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Delhi make winning start to IPL as Rizvi downs LSG



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Dubawi Spectre lands Al Jassasiya Cup in a thriller at Al Rayyan track

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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Ailing Italy at new low after missing out on yet another World Cup

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FOOTBALL

Iraq plot 'shock' as famous win seals World Cup return

Iraq beat Bolivia to secure their first appearance at the World Cup since Mexico in 1986



Iraq's forward Aymen Hussein (second right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Bolivia during the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifiers intercontinental playoff at the BBVA Stadium in Guadalupe, Mexico, on Tuesday. (AFP)

AFP
Monterrey, Mexico

Coach Graham Arnold challenged his players to "shock the world" after Iraq became the 48th and final team to qualify for the World Cup with a nerve-shredding 2-1 win over Bolivia in an intercontinental playoff in Mexico on Tuesday.

Iraq, whose preparations were disrupted by the war in the Middle East, sealed their first appearance at the finals in 40 years and will play in Group I against France, Senegal and Norway. Goals from Ali al-Hamadi and Aymen Hussein secured a famous win for Iraq, whose last appearance at the World Cup came at Mexico in 1986.

"With everything going on in the Middle East at the moment it made it harder for the players," said the Australian Arnold, who had initially sought to have the fixture postponed due to the disruption caused by the conflict.

"Delighted for the players, very good

boys, very happy for the 46 million Iraqis," he added. "Hopefully it will help change the perception of Iraq and the football in Iraq. Doing something in the World Cup nobody expects us to do. Let's shock the world."

Because of travel disruption caused by the US-Israel war on Iran, most of the Iraqi squad only reached Mexico after a grueling three-day journey from Baghdad that began with an overland crossing into Jordan. But there was little sign of weariness during a confident start by Iraq, who took the lead after nine minutes through Luton Town striker Al-Hamadi - the 24-year-old who moved to Liverpool as a toddler following the outbreak of the 2003 Iraq war.

Iraq midfielder Amir al-Ammari won a corner after a superb free-kick that was saved at full stretch from Bolivia goalkeeper Guillermo Viscarra. From the subsequent set piece Al-Ammari curled a pinpoint corner on to the head of Al-Hamadi who nodded home for 1-0.

Iraq were well worth the early goal and looked in control until Bolivia, who had gradually grown into the game, equalised

after 38 minutes. Ramiro Vaca's shot from the edge of the area was controlled with one touch by Moises Paniagua and the Morocco-based central midfielder swept into the roof of the net.

The goal stunned Iraq and Bolivia looked likely to grab a second after dominating the remainder of the half. Iraq regained the lead eight minutes after the break, when a long ball forward was nodded into the path of substitute Marko Lawk-Farji.

His cross found captain Hussein and the veteran striker clipped a first-time finish into the bottom corner. Bolivia pressed frantically for a goal to force extra-time, but Iraq's well-marshalled defence held firm during nine minutes of stoppage time.

The 62-year-old Arnold, who took Australia to the last 16 of the Qatar World Cup in 2022, said: "We have two months to get fit. For us to do something at this World Cup would be a miracle."

Oscar Villegas, the Bolivia coach, was visibly distraught. "Devastated, totally devastated because we believed we could be at the World Cup," he said.

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026™

GROUP STAGE

A	MEXICO SOUTH AFRICA KOREA REPUBLIC CZECHIA	G	BELGIUM EGYPT IRAN NEW ZEALAND
B	CANADA BOLIVIA AND HONDURAS QATAR SWITZERLAND	H	SPAIN CABO VERDE SAUDI ARABIA URUGUAY
C	BRAZIL MOROCCO HAITI SCOTLAND	I	FRANCE SENEGAL IRAQ NORWAY
D	USA PARAGUAY AUSTRALIA TURKEY	J	ARGENTINA ALGERIA AUSTRIA JORDAN
E	GERMANY CURAÇAO CÔTE D'IVOIRE ECUADOR	K	PORTUGAL CONGO DR UZBEKISTAN COLOMBIA
F	NETHERLANDS JAPAN SWEDEN TUNISIA	L	ENGLAND CROATIA GHANA PANAMA

The 12 groups for the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico after the conclusion of the European play-offs and inter-continental play-offs on Tuesday.

DR Congo score extra-time winner against Jamaica to qualify for World Cup

Guadalajara, Mexico: The Democratic Republic of Congo qualified for the World Cup for the first time since 1974 after Axel Tuanzebe netted an extra-time winner to see off Jamaica 1-0 in their inter-confederation playoff on Tuesday.

