

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Debutant Connolly guides Punjab to narrow IPL win over Gujarat



FOCUS | Page 3

Mind games: How football stars are fuelling chess boom

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Wednesday, April 1, 2026
Shawwal 13, 1447 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT

FOOTBALL

Tottenham appoint De Zerbi in battle for Premier League survival

Page 4

Qatar step up World Cup preparations at training camp



Qatar players train during a camp at Aspire Academy as Al Annabi step up preparations for the FIFA World Cup, which starts on June 11. Head coach Julen Lopetegui has selected a 32-man squad as he looks to fine-tune preparations and identify the players who will represent the team at the global showpiece to be held across the United States, Canada and Mexico in June and July. Qatar's preparations had initially included high-profile friendlies against Serbia and Argentina as part of the Qatar Football Festival, but those fixtures were cancelled due to regional tensions. Al Annabi are now scheduled to face Ireland in a friendly Dublin on May 28 in what is expected to be a key test ahead of the tournament. At the World Cup, Qatar have been drawn in Group B alongside hosts Canada, Switzerland and Italy or Bosnia.

Iran will be at World Cup and play in US, says FIFA president

Antalya, Turkey: FIFA president Gianni Infantino said yesterday that Iran "will be at the World Cup" and will play their group matches in the United States as scheduled, despite the Middle East war.

"Iran will be at the World Cup," Infantino said at half-time as Iran beat Costa Rica 5-0 in a friendly in southern Turkey. "That's why we're here. We're delighted because they're a very, very strong team, I'm very happy. I've seen the team, I've spoken to the players and the coach, so everything is fine," added Infantino, whose attendance at yesterday's game was unannounced.

Infantino went on to stress that Iran's "matches will be played where they are supposed to be, according to the draw". The World Cup, being hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada, starts on June 11.

Iran are set to play their first Group G game against New Zealand in Los Angeles on June 15. They are then scheduled to play Belgium in Los Angeles on June 21 and Egypt in Seattle on June 26. Iran's participation had been thrown into doubt by the war with the US and Israel that broke out on February 28.

"For us, what matters most are FIFA's rules and regulations. We will comply with whatever FIFA decides. Every host country has made commitments to FIFA and must honour them," Mehdi Mohammad Nabi, the vice president of the Iranian Football Federation (FFIRI), said at the match.

The FFIRI had said earlier this month it was "negotiating" with FIFA to relocate the country's World Cup matches from the United States to Mexico. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum also said that her country is prepared to host Iran's first-round matches at the tournament if needed. Infantino initially said that US President Donald Trump had given assurances that the Iranian team would still be welcome. But Trump then stated that Iran's team should not travel to the tournament "for their own life and safety".

Iran hit back at Trump's comments, saying that "no one can exclude Iran's national team from the World Cup". Yesterday, Mohammad Nabi said Infantino had been en route from Mexico to Qatar.

"Having learnt that we were organising friendly matches here, he came to see us in person, and we had a fruitful discussion," Mohammad Nabi said. "Given our history in this competition, it is only natural that FIFA should support the Iranian team. Mr Infantino is providing the necessary support to our national team and has given our players a great boost."

Asked before the game if Iran would be at the World Cup, back-up striker Dennis Eckert Ayensa said: "Inshallah" (god willing). Iran, who also played a friendly against Nigeria in the Turkish town of Belek last Friday, crushed Costa Rica, who had not qualified for the World Cup, 5-0 on Tuesday.

Skipper Mehdi Taremi, with two penalties, Ali Gholizadeh and Mohammad Mohebbi put Iran four goals up by the break. Half-time substitute Mehdi Ghayedi added a fifth in the 51st minute by which time coach Amir Ghalenoel had started to empty his bench.

Before the game, Iran's players wore black armbands and posed with photos of what officials said were young victims of the war, including those killed in an airstrike on a primary school in Iran on the first day of the conflict.

The airstrike on the school in the southern Iranian city of Minab on February 28 killed at least 170 people, including students and teachers.

FOOTBALL

Italy miss out on World Cup as Bosnia qualify

BOSNIA GO INTO GROUP B ALONGSIDE CANADA, QATAR AND SWITZERLAND

Agencies

Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina stunned Italy in a penalty shoot-out last night to qualify for the 2026 World Cup at the expense of the four-time champions, who have not been back to the tournament since 2014. Bosnia won 4-1 on penalties after their play-off final finished 1-1 at the end of extra time, with Italy having to play with 10 men following Alessandro Bastoni's sending-off late in the first half.

Italy got off to the perfect start, with Moise Kean putting them ahead in the 15th minute, but had Bastoni sent off four minutes before the break to raise the hopes of the home side.

Bosnia levelled 11 minutes from time through Haris Tabakovic and both Pjotr Posposito and Bryan Cristante missed their penalties while the hosts made no mistake from the spot to repeat their semi-final shootout win over Wales.

Italy have now failed to qualify for three consecutive World Cups, as Bosnia go into Group B at the finals in June and July alongside Canada, Qatar and Switzerland.



