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# GULF TIMES SPORT



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Al Arabi seal 27th Qatar Volleyball League title

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SPOTLIGHT

## LA28 says first Olympic tickets will go on sale on April 9

Reuters  
Los Angeles

Tickets for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games will go on sale to the general public on April 9, organisers said yesterday, as LA28 also moved to reassure fans over ticket security by naming a group of verified resale platforms that will begin operating in 2027.

A presale for residents in qualifying areas of Los Angeles and Ocala County will begin on April 2, with notification emails for selected buyers set to roll out from today, March 31 through April 4, LA28 said.

On April 7, the organising committee will notify remaining registrants whether they were selected for a purchase window in the first general sales round, known as Drop 1. "This week marks the first opportunity for fans to claim a seat at

the LA28 Olympic Games," LA28 Chief Executive Officer Reynold Hoover said in a statement.

LA28's ticketing programme will include 1mm tickets priced at \$28, the lowest price point. Roughly 5% of the Olympic tickets will cost over \$1,000, while more than 75% of all tickets, including finals, will be under \$400 and nearly 50% of all tickets will be under \$200.

"Tickets are comparable to and in many cases well under what we see for other professional sporting and major entertainment events in the US," Allison Katz-Mayfield, LA28 Senior Vice President, Games Delivery Revenue, told reporters on a call.

### RESALE PROGRAMME

Separately, LA28 said its verified multi-platform resale programme would open in 2027, with AXS and Eventim serving as the official secondary ticket marketplace and Ticketmaster and Sports Illus-



trated Tickets also designated as verified resale platforms. The announcement comes as organisers prepare for the first ticket drop and seek to warn fans against buying from unauthorised sellers before the resale programme launches.

LA28 said primary tickets would only be sold through its official ticket service providers, AXS and Eventim. It added that any LA28 tickets offered for resale before 2027 should not be considered verified.

"While LA28's resale platforms will not be launched until 2027, having a variety of platforms was critical to providing fans multiple points of access to verified tickets," Hoover said.

### LOCAL PRESALE

Fans who registered for the LA28 ticket draw and whose billing postal codes fall within qualifying counties were automatically entered into the local presale draw. Those selected will receive 48-hour purchase windows running from April 2 through April 6 and must use a payment method tied to a billing postal code in an eligible county to complete their purchase.

For both the local presale and Drop 1, selected buyers will have 48 hours to purchase tickets, while any tickets placed in a cart must be checked out within 30 minutes. Buyers may complete multiple transactions during their allotted window until they reach the ticket limit.

LA28 said tickets would be available across all Olympic sports, as well as for the opening ceremony at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood and the closing ceremony at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

Fans selected for time slots may buy up to 12 tickets for Olympic events, plus up to 12 tickets for the soccer tournament that will not count toward the general Olympic-event limit. Ceremony tickets will be capped at four per buyer and will count towards the 12-ticket maximum.

Registrants who are not assigned a time slot in either the local presale or Drop 1 will be automatically entered into future draws, LA28 said. Paralympic tickets are due to go on sale in 2027.

Ticket-inclusive hospitality packages from official provider On Location are also expected to go on sale in April. Visa will be the official payment method for purchases.

FOOTBALL

# Gattuso backs Italy against Bosnia in play-off

'It's an excuse. If the pitch is bad, it's bad for both teams'

Reuters  
Zenica, Bosnia

Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso dismissed concerns over pitch conditions and the atmosphere his side would face in Bosnia for their World Cup play-off final, saying he had never conceded a goal to a fan.

Gattuso carries the weight of Italian football on his shoulders as his team bid to reach the finals for the first time since 2014. After beating Northern Ireland at home in the semi-final, Italy now take on Bosnia away in Zenica today.

Italy were forced into a change of plans after snow and rain led to fears over pitch conditions in Bosnia, and trained in Florence on yesterday morning before travelling. "It's an excuse. If the pitch is bad, it's bad for both teams, the match still has to be played," Gattuso told reporters.

"If we start thinking about the pitch, the stands... no, that's weak. I've seen the pitch and it's fine. Honestly, even if it were bad, there's little we could do. The respect we have for Bosnia is enormous, for what they show on the pitch. As for the fans, they don't score goals, that's never happened to me."

Gattuso replaced Luciano Spalletti early in the qualification campaign after defeat to Norway had already compromised their ambitions. Despite a far from perfect performance against Northern Ireland, the manager has seen plenty of improvements since taking charge.

"Tactically, the other night we got it wrong," Gattuso said. "Seven months ago we were not this team. We suffered against opponents, they reached our goal easily, they created chances. At the beginning we conceded ridiculous goals, we were fragile, we struggled to hold our shape. Maybe we didn't play ultra-offensive football and maybe we were less brilliant, but right now I prefer a team that is solid, that suffers less, even if it means being less pretty."

Italy last lifted the World Cup in 2006, and Gattuso, who played in that team, wants to see the same spirit in this side. "We will go out there with desire and aggression. That's the most important aspect of our footballing history," he said. "We became champions not because we were the strongest, but because of our competitive edge and our ability to suffer."

