Equitron Naxcel V to a flawless double clear round in 39.05 seconds to secure first place.

Syria's Mohamad Mogheeth Alshehab finished second riding Carlotto S in 40.67 seconds, while Kuwait's Ali al-Khorafi claimed third position with a time of 41.43 seconds. A total of 15 riders competed in the class, with 13 securing placings.

In the CSI3* Special Two Phases event at 1.35m, France's Jean Francois Rondoux emerged victorious aboard Inter-Larus after clocking 27.28 seconds. Qatar's Sheikh Fahad Jassim al-Thani finished second riding Lavesther in 28.81 seconds, followed by compatriot Saad Ahmed al-Saad on Gary de Cerisy in 29.22 seconds.

The CSI2* Special Two Phases class at 1.10m saw Qatar's Abdul Aziz Jassim al-Thani take first place riding Proud in 29.89 seconds. Abdulla Ahmed al-Khulaifi secured second position on Quenta van de Corsendonksehoeve in 30.02 seconds, while Saudi Arabia's Halah al-Rasheed finished third aboard Cruising On The Ridge in 32.39 seconds. A total of 61 riders competed in the class, with 16 making the placings.

On Thursday, Qatar's Sultan Salem al-Naemi delivered an impressive double victory, winning the CSI3* Faults and Time class at 140cm riding Energika des Neyes with a clear round in 57.01 seconds. South Africa's Matthew Morrison placed second aboard Quebec in 66.01 seconds, while



Austria's Gerfried Puck, onboard Equitron Naxcel V, celebrates after winning the CSI5* Jump-Off 155cm class at the Longines Arena at Al Shaqab.

Kuwait's Yara Al-Hunaidi finished third on Valmira in 66.95 seconds.

Al-Naemi continued his strong run by claiming first place in the CSI3* Faults and Time event at 130cm riding Cavallina 13 with a time of 56.52 seconds. Saudi Arabia's Khalid Al-Hadi secured second position aboard Capoen in 57.49 seconds, narrowly ahead of American rider Kristen Vanderveen, who finished third riding Bull Run's Creation in 57.51 seconds.

In the CSI2* Faults and Time class at 125cm, Qatar's Ibrahim Khalid al-Kuwari topped the standings riding Flexy Bel Z with a clear round in 57.36 seconds. Saudi

Arabia's Khalid al-Hadi placed second on Carlton de Sauvageonn in 57.40 seconds, while compatriot Salem Balharith finished third aboard Lovina in 59.41 seconds.

Today, seven classes are scheduled across the one-star to three-star categories, with jumps ranging from 115cm to 150cm at the Longines Indoor and Outdoor Arenas in Al Shaqab, as the competition continues to showcase top regional and international talent.

The Al Shaqab Cup has drawn more than 150 riders competing for a total prize purse of €784,000 in one of the season's premier showjumping events.



Sheikh Talal bin Khalid al-Thani, Assistant Director of the Doha Equestrian Tour, poses with CSI5* Jump-Off 155cm class winner Gerfried Puck of Austria, runner-up Mohamad Mogheeth Alshehab of Syria and third-placed Ali al-Khorafi of Kuwait.



On Thursday, Qatar's Sultan Salem al-Naemi delivered an impressive double victory.

FOOTBALL

Mbappe inspires 10-man France to win over Brazil

Upamecano was sent off in the second half but France sealed a comfortable victory

AFP
Foxborough, United States

Kylian Mbappe moved to within one goal of equalling France's all-time scoring record with the opener in a 2-1 win over Brazil as two of the leading World Cup contenders faced off in a glamour friendly in the United States on Thursday.

Mbappe ran through to beat goalkeeper Ederson with a chipped finish to give France the lead just after the half-hour mark at the Gillette Stadium near Boston, home of NFL side the New England Patriots. France, World Cup winners in 2018 and runners-up in 2022, had defender Dayot Upamecano sent off early in the second half but shrugged that off to double their lead courtesy of Hugo Ekitike on 65 minutes.