Bosnia and Herzegovina players celebrate after winning the FIFA World Cup qualifiers play-off against Italy in Zenica, Bosnia. (Reuters)

GOKERES STRIKES TAKES SWEDEN EDGE POLAND TO REACH WORLD CUP

Viktor Gyokeres side-footed home an 88th-minute winner as Sweden beat Poland 3-2 in a frantic World Cup qualification playoff final, booking their ticket to the tournament and extending Poland's remarkable winless streak on Swedish soil.

The result earned Sweden a first World Cup appearance since 2018 after failing to qualify four years ago and ensured Poland's barren run in Sweden continued with the visitors having failed to secure a victory in the country since 1930.

Anthony Elanga's opener for Sweden was cancelled out by Nicola Zalewski's equaliser, but Gustaf Lagerbielke's 44th-minute strike restored the hosts' advantage and ensured they entered the break ahead.

Despite Karol Swiderski drawing the visitors level again shortly after the interval, Gyokeres capitalised on a late goalmouth

scramble to fire home the winner.

The result earned Sweden a spot in Group F for this year's World Cup alongside the Netherlands, Japan and Tunisia. It also reversed the outcome of the 2022 World Cup playoff final in Chorzow, where Poland denied Sweden a place in the Qatar tournament.

The atmosphere at Strawberry Arena reflected the high stakes, with the Swedish team storming the pitch as Gyokeres's goal went in and players running around with blue and yellow flags after the final whistle.

Sweden's route to qualification was unconventional - they finished last in Group B in the qualifying campaign with no wins and two points from six matches.

However, they won their 2024-25 Nations League group that provided them with the "safety net" of a backdoor route to the World Cup via the playoffs which they seized with both hands.

TURKEY END 24-YEAR WORLD CUP DROUGHT WITH WIN OVER KOSOVO

Turkey ended a 24-year wait to qualify for the World Cup by beating Kosovo 1-0 in their playoff final, sealing a return to football's biggest stage for the first time since 2002 when they reached the semi-finals.

Forward Kerem Akturkoglu scored the only goal in the 53rd minute, turning the ball in from close range after Orkun Kokcu's shot, following a driving run from Kenan Yildiz down the left. Turkey, ranked 25th in the world, had fallen short in qualifying campaigns over the past two decades and arrived under pressure to deliver, with coach Vincenzo Montella overseeing a squad blending emerging talents and experienced internationals.

For Kosovo, ranked 79th and playing in front of a sold-out crowd, the defeat brought an end to a remarkable run that had taken them to the brink of a historic debut

at a major tournament, less than a decade after joining FIFA and UEFA.

The hosts pushed forward in the closing stages, taking risks in search of an equaliser and creating several chances, but were unable to beat Turkey goalkeeper Ugurcan Cakir as the visitors held on. Turkey will face Australia, Paraguay and co-hosts the United States in Group D of the World Cup. The tournament will also be hosted by Canada and Mexico.

CZECH REPUBLIC BEAT DENMARK ON PENALTIES TO REACH WORLD CUP

Czech Republic qualified for the 2026 World Cup with a penalty shoot-out victory over Denmark after their play-off final finished level at 2-2. The match went to spot-kicks after Denmark twice fought back through Joachim Andersen and Kasper Høgh to cancel out Pavel Sulc and Ladislav Krejci's goals for the hosts.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Zaman gets 2-match ban for ball tampering

AFP
Lahore

Pakistan international **Fakhar Zaman** has been banned for two matches after being found guilty of ball tampering during the country's showpiece T20 league, cricket bosses said yesterday.

The 35-year-old opener was seen on video footage altering the condition of the ball during his team Lahore Qalandars' match against Karachi Kings in Lahore on Sunday night.

"Zaman has been suspended for two Pakistan Super League (PSL) matches after he was found guilty of a Level 3 offence for tampering the ball," the Pakistan

Cricket Board (PCB) said in a statement.

The PCB charged Zaman, who denied ball tampering, at a disciplinary hearing with match referee Roshan Mahanama of Sri Lanka.

Mahanama viewed television footage which showed Qalandars' players Zaman, skipper Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf, and umpire Faisal Afridi inspecting the condition of the ball.

The umpire awarded five penalty runs against Qalandars, who lost the match by four wickets.

Earlier, fast bowler Naseem Shah was slapped with the biggest fine in Pakistan cricket history after criticising a politician on social media.

Shah's whopping \$71,500 pun-

ishment is the latest incident to rock the PSL during a turbulent opening week.

Fellow fast bowler Shaheen was also fined \$3,500 for breaking the tournament's tight security protocols.

The PSL is taking place behind closed doors without fans - and only at two venues instead of six - because of fuel supply concerns caused by the Iran war.

Naseem, who plays for Rawalpindiz, aimed a barb at Punjab chief minister Maryam Nawaz, who was the guest of honour at a slimmed-down PSL opening ceremony before last Thursday's match between Qalandars and Hyderabad Kingsmen.