"People said there was no pride in this team, that nobody cared, but I see it every day, and I sincerely hope, not for myself, but for these lads, that we reach this objective. I'm proud of them, I'm happy with them, even if things go



Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso speaks at a press conference in Zenica, Bosnia. (Reuters)

badly. I hope they don't. And if things were to go badly? This isn't the right moment to talk about it," Gattuso said. "It would be a disappointment, a heavy blow. I would have to take responsibility because I am the coach, but we'll talk about that afterwards. There are people whose job it is to decide what will happen. My thoughts, I keep to myself."

### ITALY FEELING THE PRESSURE, SAYS BOSNIA'S DZEKO

Meanwhile, Bosnia captain Edin Dzeko brushed aside the controversy over Italy players celebrating his team's win over Wales, but feels the reaction showed the four-times champions are feeling the heat ahead of the World Cup playoff final between the two sides. Italy won their semi-final against Northern Ireland on Thursday, and a number of players - including Dzeko's former Inter Milan teammate Federico Dimarco - were shown watching Bosnia's penalty shootout win.

The Italians appeared jubilant after Bosnia prevailed, and Bosnian fans reacted angrily when the video was shared on social media, saying it showed disrespect towards their team. "What happened is something completely normal because we all have our preferences, mine was maybe not to play against Ita-

ly," Dzeko told reporters. "But today you have to be careful, with social media everything becomes bigger than it is. Dimarco messaged me and said he didn't want to offend anyone. I told him 'what are we even talking about? There's absolutely no problem!'"

"Italy didn't want to play in Wales, I don't know why, because we went there without fear and won," Dzeko said. "I don't know why Italy should be afraid of Wales or Bosnia. Italy is an incredible national team that has won four World Cups. If they're afraid of playing in Wales, it means something isn't working, and maybe we should look at it this way, they might really suffer in this match because they're playing for so much after missing two World Cups. That means they're afraid."

Italy's woes do not just concern the national team. No Italian club reached the last eight of this season's Champions League, and having played for Inter, AS Roma and Fiorentina, Dzeko is familiar with Italian football's problems. Bosnia, meanwhile, are also aiming to return to the World Cup for the first time since 2014, their one and only appearance to date.

Dzeko netted the equaliser against Wales, maintaining his record of scoring in every year since making his Bosnia debut in 2007. The 40-year-old is country's all-time top scorer.

## Al Arabi strike first in Qatar Basketball League finals as Al Sadd clinch third place



Al Arabi Club opened its campaign in the best-of-three finals of the 45th edition of the Qatar Men's Basketball League in style, securing a 79-71 victory over Al Rayyan in the first game at Al Gharafa Hall yesterday. The second match of the series will be held on April 2. In the third-place playoff, Al Sadd edged past Al Ahli 80-73 after a closely contested and fluctuating encounter.



CRICKET

# Suryavanshi hits 52 as Rajasthan punish Chennai

The 15-year-old smashes 4 fours and 5 sixes in his batting blitz

AFP  
Guwahati, India

Teenage sensation Vaibhav Suryavanshi lived up to the hype with a 17-ball 52 as Rajasthan Royals thrashed Chennai Super Kings by eight wickets in their opening IPL match yesterday.

Fifteen-year-old Suryavanshi smacked four fours and five sixes in his batting blitz as Rajasthan chased down a victory target of 128 with 7.5 overs to spare in Guwahati.

Suryavanshi was the talk of world cricket after making history in last year's Indian Premier League aged just 14 in a dazzling debut season which included a 35-ball century.

The left-handed batsman, who turned 15 last week, survived a dropped catch on the first ball he faced but soon found his groove to pummel the attack.

He raced to his fifty in 15 balls with two sixes off Afghanistan left-arm wrist spinner Noor Ahmad to the noise approval of the home crowd.

Suryavanshi fell when Sarfaraz Khan took a good diving catch in the deep off medium-pace bowler Anshul Kamboj.

The prodigy has been in red hot form as he starred for India in their Under-19 World Cup win in Harare last month, smashing a record-breaking 175 off 80 balls in the final against England.

Rajasthan's other opener Ya-



Rajasthan Royals' Vaibhav Suryavanshi (left) celebrates with teammate Yashasvi Jaiswal after scoring a half-century during the IPL match against Chennai Super Kings in Guwahati yesterday. (AFP)

shasvi Jaiswal stood firm to hit an unbeaten 38 as he and skipper Riyan Parag, who made 14, steered the team home in 12.1 overs.

Rajasthan, who won the inaugural IPL in 2008 under late Australia spin legend Shane Warne, elected to field first and their bowlers set up victory.

Fast bowlers Jofra Archer, Nandre Burger and left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja took two wickets each to bundle out five-time

champions Chennai for 127 in 19.4 overs. India's T20 World Cup hero Sanju Samson was bowled by South African Burger for six on his Chennai debut and Archer rattled the stumps of skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad, for six.