Former England under-21 international Tuanzebe bundled the ball over the line from a corner in the 100th minute but was made to wait for more than a minute while it was checked for a possible handball before being confirmed as a goal.

It was as much as the Congolese deserved having dominated a fast-flowing match with few clear chances at Estadio Guadalajara - one of three Mexican venues for the June 11 to July 19 World Cup which is also being co-hosted by the US and Canada.

"We're happy, we're really delighted,"

said striker Cedric Bakambu after his team grabbed the second-last available slot at the tournament. "Right now, I don't think we fully realise it yet, but when we get back to Kinshasa, it's going to be crazy ... congratulations to my teammates and to all Congolese people around the world."

It is the second time DR Congo have qualified for the finals after their initial appearance 52 years ago when the country was known as Zaire. They are the 10th African country to have qualified and will compete in Group K against Colombia, Portugal and Uzbekistan.

Jamaica were playing a second game in five days after beating New Caledonia 1-0 last Thursday in their semi-final tie, also in Guadalajara. DR Congo's higher FIFA ranking meant they were seeded straight into Tuesday's decider.

Ninety amateurs to battle for Qatar Open Golf Championship

Doha: The 40th Qatar Open Golf Championship tees off today at Doha Golf Club, with a field of 90 players competing over three days in one of the country's leading amateur tournaments.

A strong home contingent headlines the field, with Qatar's national team competing alongside regional and international players. Among those in action are Saleh al-Kaabi, Daniel Sokolov, Jaham al-Kuwari and Abdulrahman al-Shahrani, joined by Allard Bilstra, Niklas Björkhammer, Richard Bolton, Tushardip Burgohin, Stephen Britton, Claes Byberg, Matthew Castel, Martin Clancy, Laurent Constant and Winston Agcon.

Regular amateur participants also return, maintaining the event's tradition of blending emerging and experienced talent. The tournament will be played in a singles stroke-play format over the first two rounds.

At the end of tomorrow's play, the top 50 competitors will advance to Saturday's final round, where the champion will be decided.

Victory carries added significance, with the winner earning a place in the Qatar Masters, one of the region's most prominent events featuring leading professional golfers from around the world. Now in its 40th year, the Qatar Open remains a key fixture on the domestic calendar, offering local players valuable competitive exposure while reinforcing Qatar's growing presence in the sport.

SPOTLIGHT

Bosnia's Dzeko declares injury a twist of fate

Reuters
Zenica

Bosnia captain Edin Dzeko could only clutch an ice pack and watch as his teammates secured World Cup qualification, the 40-year-old declaring it must have been "fate" after a last-gasp injury ruled him out of Tuesday's penalty shootout against Italy.

The game in Zenica ended 1-1 after extra time, with Bosnia coming from behind against 10-man Italy in a match full of dramatic twists and turns, and Dzeko hit the deck in the dying seconds after a foul by Davide Frattesi.

Home fans must have feared the worst when Bosnia's all-time top scorer made his way to the centre circle for the coin toss holding an ice pack on his shoulder, and in the end the striker left the pre-shootout formalities to a teammate.



Bosnia's captain Edin Dzeko (left) celebrates after his side beat Italy to qualify for the FIFA World Cup 2026 in Zenica, Bosnia. (AFP)

"I keep saying it must have been fate, for it to happen in the last second of the match, and then for me not to be able to take a penalty," Dzeko said at a euphoric press conference.

"Someone else stepped up instead of me, scored, and in the end we won. Who knows, maybe if I had taken it, I wouldn't have scored, so it all feels like it comes from above."