In a post on X, swiftly deleted

after being widely shared, Naseem mocked Nawaz's arrival, saying: "Why is she treated like the Queen at Lord's?"

He later claimed his account had been hacked, but the PCB did not agree and ordered him to appear before a three-man disciplinary committee.

Naseem apologised before the committee imposed the record fine.

Afridi was fined by the Qalandars for breaching security protocols at his team hotel in Lahore, one of two host cities along with Karachi for this year's tournament.

Punjab Police said Afridi was refused permission to take visitors to teammate Sikander Raza's room but did so anyway.



IPL

Connolly hits 72 as Punjab post three-wicket win

FIRST WIN FOR KINGS AS TITANS GO DOWN IN THE LAST OVER

AFP
New Chandigarh

Australian Cooper Connolly made a memorable Indian Premier League debut, holding his nerve as wickets tumbled around him to haul Punjab Kings to a tense three-wicket victory over Gujarat Titans yesterday.

A tidy bowling performance, spearheaded by Vijaykumar Vyshak, had helped Punjab restrict Gujarat to 162-6 at the New Chandigarh Stadium after Shreyas Iyer opted to chase.

Last year's finalists Punjab appeared headed for a straightforward victory when opener Prabhsimran Singh and Connolly set about the bowling, adding 76 for the second wicket in only 49 deliveries.

Gujarat had struck only three sixes in their entire innings while Punjab had four in the first four overs alone as they mounted a blistering assault.

But the belated introduction of pacer Prasadh Krishna, Gujarat's impact player, triggered a dramatic twist.

Prasadh, brought on by captain Shubman Gill only in the 13th over, took three for three in 10 deliveries to spark a collapse that saw Punjab lose four for eight in 16 balls.

However, the 22-year-old Connolly showcased a maturity that belied his age, keeping his com-



Punjab Kings' Cooper Connolly plays a shot during the 2026 IPL match against Gujarat Titans at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh International Cricket Stadium on the outskirts of Chandigarh yesterday. (AFP)

posure and eking out small but crucial partnerships with South African Marco Jansen and compatriot Xavier Bartlett.

Fittingly it was Connolly, who finished unbeaten on 72 off 44 deliveries with five fours and as many sixes, who brought up victory with five balls to spare as he guided Punjab to 165-7 in the last over.

Earlier, Gujarat had got off to a frenetic start with India Test skipper Gill striking three glorious fours in the second over from Bartlett.

Gill and Sai Sudharsan, last season's most prolific opening pair, added 37 before Jansen provided the breakthrough, having Sudharsan caught on the pull for 13.

Gujarat went to nine an over in the Powerplay but as the ball got older and softer, the scoring rate dipped.

BRIEF SCORES
Punjab Kings 165 for 7 (Connolly 72*, Prabhsimran 37, Prasadh 3-29)
beat Gujarat Titans 162 for 6 (Gill 39, Vyshak 3-34, Chahal 2-28) **by three wickets**

COMMENT

Australia head coach McDonald backs Green to retain place in Tests

Reuters
Sydney

Australia head coach Andrew McDonald has backed Cameron Green to remain part of the Test squad, despite the all-rounder's lean Ashes series against England.

Green tallied 171 runs in five Tests at an average of 24.42 and took four wickets as Australia triumphed 4-1 against England earlier this year.

Green, who made his test debut in 2020, has played 37 matches with a batting average of 32.75, including two centuries, and a bowling average of 38.94.

McDonald said Green's domestic record justified his continued selection with a first-class batting average of 45.52, which rises to 53.38 in the Sheffield Shield.

"I think he's good enough," McDonald told SEN radio.

"Anyone that's averaging that at Shield level suggests that he's ahead of the pack there, and it's only a matter of time before it gets to a situation where he's performing for Australia.

"I think he's got a few things to work on around his game, but that's no different to anyone else!" Green, 26, has also been in focus

during his stint with Indian Premier League side Kolkata Knight Riders, with Cricket Australia managing his workload due to a lower back injury that has temporarily restricted his bowling.

"Cameron is currently rebuilding his bowling loads in India with a view to return in around 10-12 days' time. KKR has been communicated with and is fully aware of this information," a CA spokesperson said on Monday.

McDonald said Green must learn to manage the expectations that come with being an Australian all-rounder, especially if he continued to play across formats. "There's huge expectation within the IPL, and there's huge expectation with any all-rounder that shapes an Australian team," he said.

"I'm sure that his career will trend upwards.

"He's just got to balance out all those expectations, and in particular, playing all three formats, which is a significant challenge for any cricketer, let alone a player that's still learning."

Australia begin their Test season in August with a two-match series against Bangladesh before touring South Africa in September for three one-day internationals and three Tests.