Chennai's batting crumbled with number eight Jamie Overton making the total respectable with his 43 off 36 balls.

Archer returned impressive figures of 2-19, while Burger claimed

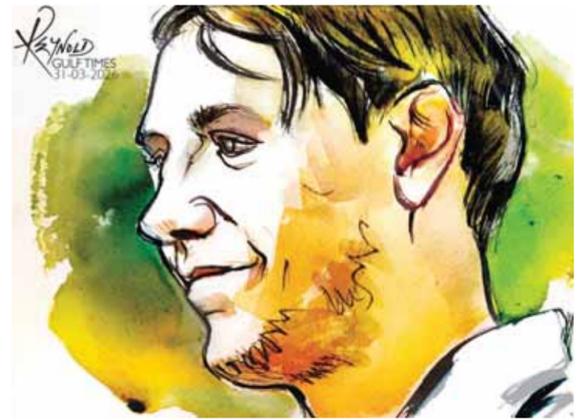
2-26. Chennai veteran MS Dhoni is recovering from a calf strain and likely to be out for the first two weeks of the T20 tournament scheduled to end on May 31.

**BRIEF SCORES**

**Rajasthan Royals 128 for 2** (Suryavanshi 52, Jaiswal 38\*, Kamboj 2-27) **beat Chennai Super Kings 127** (Overton 43, Jadeja 2-18, Archer 2-19, Burger 2-26) **by eight wickets**

SPOTLIGHT

## Rahane takes pop at Cricket Australia over record-buy Green



AFP  
Mumbai, India

Kolkata Knight Riders skipper Ajinkya Rahane aimed a dig at Cricket Australia after \$2.7mn all-rounder Cameron Green was unable to bowl as they opened their IPL season with defeat.

Green was snapped up by three-time champions Kolkata in the December auction for Rs252mn to become the most expensive overseas buy in Indian Premier League history.

Kolkata posted 220 against Mumbai Indians at Wankhede Stadium on Sunday, with Green hitting a four and a six while batting at number three before he departed for 18 off 10 balls.

The Kolkata bowlers - minus Australian international Green - then took a beating as the hosts chased down their target with five balls to spare.

Quizzed afterwards about not using Green as a bowling option, Rahane replied bluntly: "The question you need to ask Cricket Australia."

Cricket Australia yesterday said Green has a lower back injury that "requires him to abstain from bowling for a short period".

"Cameron is currently rebuilding his bowling loads in India with a view to return in around 10-12 days' time," a spokesperson said yesterday.

"KKR has been communicated with and is fully aware of this information."

The 26-year-old Green has been carefully managed since having back surgery in 2024.

He bowled just seven balls at the T20 World Cup in February and featured in the Sheffield Shield's ninth round only as a batter.

**SOUTH AUSTRALIA CLINCH SHEFFIELD SHIELD**

South Australia took Victoria's last seven wickets for 37 runs yesterday to secure a 56-run victory and clinch back-to-back Sheffield Shield titles for the first time in the 133-year history of the domestic first-class competition.

Victoria, heavy favourites to win the final, resumed on day five at Junction Oval on Monday chasing a victory target of 196 to take the inter-state title for the 33rd time.

South Australia's bowling attack needed less than an hour to dismiss them for 139, however, with quick Nathan McAndrew named Man of the Match for his figures of 6-121 over both innings and a key knock with the bat.

REVIEW

## After Kohli, Rohit proves old is gold

Reuters  
Mumbai

Day after fellow veteran Virat Kohli showed age is just a number, Mumbai Indians opener Rohit Sharma produced a match-defining half-century against Kolkata Knight Riders on Sunday to underline that his appetite for runs remains as strong as ever.

Rohit, who turns 39 next month, led Mumbai to five Indian Premier League titles before Hardik Pandya replaced him as captain ahead of the 2024 season.

Like 37-year-old Kohli, Rohit restricts his India duties to the 50-overs format but he has begun the elite Twenty20 tournament intent on proving he is still very much a match-winner.

"He's freed himself up," coach Mahela Jayawardene said after Rohit's 78 off 38 balls helped Mumbai chase down 221 in a six-wicket victory in their tournament opener



at home. "He's thinking much calmer, he's not the leader, there's less pressure on him."

"This happens - it happened to me as well in my last few years when I went and played franchise cricket," added the former Sri Lanka captain.

"You practise less, but your memory - your muscle memory - it works. And you just go with the flow, you know, what the bowlers are trying to do. And once you're in

that mode, you have that freedom which we've noticed in Rohit in the last couple of years.

"We encourage him to go and do that, and the rest of the team is backing him to do that and I'm quite happy about it."

Rohit, whose last competitive outing was in India's home one-day series against New Zealand in January, returned for the new IPL season looking leaner and fitter.

He joined the Mumbai camp early and played plenty of practice matches before going on to register his 50th 50-plus score in the IPL on Sunday.