Bosnian keeper Nikola Vasilj did

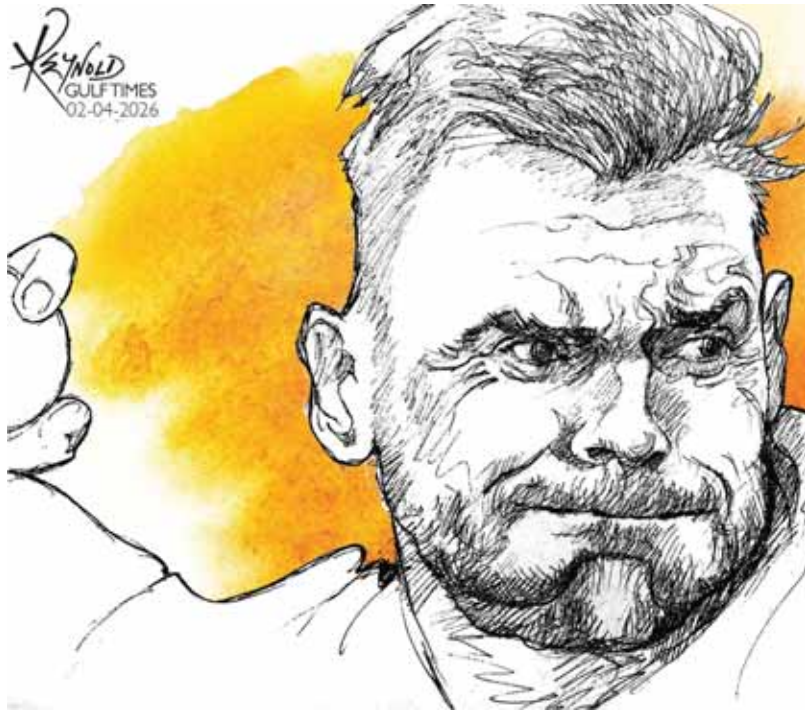
not even need to make a save during the shootout. Pio Esposito blazed Italy's first spot kick high over the bar and Bryan Cristante's penalty rocked the crossbar, while the hosts put away all four penalties.

Bosnia's final two takers, 18-year-old Kerim Alajbegovic and 21-year-old Esmir Bajraktarevic, have a combined age lower than Dzeko's, yet both stepped up with remarkable composure to convert.

Dzeko, who played and scored in Bosnia's only previous World Cup appearance in 2014, joined in the jubilant celebrations wearing a sling - still in place during the press conference - but sounded optimistic about his prospects of recovering in time for the finals. "We're all relieved about the arm, it's not the worst-case scenario," Dzeko said. "Most likely it won't need surgery. So I hope that in maybe a month, month and a half, I should be back."

COMMENT

Anderson backs England for Ashes revenge



AFP
London

Fast-bowling great James Anderson believes England can still regain the Ashes on home soil next year despite a dire series loss in Australia. The veteran paceman, effectively forced into England retirement by the current set-up, could only look on as Ben Stokes' men succumbed to a 4-1 loss in a five-Test contest from November to January. What made the reverse even tougher to take was that England had travelled 'Down Under' with hope of winning the Ashes for the first time since 2015 given they were up against a less than vintage Australia team. But Ben Stokes' men were undone by poor preparation, questionable selection and a lack of cricket nous by a more hardened Australia side, while England's cause was not helped by their drinking exploits a controversial mid-series break in Noosa. "Obviously, I think Ashes series are huge and everyone gets judged," said Anderson, still playing for Lancashire at the age of 43 during the county's pre-season media day yesterday.

Anderson, whose 704 Test wickets are an England record and the most taken by any fast bowler in the history of the format, added: "We've seen the backlash of losing in Australia quite heavily. I thought they had a great chance of causing an upset or winning, certainly, out in Australia. I still feel like they've got a great chance of winning in England, as well." England cricket chiefs decided against ditching Stokes as Test captain, with coach Brendon McCullum and managing director Rob Key also keeping their jobs despite a comprehensive defeat. Anderson, who will captain Lancashire in this season's first-class County Championship, was coy when asked if England had been right to retain the trio, saying: "They've decided that that's the right way to go." "We've seen it in the past where people have lost their jobs after Ashes series and maybe knee-jerk reactions to what that is." Anderson, who turns 44 in July, was however buoyed by the form shown in Australia by England paceman Josh Tongue although concerned by the prospects for express quick Jofra Archer. "I love Josh Tongue," said Anderson.

"I think he's a serious bowler. And I'm sure he'll play many, many more Tests. Jofra, I'm not sure, with his injuries and T20 commitments, with his Test career, what the future looks like for that," Anderson added.

England's Brook, Bethell let off with warning over NZ nightclub altercation England white-ball captain Harry Brook and all-rounder Jacob Bethell have been let off with a warning by the independent Cricket Regulator after an investigation into an altercation with a nightclub bouncer in New Zealand late last year. Brook, who had initially said he was alone in the altercation in Wellington after being denied entry into a nightclub, admitted in January that he had lied to protect his teammates. The Regulator said yesterday that both Brook and Bethell had accepted they had breached the professional conduct regulations. Fast bowler Tongue was also present during the incident. "No further action is to be taken by the Regulator in relation to Josh Tongue," the Regulator added.