Kolkata Knight Riders' Cameron Green in action against Mumbai Indians on March 29, 2026. (Reuters)

PSL MATCH BETWEEN ISLAMABAD UNITED AND PESHAWAR ZALMI CANCELLED



The Pakistan Super League (PSL) clash between Islamabad United and Peshawar Zalmi at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium yesterday was cancelled as persistent rain left the field under covers and unplayable, according to match officials. The points were shared between the two PSL sides. The result helped Islamabad open their tally and move to sixth in the standings, while Peshawar climbed to second spot with three points, behind table-toppers Karachi Kings, who have four. Today, Multan Sultans will face Hyderabad Kingsmen at the same venue, with Hyderabad aiming to register their first win of PSL 11, while Multan will look to make it two wins in two matches.

SPOTLIGHT

What a player! Growing calls for Suryavanshi to make India debut

AFP
New Delhi

There were growing calls yesterday for teenager **Vaibhav Suryavanshi** to be fast-tracked into India's senior national team after slamming a 17-ball 52 to launch his IPL season.

The batsman turned 15 last week, making him eligible to represent India under International Cricket Council rules, having already starred for his country at youth level.

On Monday he smacked four fours and five sixes as Rajasthan Royals chased down a target of 128 with 7.5 overs to spare against Chennai Super Kings in Guwahati.

The teenager made history in last year's IPL in a dazzling debut season highlighted by a 35-ball century, the second fastest in the history of the T20 tournament.

Spin bowling great Anil Kumble compared Suryavanshi to batting legend Sachin Tendulkar, who made his full international debut aged 16.

"Yes, absolutely. If a player



shows this level of consistency, he should be fast-tracked, just like Sachin Tendulkar," Kumble said on JioHotstar.

Suryavanshi has already made his mark at youth international level, hammering 175 off just 80 balls as India beat England in the Under-19 World Cup final in February. Former India batter Ambati Rayudu described Suryavanshi as "a cut above a lot of youngsters in the country".

"He's a talent that will definitely do wonders for Indian cricket," Rayudu said on ESPN-cricinfo. "I don't know when, but definitely in the future." Inside the Rajasthan Royals camp, the

leadership group has been focused on shielding the prodigy from the pressures of early fame.

"What I tell him is that you're going to play 14 games (in this season's IPL) and regardless of what goes on in the game, it shouldn't bother you," captain Riyan Parag said.

"What goes around in the media shouldn't bother you."

He added following Monday's latest eye-catching display: "Like everyone in the stands, we also had this feeling of 'wow', wondering how he is able to do this."

"He is a talent and I am very glad that he is in our team, and not the opponent's," he said.

FOCUS

Mind games: How football stars are fuelling chess boom

'CHESS IS AN INCREDIBLE GAME. IT SHARPENS YOUR MIND'

AFP
London

Erling Haaland and Mohamed Salah are among the Premier League stars "addicted" to chess, helping to spark a surge in the game's popularity among younger people. Manchester City striker Haaland is so fascinated by the game that he recently invested in a ground-breaking new chess tour to capitalise on the increased profile bestowed by its celebrity players.

As well as Haaland, Liverpool forward Salah and England teammates Harry Kane, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Anthony Gordon are all avid chess players.

Salah is obsessed by playing the faster 'blitz' version of chess using an anonymous online profile.

"I'm addicted to chess. Every day, literally every day," the Egyptian said. Arsenal midfielders Martin Odegaard and Eberechi Eze are both keen players, with the latter winning an amateur tournament in 2025.

Chess grandmaster Magnus Carlsen, a five-time world champion, is a huge football fan and the Norwegian's love for both games has played a role in the surprise crossover.

Alexander-Arnold often plays chess with his brothers and once levelled-up to face Carlsen, who defeated the Real Madrid defender in a 17-move rout that lasted just five minutes.

AC Milan winger Christian Pulisic has the queen chess piece tattooed on his arm in tribute to his grandfather, who taught him the game as a child.

France World Cup winner Antoine Griezmann and Real Madrid's Dani Carvajal are also aficionados.

On the surface, the contemplative, cerebral nature of chess is a stark contrast to the physicality and aggression of football. But dig deeper and there are more similarities than you would expect.

"Chess is an incredible game. It sharpens your mind, and there are clear similarities to football," Haaland said.

"You have to think quickly, trust your instincts, and think several



moves ahead. Strategy and planning are everything."

'It's remarkably similar'

Backed by the International Chess Federation (FIDE), the new tour will feature four tournaments each year in different cities, with a world champion crowned across three disciplines - fast classic, rapid and blitz.

Each season will have a minimum prize pool of £2mn (\$2.7mn).

"Seeing a world-class athlete like Erling Haaland join the Total World Chess Championship Tour is a powerful signal of the global attention and cultural relevance that chess enjoys today," FIDE president Arkady Dvorkovich said.

Chess has its roots in seventh century India. But those humble

origins are a far cry from the technology fast-tracking the chess boom, with online apps taking over from the traditional board as the game's most common battleground.

Online play rocketed during the Covid-19 pandemic and, according to FIDE, at least 1.5bn people now have a chess app on their phone. Netflix series "The Queen's Gambit" and the impact of celebrity influencers, including footballers, have all contributed to the boom transforming the previously staid image of chess.