"We had a lot of simulations for him, especially to get him going, and I was quite happy the way he was hitting the ball ... I thought he batted brilliantly," Jayawardene said.

On Saturday, Kohli smashed an unbeaten half-century to anchor defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru to a commanding victory over Sunrisers Hyderabad.

## AL ARABI WIN HANDBALL LEAGUE SHIELD



Al Arabi have won the Qatar Handball League title for the 2025-2026 sports season. In a thrilling conclusion to the eighteenth and final round at the Al Duhail Sports Hall, Al Arabi secured the championship following a tense 27-27 draw against Al Duhail. This victory marks Al Arabi's second consecutive league title and their fourth historical win, adding to their previous triumphs in the 1982-1983, 2019-2020, and 2024-2025 seasons. They finish atop the table with an impressive 51 points, followed closely by Al Duhail (47 points) and Al Rayyan (42 points). The league shield and gold medals were presented to Al Arabi captain Anis Al Zouaoui by Mohammed al-Shaabi, President of the Qatar Handball Federation (QHF), and HE Sheikh Tamim bin Fahd al-Thani, President of Al Arabi. Mohammed Jaber al-Mulla, Secretary-General of QHF awarded the silver medals to Al Duhail and the bronze to Al Rayyan.

## Pacer Shah fined by PCB for social media post

Lahore: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has announced the outcomes of disciplinary committee proceedings pertaining to breaches of various clauses of Naseem Shah's Central Contract and the PCB Social Media Guidelines.

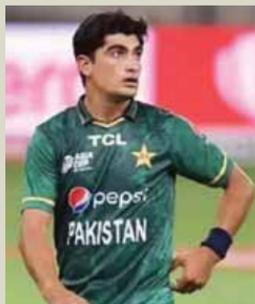
The PCB had issued a show cause notice dated 27th March 2026 outlining the violations and sought a response for Naseem.

A personal hearing was then held by a three member Disciplinary Committee on 30th March 2026 after Shah's reply had been received and reviewed.

Pursuant to the hearing and evaluation of Shah's submissions the Committee has determined as under:

Whilst noting the unconditional apology tendered, Shah is found to have breached various clauses of his Central Contract and a fine of PKR 2 crores has been imposed.

It was noted that Shah's social media adviser has already been terminated by Shah and shall be blacklisted by the PCB from associating with any player falling under the PCB's jurisdiction.



The PCB remains committed to upholding professional standards, contractual obligations and the integrity of the game.

**PCB charges Fakhar Zaman with ball-tampering in PSL match**  
Lahore Qalandars batter Fakhar Zaman has been charged with ball-tampering in Sunday's Pakistan Super League (PSL) match against Karachi Kings, the PCB said in a statement. The incident occurred in the final over with Karachi needing 14 runs to win. Fakhar, Lahore captain Shaheen Afridi and fast bowler

Haris Rauf were involved in a brief discussion, during which Fakhar and Rauf passed the ball between them.

The umpire then approached Rauf and asked to see the ball. Following consultations with the square-leg umpire, the officials awarded five penalty runs to Karachi and ordered the ball to be changed.

The penalty proved costly as Karachi went on to chase down a target of 129 with three balls to spare, Abbas Afridi hitting a four and a six to seal a four-wicket victory.

"Fakhar denied the charge levelled against him during a disciplinary hearing led by the match referee Roshan Mahanama," the PCB said. "Another hearing is set to take place within the next 48 hours after which the match referee will share his verdict."

Afridi said they would look at video footage of the incident. "I don't know about this, and we'll see if it's there in the camera and discuss it," he said at the post-match presentation ceremony. Fakhar could face a ban of one or two matches if found guilty.

## HANDBALL: AMIR CUP, QATAR CUP DRAWS HELD



The draws for the 2026 Amir Cup and Qatar Cup were conducted by the Qatar Handball Federation in Doha yesterday. The action-packed Qatar Cup semi-finals kick off on April 2, featuring a thrilling lineup where league champions Al Arabi face Al Sadd, while runners-up Al Duhail take on Al Rayyan. The highly anticipated final will follow on April 4. Meanwhile, the prestigious Amir Cup begins its qualifiers on April 2 with Al Gharafa facing Al Shamal, and Al Khor taking on Qatar SC. The quarter-finals on April 7 will bring massive clashes, including Al Rayyan vs Al Wakrah and a blockbuster rematch between Al Arabi and Al Sadd. The ultimate champion will be crowned on April 11, it was announced yesterday.

MOTORSPORT

# Bezzecchi wins fifth in a row by taking US GP

AFP  
Austin

Marco Bezzecchi captured his fifth consecutive MotoGP victory on Sunday by winning the United States Grand Prix, reclaiming the season points lead in the process.

The 27-year-old Italian rider for Aprilia also set a MotoGP record for consecutive laps led with 121 in taking the 20-lap showdown at Circuit of the Americas in Austin, Texas.