Carlo Ancelotti's Brazil did pull one back 12 minutes from time via a close-range finish by Juventus defender Gleison Bremer, but Les Bleus held on for a victory that will boost confidence two and a half months before the World Cup begins. They play Senegal, Norway and a play-off winner in the group stage.

"I said beforehand that we couldn't take too much away from this game. It wasn't the World Cup final, but it showed we are in a good dynamic," Mbappe said. "We are creating lots of chances and we are looking a bit more solid even if we let in a goal at the end. We are moving forward and this will help us prepare for the World Cup."

The sight of captain Mbappe scoring in trademark lethal fashion is especially good news for coach Didier Deschamps, after the Real Madrid superstar recently returned from three weeks out with a knee injury. The 27-year-old has now scored 56 goals in 95 appearances for his country, leaving him just one goal away from equalling the France record of 57 goals held by the recent-



France's Kylian Mbappe shoots past Brazil's goalkeeper Ederson during a friendly match at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts, on Thursday. (AFP)

ly-retired Olivier Giroud.

Mbappe will have the chance to match, and perhaps surpass, that record when France play Colombia in the second friendly of this American tour, at the Northwest Stadium near Washington DC tomorrow.

The Brazilians go into this year's World Cup - in which they will face Morocco,

Scotland and Haiti in the group stage - hoping the recent appointment as coach of the revered Ancelotti can make them serious contenders to claim a record-extending sixth title.

Ancelotti said he was "half-satisfied" with Thursday's result. "When you lose a game, you should never be happy... The

result isn't the most important thing, but it does reveal what we did well and what we didn't," Ancelotti said. "In the overall context of the game, I am satisfied - because the team competed and fought, even scoring from a set piece, which is important. I am half-satisfied, but we certainly shouldn't be happy with the result."

But this match will have reminded them of the standards required against the very best sides in the international game. Brazil were admittedly missing several key players here, with goalkeeper Alisson Becker, defensive duo Gabriel Magalhaes and Eder Militao, midfielder Bruno Guimaraes and forwards Rodrygo and Estevao among those absent. France, meanwhile, were without Arsenal centre-back William Saliba, but a fearsome attack included Mbappe, Bayern Munich's Michael Olise and Paris Saint-Germain's Ousmane Dembele, the reigning Ballon d'Or. Dembele released Mbappe for the opener, and that separated the teams at the break.

Upamecano was sent off on 55 minutes after American referee Guido Gonzalez upgraded a yellow card to red following a VAR review, ruling that the defender had denied Wesley a clear goal-scoring opportunity as he took down the full-back on the edge of the area.

Crystal Palace centre-back Maxence Lacroix, a late call-up to replace the injured Saliba, came on for Dembele to make his debut and bolster the French back line after that. They then increased their lead as Olise supplied Ekitike in the area and the Liverpool striker clipped the ball beyond Ederson for his second international goal.

Mbappe and Ekitike were promptly removed, and Brazil were left with too much to do, even if Bremer converted from close range from Luiz Henrique's assist to make it 2-1. Ancelotti will now hope his team can bounce back when they take on Croatia in Orlando, Florida next Tuesday.

Stand at new Inter Miami stadium to be named for Messi

Miami: A spectator stand at Inter Miami's new stadium is to be named in honour of Argentina superstar and club captain Lionel Messi, the Major League Soccer franchise announced. Inter Miami said in a statement the club's new 26,700-seat arena, to be known as Nu Stadium, would include the "Leo Messi Stand" when it hosts its first game on April 4. The Nu Stadium is a permanent, purpose-built replacement for Inter's temporary home at Chase Stadium in Fort Lauderdale, where the club have played since joining MLS in 2020. Messi joined Inter three years ago, transforming the club's fortunes in the process by leading them to four trophies including the 2023 Leagues Cup and the 2025 MLS Cup. Inter said naming the stand after Messi was a reflection of the 38-year-old Argentine's ongoing impact with the club.