The strategy involved in chess also appeals to football managers looking for a mental edge in their tactical battles on the pitch.

Quoted in the book 'Pep Confidential', Manchester City boss

Pep Guardiola said: "You have no idea how similar the two things are."

Avid Real Madrid fan Carlsen sees his game through the same lens as former Barcelona coach Guardiola: "In chess and football, the important thing is to control the middle. If you control the middle, you control the pitch or the board," he said.

"In terms of space, it's remarkably similar."

But will the satisfaction of a successful checkmate ever replace the thrill of scoring a winning goal for chess-fixated footballers?

For Kane, his true love remains football, leaving chess as the perfect way to relax.

"I use chess to switch off," he said. "It's such a mental game. You have to focus on every moment."

FOOTBALL

Napoli threaten absent Lukaku with disciplinary action

Reuters
Brussels

Romelu Lukaku could be in hot water with Napoli after the Belgium striker failed to turn up for training despite withdrawing from international duty with an injury, the Serie A champions said.

The club confirmed Lukaku was a no-show after being called back to their training ground, sparking threats of disciplinary action in a saga that has left the former Chelsea and Inter Milan striker's immediate future hanging in the balance.

Lukaku withdrew from Belgium's trip to the United States, missing World Cup warm-up matches against the U.S. and Mexico to work on his fitness. Italian media reported that Lukaku refused to return to the club's training ground for rehabilitation.

"Napoli can confirm that Romelu Lukaku did not respond to today's call to return to training," Napoli said in a statement. "The club reserves the right to consider taking the appropriate disciplinary action, as well as to determine whether the player will continue to train with the team for an indefinite period."

Lukaku, who scored 14 goals

last season to guide Napoli to the Serie A title, has endured a torrid campaign plagued by fitness issues. He was sidelined for the first half of the season due to a hamstring injury while he has managed one league goal in five substitute appearances since his return in January.

The 32-year-old striker defended his decision to remain in Belgium for treatment, citing ongoing physical problems that have hampered his return to peak form.

"The truth is the last few weeks I wasn't feeling right physically and I had it checked out while I was in Belgium and it showed that there was an inflammation and liquid on my hip flexor muscle next to my scar tissue," Lukaku said on Monday.

"Since it is the second problem I had since coming back early November, I chose to do the rehab in Belgium so I can help when called upon. I could never turn my back on Napoli, never. There's nothing more I would love to do than play and win (with) my team. But right now I have to make sure I am clinically a 100%."

Napoli are third in Serie A, seven points behind leaders Inter Milan. They next host second-placed AC Milan on Monday.



Woods told police he was looking at phone before rollover crash

Tiger Woods told authorities he was looking down at his phone and did not realize the truck in front of him had slowed down before his rollover crash in Florida last week, according to a probable cause affidavit obtained yesterday. According to the report, Woods had two hydrocodone pills in his pocket and officers observed him to be lethargic, slow, "sweating profusely" with eyes that were bloodshot, glassy and pupils that were "extremely dilated". When asked during the criminal DUI investigation if he took any prescription medication, the report said the golfer replied "I take a few" while adding he had done so earlier in the morning. Woods' manager did not immediately respond when asked to comment on details of the probable cause affidavit. A Martin County Sheriff's deputy wrote in the report that Woods, when asked about the collision, said he was looking at his cell phone and changing the radio station which caused him not to see a truck slowing down before the crash. The officer said in the report he observed Woods "limping and stumbling" and added that the golfer told him he has had seven back surgeries.

BOTTOMLINE

US pro table tennis league blasts niche sport into spotlight

AFP
Lawrenceville, United States

Don't call it the "Marty Supreme" effect: table tennis is a growing sport in the United States, in part because of a new professional league giving the parlor game an ultra-competitive edge.

Founded three years ago by tech entrepreneur Flint Lane, Major League Table Tennis (MLTT) is now home to several ping pong players in the global top 100, including Amy Wang and Lily Zhang, who represented Team USA at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

At a weekend MLTT match in Princeton, New Jersey, about 100 spectators watched Kotomi Omoda secure victory for the Portland Paddlers against the Florida Crocs.

Nikhil Kumar, who also plays for the Paddlers and competed in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, told AFP he was "a little bit skeptical" when he first heard of Major League Table Tennis.

Now that the league has been around for a few years, however, "there's been a lot of progression for us in terms of the level of the play and the players that are coming to play stronger," he said.

The Olympic sport's growing US fandom is evident in MLTT ticket sales, which are up 50 percent compared to last year, according to founder Lane.

"I don't know if I would be a season ticket holder, but I'm killing a Saturday afternoon," Rich-



USA's Amy Wang.

ard Kurland, a spectators at the match, told AFP.

"It's something different. I'll have stories to tell my friends for the next few weeks, some photos. I would definitely come back."

Despite the league's professional status, MLTT players hold day jobs to support themselves.

"I hope one day that it could be enough," said Kumar, who works as an engineer at a New York tech startup. "I'd love to play table tennis as a living."