Bezzecchi started second behind Italian pole-sitter Fabio Di Giannantonio, who rides for Valentino Rossi's VR46 team, but the Ducati rider faded quickly to fifth as Bezzecchi seized the lead and kept it to the finish.

In leading the first three laps he broke the previous record for most led in a row of 103 set by Spaniard Jorge Lorenzo of Yamaha in 2015.

His winning time of 40mins 50.653secs was 2.036 seconds ahead of runner up Aprilia team-

mate Jorge Martin of Spain, who won Saturday's sprint race to take the riders lead by a point.

Spain's Pedro Acosta of KTM was third.

Bezzecchi is the first rider since Spain's Marc Márquez in 2014 to win the first three races of a season, Márquez having taking 10 in a row in his run.

"I'm happy. I'm very happy," said Bezzecchi. "Yesterday I made a mistake so it was very important to make a good race today."

He praised the crowd, saying of his supporters, "I was very sad and they gave me a push to bounce back today."

Bezzecchi seized an 81-77 lead over 2024 world champion Martin in the season points standings.

Bezzecchi's victory run also includes last year's closing races at Portugal and Valencia and this year's openers in Thailand and Brazil.

Only reigning world champion Márquez, who was fifth on Sunday just behind Di Giannantonio, and Rossi have had longer modern-era win streaks.

RESULTS

1. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Aprilia) 40:50.653, 2. Jorge Martin (ESP/Aprilia) at 2.036, 3. Pedro Acosta (ESP/KTM) 4.497, 4. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 6.972, 5. Marc Márquez (ESP/Ducati) 8.100, 6. Enea Bastianini (ITA/KTM-Tech3) 8.243, 7. Alex Márquez (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 11.253, 8. Raúl Fernández (ESP/Aprilia-Trackhouse) 13.129, 9. Luca Marini (ITA/Honda) 14.471, 10. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 14.544, 11. Fermin Aldeguer (ESP/Ducati-Gresini) 21.063, 12. Brad Binder (RSA/KTM) 22.062, 13. Diogo Moreira (BRA/Honda-LCR) 22.201, 14. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/Ducati-VR46) 24.371, 15. Toprak Razgatlioglu (TUR/Yamaha-Pramac) 25.549, 16. Jack Miller (AUS/Yamaha-Pramac) 26.309, 17. Fabio Quartararo (FRA/Yamaha) 27.136, 18. Alex Rins (ESP/Yamaha) 38.701

Overall standings

1. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA) 81 pts, 2. Jorge Martin (ESP) 77, 3. Pedro Acosta (ESP) 60, 4. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA) 50, 5. Marc Márquez (ESP) 45



Aprilia Racing's Marco Bezzecchi celebrates with the trophy after winning the MotoGP Grand Prix of the United States at Circuit of The Americas Austin. PICTURE: Jerome Miron-Imagn Images

TENNIS

# Sinner overpowers Lehecka to claim Miami Open

The Italian completes 'Sunshine Double'

AFP  
Miami

World number two Jannik Sinner powered past Jiri Lehecka 6-4, 6-4 to win the ATP Miami Masters 1000 for a second time on Sunday, adding the title to his Indian Wells crown.

Sinner had to wait out rain delays before and during the match to complete his "Sunshine Double" becoming the first man to sweep the elite hard court tournaments in California and Florida since Roger Federer in 2017 and the first to do so without dropping a set.

In fact, Sinner -- who won Miami in 2024 but missed last year as he served a three-month doping ban -- has now won three straight Masters 1000 events, starting with a victory in Paris last year.

"It's a very, very special moment," Sinner said. "Coming here, performing again in a very good way after Indian Wells means a lot to me."

"It's something I never would've thought (I'd win) because it's difficult to achieve."

Sinner's victory, coupled with Aryna Sabalenka's triumph over Coco Gauff on Saturday, mark the first time the Indian Wells-Miami sweep was achieved on both the men's and women's sides since Novak Djokovic and Victoria Azarenka both did it in 2016.

It also saw the Italian gain a bit on Spain's Carlos Alcaraz - who was upset in the third round - in the race for world number one as the clay court season beckons.

Early showers saw the match delayed for more than an hour. Sinner had just pocketed the first set when the showers hit again,



Jannik Sinner of Italy poses with the Butch Buchholz Trophy after defeating Jiri Lehecka of Czechia in the Miami Open final. (AFP)

halting the match for 90 minutes. It wasn't enough to unsettle Sinner, who fired 10 aces and won 33 of 36 points when he put his first serve in play.

His return game was also spot on as he handed 22nd-ranked Czech Lehecka his first service break of the tournament for a 2-1 lead in the opening frame.

Sinner trailed 0-40 in the following game but fired three service winners and a pair of aces to hold.

"I tried to be focused," Sinner said. "I tried to understand why I missed the first serves before. In the beginning, the conditions were very different ... very, very heavy balls. I missed a couple of

first serves in the net because they were quite heavy."

He said Lehecka's aggressive return game also gave him pause.