SPOTLIGHT

Rizvi the batting hero as Capitals start with a win

Lucknow Super Giants fail with the bat after taking first strike

AFP
Lucknow, India

Delhi Capitals recovered from a top-order collapse as Sameer Rizvi hit an unbeaten half-century to help secure a six-wicket win over the Lucknow Super Giants in the IPL yesterday. South Africa seamer Lungi Ngidi took three wickets as Delhi bowled out hosts Lucknow for 141, a total the Capitals overhauled with 17 balls to spare. Delhi slipped to 26-4 before impact substitute Rizvi, who struck 70 not out, and Tristan Stubbs, who made 39, put on an unbeaten stand of 119 to steer the team home. Mohammed Shami, in his debut season for Lucknow, dismissed KL Rahul for a duck with the first ball of the chase. Fellow quick Prince Yadav struck twice in one over to send back Pathum Nissanka (1) and Axar Patel (0) to leave Delhi in trouble 4.3 overs into their run chase. But Rizvi, who hit five fours and four sixes in his 47-ball knock, and Stubbs steadied the ship before unleashing as the target came into view. The 22-year-old Rizvi raised his fifty with a four off part-time spinner Aiden Markram and later hit the winning six. Earlier, Lucknow skipper



Delhi Capitals' Sameer Rizvi watches the ball after playing a shot during the IPL match against Lucknow Super Giants at the Ekana Cricket Stadium in Lucknow yesterday. (AFP)

Rishabh Pant opened the innings with Mitchell Marsh but was run out for seven after a hit from his fellow batter grazed the bowler's arm to hit the stumps at the non-striker's end. Delhi skipper Patel bowled Markram for 11 and wickets fell at regular intervals. Ngidi sent back Nicholas Pooran for eight with a well-disguised

slower delivery that rattled the stumps. Marsh attempted to pull things back with his 35 but fell in his attempt to attack left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav and the batting then collapsed. Abdul Samad's 25-ball 36 boosted the total but the Lucknow innings lasted for just 18.4 overs after Ngidi struck with suc-

cessful balls. Left-arm quick T Natarajan also took three wickets. **BRIEF SCORES** Delhi Capitals 145 for 4 (Rizvi 70*, Stubbs 39*, Prince 2-20) beat Lucknow Super Giants 141 (Samad 36, Marsh 35, Ngidi 3-27, Natarajan 3-29, Kuldeep 2-31) by six wickets

PSL: Farhan smashes 106 as Multan beat Hyderabad



Sahibzada Farhan of Multan Sultans in action against Hyderabad Kingsmen during their PSL match in Lahore yesterday. Batting first, Kingsmen scored 225/5 in 20 overs. Maaz Sadaqat scored 62 and Sharjeel Khan remained unbeaten on 51. In reply, Sultans were powered home by Farhan who scored 106 off 57 deliveries. Farhan hit seven 4s and eight 6s as Sultans won by four wickets.

FOCUS

Connolly hits reset button and fires Punjab to victory on IPL debut

Reuters
Mumbai

Cooper Connolly marked his Indian Premier League (IPL) debut by smashing an unbeaten 72 to guide Punjab Kings to a three-wicket win over Gujarat Titans on Tuesday, and the Australian all-rounder credited his turnaround in form to a mental reset. The 22-year-old had struggled in recent months and managed to score just one run in three Twenty20 International innings during Australia's 3-0 series defeat by Pakistan this year. At the 2026 T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka, he played in two games as Australia crashed out in the group stage, scoring three and 11. "I had a couple of weeks at home, a refresh and reset, spent some time with family and friends," said Connolly, who was named player of the match. "That was probably the point where I changed. It was just like, 'yeah, okay, I'm just going to reset, and I'm going to go into the IPL fresh.'" Connolly's knock was crucial for Punjab as he combined with Marco Jansen and Xavier Bartlett in key partnerships to guide them out of trouble in the chase after they had lost four wickets for eight runs. "To be honest, not a lot was said. It was sort of relaxed out there. We still felt like we were in a really good position to win the game. And, Marco was pretty calm, so was Xavier," he said. Connolly hit five sixes and five