Lane told AFP that MLTT ranks among the top professional leagues in the world, though it still trails the Chinese, Japanese, French and German leagues.

"But we're not competing against them either," Lane said, comparing it to Major League Soccer, the US football league that generate billions of dollars without being among the top leagues globally.

To grow the American audience for the sport, MLTT launched its

own streaming channel in September, Table Tennis TV. It also created a ranking system, Spindex, with the hopes of making it a ratings scale similar to golf handicaps.

USA Table Tennis, the non-profit governing body for the sport in America, had around 14,000 members as of late 2025.

PingPod, a chain of table tennis venues in the United States, reported it had 160,000 registered users.

"Having a well-funded, well-organized professional league in the United States is a good tailwind, a good boost for the sport, both in terms of participation and spectatorship," PingPod co-CEO David Silberman told AFP.

The sport also came to recent prominence in popular culture with the release of the Oscar-nominated film "Marty Supreme," which saw famed actor Timothee Chalamet portray table tennis player Marty Mauser in 1950s New York, based loosely on real-life player Marty Reisman.

The film grossed almost \$100 million in the United States, becoming the top-grossing picture for independent film distributor A24. "The buzz about Marty Supreme, the way that I talk about table tennis at work, or at the store in public, is completely different with the movie," said table tennis fan Revan Raguidin, who supports the Princeton Revolution MLTT team.

"I think there's so much more recognition of the sport this way, and I am really grateful for it."

SPOTLIGHT

Al Rayyan and Al Wajba in final of Al Thumama Ramadan Football



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Rayyan and Al Wajba booked their places in the final of the third edition of the Al Thumama Ramadan Football Tournament at the Al Furjan Stadium in Al Thumama.

In the semi-finals, Al Rayyan defeated Al Shaab 4-0 while Al Wajba secured a 3-0 win over Al Raya Medical.

Al Shaab and Al Raya Medical will now meet in the third-place play-off.

Al Rayyan's run to the final gathered momentum late in the group stage.

They had been sitting fourth before a crucial 3-0 win over Al Zaem pushed them into the semi-

finals, where they carried that form forward with a dominant display.

The tournament, held for players aged 10 to 14, featured 13 teams split into two groups. Group A included Doha, Turki Bin Abdullah, Al Wajba, Al Zaem, Al Rayyan and Al Thumama.

Group B featured Al Dafna, Al Shaab, Al Waab, Al Raya Medical, Palestine, Al Shaqab and Al Shahaniya.

Winners will receive QR7,000 along with the trophy and medals, while the runners-up will earn QR5,000.

The third-place team will take home QR3,000. Individual awards will also be presented.

The best player, top scorer and best goalkeeper will each receive QR500, while the best team award carries a prize of QR3,000.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Spurs appoint De Zerbi in battle for survival

Tottenham sit one point outside the relegation zone with seven games remaining

AFP
London

Tottenham appointed Roberto De Zerbi as the club's third manager of the season as they battle to avoid relegation from English football's top flight for the first time in nearly 50 years. Former Brighton and Marseille boss De Zerbi has reportedly been handed a lucrative five-year deal to convince him to take the job immediately rather than waiting to see which division Spurs are in next season. Tottenham sit just one point outside the relegation zone with seven games of the Premier League season remaining. De Zerbi replaces Igor Tudor, whose interim reign at the north London club lasted just seven games after Spurs crashed out of the Champions League and fell ever closer to dropping into the second tier. "I am delighted to be joining this fantastic football club, which is one of the biggest and most prestigious in the world," said De Zerbi in a Tottenham statement. "I am here because I believe in that ambition and have signed a long-term contract to give everything to deliver it. Our short-term priority is to climb the Premier League table, which will be the complete focus until the final whistle of the last game of the season." Spurs' sporting director Johan Lange insisted De Zerbi - "one of the most creative and forward-thinking coaches in world football" - had always been the club's first choice to take over on a full-time basis. "Roberto was our number one target for the summer and we are very pleased to be able to bring him in now," said Lange. De Zerbi established a positive reputation for himself in England during a two-year spell as Brighton boss between 2022 and 2024. His time at Marseille also started well, with the club finishing second to Paris Saint-Germain in Ligue 1 last season to qualify for the Champions League. But he left the French club in February after fail-

ing to make it out of the Champions League phase and following a humiliating 5-0 defeat by PSG. Tottenham have not tasted life outside the top flight of English football since the 1977/78 season. 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. Last season they ended a 17-year trophy drought by winning the Europa League. But the warning signs of a battle for survival were there as Ange 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 and replaced by Tudor. De Zerbi's first match in charge will be away to Sunderland on April 12. However, his appointment has been far from universally approved by the Tottenham fanbase. Some fan groups have raised objections to his support for Mason Greenwood during his time at Marseille. Former England international Greenwood controversially signed for Marseille in July 2024 after a season on loan from Manchester United at Spanish club Getafe. He was suspended by United in January 2022 following allegations of attempted rape and sexual assault. Greenwood always denied the allegations and prosecutors dropped charges in February 2023. But the Tottenham Supporters' Trust responded to De Zerbi's appointment by saying in a statement: "Any perceived sympathy toward alleged perpetrators of physical or sexual violence against women fundamentally undermines trust in the custodianship of this club."