"You have to hit very precise. If not, he has it on the racquet," Sinner said. But he made the advantage stand up and gave himself a first set point in the ninth game with a blistering cross-court forehand service return winner.

Lehecka saved that one with a service winner and saved another set point with a volley, going on to seal the hold on his sixth game point before Sinner pocketed the set with a love game.

Lehecka fought off five more break points before Sinner pounced for the lone break of

the second set and a 5-4 lead, the Czech gifting Sinner a break chance with a loose forehand.

Sinner didn't face a break point in the second set and gave himself a match point with a forehand volley winner, thought he had it on a serve that was called a let, and polished it off with another winner at the net.

While Lehecka, playing in his first Masters 1000 final, couldn't follow compatriot Jakub Mensik into the Miami winner's circle, he will reach a career-high 14th in the world rankings.

"I came here with not good form and I was able to come back to the tennis that I want to play," Lehecka said at the trophy ceremony.

FOOTBALL

# Tottenham close in on De Zerbi as next boss

AFP  
London

Tottenham have targeted Roberto De Zerbi as their preferred candidate to lead the troubled Premier League club's fight to avoid relegation, according to reports yesterday.

De Zerbi is available after leaving Marseille by mutual consent in February.

Tottenham parted ways with interim boss Igor Tudor on Sunday after just seven games and 44 days in charge. The north Londoners sit just one point above the relegation zone with seven matches left, having failed to win a league game in 2026. De Zerbi established a positive reputation for himself in England during a two-year spell as Brighton boss between 2022 and 2024.

The Italian had reportedly been reticent to take the Tottenham job before knowing which division they will be playing in next season.

However, The Athletic and Talksport reported that progress has been made in talks, with Tottenham offering a lucrative long-term deal to con-

vince the 46-year-old to take charge now.

Tottenham have not tasted life outside the top flight of English football since 1977-78.

Despite boasting a new 63,000-capacity stadium, state-of-the-art training ground and revenues that make them among the top 10 richest clubs in world football, they are at severe risk of a humiliating relegation to the Championship.

Just a few years ago they were Champions League regulars under former manager Mauricio Pochettino, reaching the final in 2019. Tottenham, then managed by Ange Postecoglou, ended their 17-year trophy drought by winning the Europa League last season.

But the warning signs of a battle for survival were there as Postecoglou was dismissed despite victory over Manchester United in the Europa League final after finishing 17th in the Premier League. Thomas Frank was appointed as the Australian's successor, but the Dane was sacked in February after a run of two wins in 17 league games.

Tottenham are hopeful of making an appointment well before they are next in action at Sunderland on April 12.

## Kenya's former NY marathon champ Korir gets five-year doping ban

Kenya's 2021 New York marathon champion Albert Korir has been banned for five years after he admitted using a banned performance-enhancing drug, the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) said yesterday. Korir, 32, tested positive for the synthetic form of erythropoietin (EPO) that stimulates red blood cell production during out-of-competition tests in Kenya in October 2025. The AIU said that Korir had received a one-year reduction from the original six-year suspension "based on an early admission and acceptance of the sanction". His five-year ban will run from January 8, 2026, the date he was provisionally suspended, until January 7, 2031. Korir won the 2021 New York marathon in a time of 2hr 08min 22sec and came third in 2023 with a personal best time of 2:06:57. He won the Ottawa marathon in 2019 and 2025. Korir's sanction comes nearly six months after compatriot Ruth Chepngetich, the current world marathon record holder was banned for three years after admitting the use of Hydrochlorothiazide (HCTZ), a banned diuretic used as a masking agent. Meanwhile, French heptathlete Auriana Lazraq-Khlass, the current European silver medalist, has been provisionally suspended for failing to comply with her anti-doping whereabouts requirements, the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) said yesterday. "The AIU has provisionally suspended Auriana Lazraq Khlass (France) for Whereabouts Failures," the AIU posted on social media.

FOOTBALL

# Al Wajba, Al Shaab top groups at Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The third edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament at Al Furjan Stadium produced a major upset as Abdullah bin Turki's team crashed out after a 2-0 defeat to Al Wajba in their final group match.

Despite leading their group for much of the competition, the loss saw them slip to third place with 10 points and miss out on qualification. Al Rayyan secured second place with the same number of points, advancing on goal difference.

In other results, Al Dafna edged Al Shahaniya 1-0, while Al Rayyan recorded two wins, defeating Al Zaeem 3-0 and Al Dafna by the same scoreline. Al Wajba topped Group A with 13 points, followed by Al Rayyan. In Group B, Al Shaab finished first with 15 points, while Al Raya Medical claimed second spot with 11 points.

The semi-final line-up will see Al Shaab face Al Rayyan, while Al Wajba take on Al Raya Medical.

Tournament Director Youssef Abdulnoor said the competition had been intense, with Abdullah bin Turki's exit one of the biggest surprises. He noted that the closeness in standards among teams makes the title race difficult to predict, while highlighting the emergence of promising talents as a key outcome of the tournament.