GHANA PLAYERS' LUXURY WATCHES STOLEN FROM VIENNA HOTEL

Two Ghanaian footballers in Vienna for a friendly against Austria reported that they each had a luxury watch stolen from their hotel, police said. A spokesperson for Vienna police said the Rolex watches worth a "low to mid five-figure sum in euros" and cash were stolen from two separate rooms at the hotel in the 22nd district of Vienna, which borders the district where the match is being held.

The police spokesperson did not identify the players or the hotel, but said no violence was involved. Such incidents are relatively rare in the Austrian capital. Vienna's low crime rate has helped it frequently top global rankings of cities with the highest quality of life. Ghana and Austria have qualified for this year's World Cup.

EX-ENGLAND MANAGER HODGSON, 78, RETURNS AS BRISTOL CITY BOSS

Former England manager Roy Hodgson will take charge of Championship side Bristol City until the end of the season, 44 years after he last managed the Robins. Hodgson, 78, replaces Gerhard Struber, who left the club after a six-game winless run realistically ended hopes of making the play-offs for promotion to the Premier League.

City are 16th in the table and unlikely to be dragged into a relegation battle. Hodgson's appointment takes him into half a century in management, having landed his first job at Swedish club Halmstad in 1976. His first stint at Bristol City lasted just four months in 1982 before going on to manage a host of clubs including Inter Milan, Blackburn, Fulham, Liverpool and West Brom, as well as four years in charge of England between 2012 and 2016.

Everyone knows we are African champions, says Senegal coach

Saint-Denis, France: Senegal coach Pape Thiaw insisted that "trophies are won on the pitch" when asked about the decision to strip his team of the Africa Cup of Nations title and declare Morocco the champions.

"I am focused on my job. It is important to not be distracted. Everyone knows we are the champions of Africa," Thiaw told reporters at a press conference in Paris, ahead of his team's friendly meeting with Peru today at the Stade de France. "We are going to keep working hard to try to win more trophies. It is clear in our minds that trophies are won on the pitch."

Today's game is part of Senegal's preparations for the upcoming World Cup, when they will play France, Norway and the winner of a play-off between Bolivia and Iraq in the group stage in the United States. The Peru match will also be their first outing since the Cup of Nations final against



Morocco in Rabat on January 18. Senegal won 1-0 thanks to Pape Gueye's extra-time goal, but the occasion was marred by chaotic scenes at the end of normal time when many of Thiaw's players

walked off the pitch in protest at the decision to award Morocco a penalty with the score still goalless.

Some Senegalese supporters also attempted a pitch invasion, and the game was held up for almost 20 minutes before the Senegal players returned. Brahim Diaz, who was adjudged to have fouled for the penalty, then had his weak spot-kick saved, allowing Senegal to go on and win in extra time with the hosts stunned.

However, Senegal were sensationally stripped of the title last week, when the Confederation of African Football announced that it had upheld an appeal by the Moroccan Football Federation, saying that the champions had infringed tournament regulations by walking off.

As a result, it declared that Senegal had forfeited the match, turning its 1-0 victory into a 3-0 defeat, making Morocco the champions instead. On Wednesday,

Senegal lodged an appeal against that decision to the Swiss-based Court of Arbitration for Sport.

"We deserved to be champions of Africa on the pitch and we will try to do the same thing off it," said Senegal captain Idrissa Gana Gueye. Last week Everton midfielder Gueye, 36, said he was ready to "hand back the medals" to Morocco if it eases tension between the two countries.

Gueye was also part of the Senegal team which won the Cup of Nations title for the first time at the 2022 edition in Cameroon.

"Nothing can replace the emotions that we have experienced," Gueye added, pointing out that his team have won two titles in the last three editions of AFCON, having also reached the 2019 final which they lost to Algeria.

"We didn't steal those results. A whole country put in the work, a nation which gives everything on the field and off it."