Former Brighton and Marseille boss Roberto De Zerbi has reportedly been handed a lucrative five-year deal to convince him to take the job immediately rather than waiting to see which division Spurs are in next season. (Reuters)

Chelsea's Cucurella laments 'instability' caused by Maresca exit

London: Chelsea's Marc Cucurella believes former manager Enzo Maresca's departure and the club's policy of signing young players is behind the London side's recent struggles. Maresca left Stamford Bridge by mutual consent on New Year's Day after just 18 months in charge following a breakdown in his relationship with the London side's hierarchy. Chelsea were then fifth in the Premier League table - 15 points adrift of leaders Arsenal. The Italian was initially replaced by Under-21s coach Calum McFarlane before current manager Liam Rosenior arrived from Strasbourg - a club also owned by Blues supremo Todd Boehly and Clearlake Capital. Chelsea, however, have won only four of their last 12 matches, suffering a humiliating 8-2 aggregate defeat by holders Paris Saint-Germain as they crashed out of the Champions League and slipping to sixth in the Premier League. While Chelsea and Spain defender Cucurella said Rosenior's "football ideas are good", he believes changing managers in mid-season has caused "instability" at Stamford Bridge. "These are decisions taken by the club. If you asked me, I would not have made this decision," the 27-year-old told the Athletic. "To make a change like that, the best thing is to wait until the end of the season. You would give everyone, the players and the new manager, time to get ready, have a full pre-season. The instability around the club comes from this, in a nutshell. We had a caretaker manager first, then a new manager, with new ideas and no time to work on them. It is what it is." Cucurella also believes Chelsea's policy of primarily re-cruiting younger players has left them lacking the experience to compete for trophies. "We have a good core of players," he added. "The foundations are there. But to fight for major trophies such as the Premier League or the Champions League, you need more. Signing young players only might complicate achieving those goals. Against PSG, we lacked players that had gone through situations like that."

SPOTLIGHT

Newcastle CEO gives Howe support after painful losses



Reuters
London

Newcastle United chief executive David Hopkinson offered lukewarm backing to under-fire manager Eddie Howe after supporters booed the team off following a derby defeat by bitter rivals Sunderland. Howe's side slumped to 12th in the Premier League following the dramatic 2-1 loss at St James' Park in their last game before the international break, as promoted Sunderland achieved a league double over their neighbours. The defeat came days after Newcastle capitulated in spectacular fashion at

Barcelona in the Champions League, suffering a humiliating 7-2 thrashing after playing out a 1-1 draw in the first leg against the Spanish side. "I don't have a stance on his future. What I can tell you is that the derby loss hurt," Hopkinson told reporters. "We take it seriously. There's nothing within us that thinks, 'Well, it's just three points and on we go! It has resonated. I spent a couple of hours in a one-on-one lunch recently with Eddie and we talked through a multitude of things, including that.'" Howe, who signed a long-term contract in 2022, has seven games to improve Newcastle's position in the Premier League standings if they are to play in Europe next season. They sit six points behind sixth-

placed Chelsea. Hired in 2021, Howe has led Newcastle to Champions League qualification twice and ended the club's 70-year trophy drought when they won the League Cup last season. "Eddie is our manager. I expect to have a great run to the end of the season here and we will talk about the future when it's time," Hopkinson added. "Right now, we're focused on this season's competition." Newcastle announced record revenues of 335.3m pounds (\$443m) for the year ending June 2025. The club said commercial income rose 44% despite not playing European competition during the accounting period and they posted a profit after tax of 34.7m pounds.



Australia head to World Cup on a high after crushing Curacao 5-1

Melbourne: Watford striker Nestory Irankunda bagged a brace as Australia hammered fellow World Cup qualifier Curacao 5-1 in Melbourne, ensuring they head to North America on a high. It was the Socceroos' final home game before the global showpiece in June-July, building on a 1-0 win against Cameroon last week. Curacao have now crashed to consecutive defeats after losing 2-0 to China, with new Dutch coach Fred Rutten facing a formidable task at the Caribbean island nation's maiden World Cup. "A wonderful send off. We wanted to win this game and go off on a high note, and scoring five is a nice bonus," said Australia coach Tony Popovic. "We considered a soft goal... things to work on, but there was a great reaction after that." Australia are in World Cup Group D with co-hosts the United States, Paraguay and either Kosovo or Turkey. Curacao are in a challenging Group E with Germany, Ivory Coast and Ecuador. The Socceroos started slowly but got the breakthrough on 23 minutes after a loose pass from Curacao captain Leandro Bacuna. It went to Kai Trewin who via Deni Juric found Awer Mabil with the Spain-based striker chipping over the goalkeeper. Curacao, the smallest nation ever to make a World Cup,