## Al Arabi seal Qatar Volleyball League title for 27th time

**Doha:** Al Arabi clinched the Qatar Volleyball League title for the 27th time after defeating Al Rayyan 3-1 in the final round of the competition at the Qatar Volleyball Association Hall yesterday. Al Arabi were awarded a cash prize of QR1 million for their triumph, while Al Wakrah finished runners-up, receiving QR600,000, and Al Shorta claimed third place along with QR400,000.

Al Arabi topped the standings with 44 points, edging Al Wakrah by a single point after the latter suffered a 0-3 defeat to Al Shorta in their final match. Al Shorta finished in third place with 40 points, while Al Rayyan finished fourth with 36 points.

The title-deciding clash between Al Arabi and Al Rayyan was closely contested, reflecting the high level of competition between the two sides. Al Arabi narrowly claimed the opening set 25-23 before repeating the same scoreline in the second set after another evenly balanced contest. Al Rayyan responded strongly

in the third set, reducing the deficit with a convincing 25-18 victory. However, Al Arabi relied on their experience and composure in the fourth set, dominating proceedings to seal the match with a comfortable 25-15 win and confirm the championship.

In the other encounter, Al Shorta delivered an impressive performance to defeat Al Wakrah in straight sets.

The team took control early, winning the first and second sets 25-17 before completing the victory with a 25-18 result in the third set. The defeat dashed Al Wakrah's hopes of securing their first-ever league title after leading the standings for much of the season.

Qatar SC finished fifth with 36 points, followed by Al Ahli in sixth place with 29 points. Al Shamal and Al Khor shared seventh and eighth places respectively with 12 points each, while Al Gharafa placed ninth with 11 points and Al Sadd finished tenth with seven points.



### FOOTBALL

# Denmark face Czech set-piece test for World Cup berth

Denmark eye a place at World Cup for third consecutive time

Reuters  
Prague

**D**enmark coach Brian Rieme described today's high-stakes clash against the Czech Republic as the most significant fixture of his managerial career, with a victory booking a ticket to the upcoming World Cup.

The match in Prague will determine if Denmark clinch a third consecutive World Cup appearance. The Danes enter the final in high spirits after a 4-0 victory over North Macedonia in Thursday's playoff semi-final. "Reaching a World Cup finals is something special and unique. It is an extraordinary experience that a manager might only encounter once in their career," Rieme said.

However, Rieme was wary of the Czech threat from set-pieces with their attack led by striker Patrik Schick. "We have prepared for it and analysed them. We have great faith in our players, and set-pieces are also part of their daily routine at their clubs. However, we are aware that set-pieces are a major strength for the Czech Republic," he said.

Striker Rasmus Hojlund was confident of his teammates rising to the occasion. "It is probably one of the biggest games I have played in my career so far," he told reporters. "I am not exactly ancient yet, but I have still played a fair number of matches at a high level. There have been nerves, but it is about turning that into something positive."

Meanwhile, Czech Republic manager Miroslav Koubek hailed his side's penalty shootout win over Ireland as a show of great mentality, but wants more composure in their World Cup playoff final against a very different Denmark side. The Czechs, looking to reach their first World Cup since 2006, went two goals down to Ireland early in Thursday's semi-final but despite a sub-par performance they came back to draw level and win on penalties. That



Denmark's midfielder Christian Eriksen (right), Frederik Rønnow and Jesper Lindstrøm train in Copenhagen, on the eve of the FIFA World Cup play-off final against Czech Republic. (AFP)

was Koubek's first game in charge, and while his players got the job done, the 74-year-old coach wants more from his side in today's game in Prague.

"That victory definitely helped us and I want to highlight the players' performance," Koubek told reporters. "The mental side - the commitment, the fight, the work they put into the match - I think that got pushed a bit into the background, but it was the biggest factor in our win. There is room for improvement, we saw that, we know there are things we could have done differently. But it was a victory of will and character, and on the football side we will certainly want to improve things."

Koubek believes Denmark will be an altogether different proposition than Ireland, and wants his players to show greater calm than they did in the last game.

"They have very good individuals, technically strong, very good combination play," he said. "It's a team that has been together a long time, very stable. Their philosophy is completely different from Ireland's. We want to be less nervous. We were nervous, we felt the moment, and we need to relax a bit. We are capable of playing similar football to Denmark. I keep asking for us to get on the ball more than we did against Ireland, and to improve the team's ability to play."

### SPOTLIGHT

## Tiny Kosovo on verge of World Cup history

Reuters  
Pristina, Kosovo

**U**nder Serbian rule in the 1990s, sporting events in Kosovo were banned and football games were held privately. After matches, players washed off in small rivers or with melted snow. Today, Kosovo are on the verge of winning a spot in the World Cup finals for the first time - a potentially momentous sporting turnaround for Europe's youngest nation. Kosovo, which gained independence from Serbia in 2008 and was only sanctioned to join world football in 2016, will host Turkey in a final playoff game today following a thrilling 4-3 win over Slovakia last week. The winner will fly to North America for the tournament which starts in June.