were fortunate to reach half-time only 1-0 behind, but struck back soon after the restart. Substitute Arjany Martha slotted the ball through goalkeeper Mat Ryan's legs, only for Australia to respond emphatically. They collected two goals in four minutes, the first a powerful header by Parma defender Alessandro Circati then a curling shot from dynamic Feyenoord star Jordan Bos. Irankunda added a fourth with 10 minutes left, doing a backflip in celebration, and put another past the goalkeeper soon after as Curacao went to sleep. After sticking the landing on a gymnastic back-flip, Irankunda put on a sequined glove thrown to him by an on-field photographer and danced a jig with Jackson's trademark crotch-grab. Irankunda said the photographer was a friend who had given him the celebration idea in a chat on Instagram. Cameroon beat Ivory 2-0 in an earlier match in Melbourne despite having coach David Pagou sent off. They struck early with Kari Etta Eyong opening their account in the third minute and Saidou Alioum doubling it six minutes later. There was drama in the second-half when coach David Pagou angrily protested a foul on Mael Fernandez Monyebe.

ROUND-UP

Ghana sack Addo 10 weeks before World Cup

Ghana have parted ways with coach Otto Addo, with 72 days remaining until the kickoff of the 2026 World Cup, the country's football association (GFA) announced. The decision came a few hours following a 2-1 defeat by Germany in Stuttgart during their preparation for the tournament which will be held in North America next summer. Ghana also lost 5-1 in Austria on Friday. Former Borussia Dortmund player Otto Addo, appointed for a second stint in March 2024, failed to qualify Ghana for the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations despite having Premier League players Antoine Semenyo and Mohamed Kudus in his squad. The German-born coach won eight matches and lost nine in 22 games in charge of the West African nation. Otto Addo, 50, led Ghana at the 2022 World Cup, after previously working as an assistant to Milovan Rajevac. They recorded a 3-2 win over South Korea in Qatar but exited at the group stage after defeats by Portugal and Uruguay. Ghana, who reached the World Cup for the fifth time, are in Group L along with Croatia, England and Panama. DAYLIGHT OFFSIDE RULE TO BEGIN TRIAL IN CANADIAN PREMIER LEAGUE The Canadian Premier League (CPL) will become the first professional competition to stage an official pilot of the alternative offside law during the 2026 season, the league said in a statement. The revised interpretation, proposed by former Arsenal manager and current FIFA Chief of Global Football Development Arsene Wenger, is aimed at boosting attacking play and improving the flow in competitive matches, the statement added. Under the new approach, an attacking player will be ruled offside only if there is clear gap, or "daylight", between the attacker and the defender, meaning the attacker will be considered



inside if any part of the body that can legally score is level with or behind the second-to-last defender. The CPL said the trial will be conducted in close collaboration with FIFA, which will oversee the research and evaluation framework, while working with Canada Soccer to prepare match officials, players and clubs. Alongside the offside experiment, the CPL will also introduce FIFA-designed and IFAB-approved measures, including Football Video Support, aimed at cutting down time-wasting and improving match efficiency. ANCELOTTI SAYS DANILLO CERTAIN TO BE PART OF BRAZIL WORLD CUP SQUAD Brazil head coach Carlo Ancelotti has backed veteran defender Danilo to be part of his final 26-man squad for this year's World Cup in North America, adding that his squad is largely settled. Brazil have been drawn in Group C alongside Morocco, Haiti and Scotland for the June 11 to July 19 tournament, with Ancelotti

set to announce his final squad by May 18. "Danilo is a very important player, not only on the pitch but also off it," Ancelotti told reporters in Orlando, ahead of his side's warm-up friendly game against Croatia. "Danilo is certain to be in the final 26-man squad because I like him... his character, his personality, his style of play. He can play in all defensive positions. I have a fairly clear idea of the starting line-up for the first match, and the final squad is also pretty much set." Former Real Madrid and Manchester City defender Danilo, 34, is currently at Brazil club Flamengo. He has played 67 internationals for Brazil across all competitions so far. Ancelotti said a strong defensive foundation would be essential for Brazil to win a sixth World Cup. SAN SIRO SALE TO INTER AND AC MILAN PROBED FOR BID RIGGING: MEDIA The sale of the San Siro stadium by the city of Milan to Italian football giants Inter Milan and AC Milan is being investigated for bid rigging, Italian news reports. Nine people are under investigation after Italy's financial police carried out searches at Milan City Hall and the company owned by Inter and AC Milan which manages the San Siro, according to media reports. Those being investigated include the former CEO of Inter, Alessandro Antonello, representatives from both clubs and the city of Milan's general manager, Christian Malangone, who has been described as Mayor Giuseppe Sala's right-hand man. Accusations of bid rigging centre on the manner in which the 197m euros (\$227m) sale of 28 hectares (70 acres) of public land on which the San Siro sits was approved in late September. Inter and AC Milan are planning to knock down the San Siro after having built a new 70,000-capacity arena on the land immediately to the west of the current stadium.