"Kosovo's appearance in America would be historic, truly epochal," said Erol Salihu, former secretary general of Kosovo's federation. "This would be the realisation of a dream, for the generations who played in muddy fields and meadows to defend the honour and spirit of the sport," he said.

Kosovo, with a population of 1.6mn people, lost nine out of ten games in their first qualifying

campaign for the 2018 World Cup. But positive results emerged when the federation started recruiting from the diaspora. In this latest campaign, the team beat Sweden and Slovenia to earn a place in the qualifying playoffs.

Every match in Kosovo is seen as an achievement for a country scarred by conflict - Kosovo's fight for independence, which was secured by a NATO military air campaign in 1999, left more than 13,000 people dead.

"People have suffered here, each of us has lost many family members," said Samir Ujkani, Kosovo's first captain and goalkeeper who moved to Belgium as a child. "It is our duty to come back here and represent our country," he said.

Meanwhile, excitement is building in Kosovo, whose national stadium holds just 12,500 people - a fifth of the size of many of the World Cup's host venues.

Tickets for today's game sold out within minutes and are now being resold on the black market for up to 20 times more. Towns will put up big screens in main squares for those who cannot attend the game.

If that is not incentive enough for the players, Kosovo's government promised a bonus of 1mn euros if they win.



Kosovo players attend a training session ahead of the World Cup playoff final against Turkey in Pristina, Kosovo. (Reuters)

### FOCUS

## Poland seek to end 96-year drought in Sweden in play-off final

Reuters  
Stockholm

**P**oland enter today's World Cup play-off final against Sweden seeking to end a winless run on Swedish soil that stretches back nearly a century. The match at the sold-out Strawberry Arena in Solna is a winner-takes-all clash for a place in the tournament finals in North America and for Poland, it offers a chance to end a dismal sequence of results, having not won in Sweden since a 3-0 friendly victory in Stockholm in 1930. Since then, Poland have endured eight losses and two draws in Sweden.

"It depends on whether we look at the statistics," Poland coach Jan Urban told reporters earlier in the week when asked if the winless streak would have an impact on today's match. "Apparently, it has been nearly 100 years since we won a match in Sweden. This will be a completely different encounter."

While Sweden hold the historical edge, Poland can draw confidence from more recent events. The two nations met in the 2022 World Cup playoffs, with Poland



Poland captain Robert Lewandowski (second right) trains with teammates in Stockholm.

earning a 2-0 victory at home in Chorzow to secure their spot in Qatar. After a disappointing qualifying campaign, Sweden are showing signs of improvement under new coach Graham Potter, beating Ukraine 3-1 in their playoff semi-final while Poland fought to a 2-1 win over Albania.

"On paper, Sweden are the strongest

team in this bracket," Urban told reporters. "Potter's team confirmed their quality against Ukraine, but many unknowns remain. We don't yet know how they will behave in a more difficult scenario - for example, if they are trailing."

The match could mark the end of an era for Poland's experienced core. Captain

Robert Lewandowski, 37, has indicated he is approaching the final stage of his career, while midfielder Piotr Zielinski, 31, remains a key figure. "I'm not afraid to end my career because I'm starting to prepare for it, to prepare things I can do after football," Lewandowski said in January. "I know it's a very important part of my life, but it's not everything."

Failure to qualify would likely trigger an immediate overhaul of the national side, signalling the end for a generation that made Poland a fixture at major tournaments. "The World Cup is the most important tournament in every footballer's career. Tomorrow we'll play a decisive match to fulfil our dreams and write more history," winger Jakub Kaminski said.

### SWEDEN STILL HAVE WORLD CUP CHANCE DESPITE WOEFUL QUALIFYING CAMPAIGN

Despite a qualifying campaign in which they slumped to four defeats and finished bottom of their group, Sweden are one game away from qualifying for the World Cup thanks to a process that offers teams a number of second chances.

Sweden were so bad in Group B that they

finished fourth behind Switzerland, Kosovo and Slovenia, with whom they drew twice, and they flopped so badly in their first four games that coach Jon Dahl Tomasson became the first men's head coach to be sacked by the Swedish football association (SvFF).

"It just feels like an amazing opportunity. We have the opportunity because what the team did in the Nations League. So we are where we are, and now we've got one game to play to get to the World Cup, which is a dream," Graham Potter, who took over after Tomasson, said.

Potter led Sweden in their last two qualifiers, losing 4-1 in Switzerland and drawing with Slovenia at home, but in the end it turned out those results were immaterial as their victory in Nations League Group C1 - the third tier of the UEFA competition - threw them a lifeline.

For the European playoffs, the 12 runners-up in the group stage of World Cup qualifying were joined by four Nations League group winners who finished outside the top two in their groups, based on the 2024-25 UEFA Nations League interim overall ranking, and the Swedes were among those four teams.