fours, with Punjab captain Shreyas Iyer saying the Australian's shot-making was "surreal". "He's got a great awareness as a player. I've seen him in the past as well, playing for Australia. He's got a great mindset and hopefully he continues with the same form," Iyer added. Punjab, fourth in the IPL standings, next face Chennai Super Kings tomorrow. **India to tour Zimbabwe for three T20 matches** India will tour Zimbabwe for three T20 internationals in July, the country's cricket board said yesterday, packing more matches into their already-busy calendar. The matches will all be played in Harare - on July 23, 25 and 26 - before the teams meet again in January next year for three ODI matches in India. India last toured Zimbabwe in 2024, winning a five-match T20 series 4-1. Top-ranked India, led by Suryakumar Yadav, won the T20 World Cup last month at home.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Konstas, Maxwell axed as CA unveil contract list

AFP
Sydney

Young opening batsman Sam Konstas and veteran all-rounder Glenn Maxwell were axed yesterday as Cricket Australia announced a list of 21 nationally contracted players for the 2026-27 season. Australia, who will play 20 Tests in a 12-month period from August, have opted to go with opener Jake Weatherald, 31, instead of the out-of-form 20-year-old Konstas. With Australia facing such a Test-heavy schedule, white-ball specialists Maxwell and Matt Short were also dropped from last year's list along with retired opener Usman Khawaja and injured fast bowler Lance Morris. A surprise was the omission of fast bowler Jhye Richardson, who played his first Test in four years in the Boxing Day Ashes clash. The 29-year-old had been



touted as one of the natural successors to Australia's ageing pace stalwarts Mitchell Starc (36), Josh Hazlewood (35) and Scott Boland (36). Cricket Australia instead opted to reward fellow Ashes-winning quick bowlers Brendan Doggett, who is 31, and the 36-year-old Michael Neser. "The next 12 months encom-

passes a busy Test schedule across a range of conditions and challenges," said chair of men's selectors George Bailey. "This is reflected in the contract list through a predominance of Test and multi-format players for this cycle." Australia start their 2026-27 season with a two-match home series against Bangladesh in Au-

gust. They will travel for three ODIs in Zimbabwe, plus three ODIs and three Tests in South Africa during September and October. Australia return home for a white-ball series against England followed by 10 Tests in 14 weeks, starting with four at home to New Zealand in December and January. A five-Test tour of India begins on January 21 and the season will end with the 150th anniversary Test against England at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in March, 2027. **Cricket Australia contracted men's players 2026-27:** Xavier Bartlett, Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Pat Cummins, Brendan Doggett, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Matthew Kuhnemann, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Todd Murphy, Michael Neser, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc, Jake Weatherald, Beau Webster, Adam Zampa

HORSE RACING

Dubawi Spectre claims Al Jassasiya Cup in a thriller

Trainer al-Ghazali and jockey Casamento complete a hat-trick of wins

By Sports Reporter
Doha

It was a memorable day at the track for trainer Jassim al-Ghazali and jockey Marco Casamento at Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

The in-form trainer-jockey partnership celebrated a superb hat-trick of victories, highlighted by Dubawi Spectre's success in the feature race, the Al Jassasiya Cup. The Thoroughbred Handicap (80-100), run over 1900m (Class 2) for horses aged four and above, brought together a competitive field of 14 and delivered a thrilling finish.

The six-year-old bay gelding, in the colours of HE Mansoor bin Ebrahim al-Mahmoud and trained by Jassim al-Ghazali, recorded a second consecutive victory under Casamento supervision and a third from six starts this campaign, getting the verdict by a nose after being held up for much of the journey before finishing strongly, completing a notable one-two for the yard.

Studio City set the early pace before National Park and Nuvolari moved up to contest the lead, with National Park eventually taking control. The order at the front remained largely unchanged through the middle stages and into the straight, with Studio City, Nuvolari and Thor's Hammer all in close attendance.

Passing the 200m marker, Studio City briefly struck the front, but Dubawi Spectre, who had been making steady progress from off the pace, unleashed a powerful late surge to hit the lead.

He was immediately joined by stablemate Thor's Hammer, and the pair engaged in a fierce duel to the line. The finish required a photo, with Dubawi Spectre just getting his nose down in time to



Jockey Marco Casamento guided Dubawi Spectre to the Al Jassasiya Cup victory at the Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. **PICTURE: Juhaim**

deny Thor's Hammer, who represents Al Rufaa Racing and is also prepared by al-Ghazali, with Salem Alajmi in the saddle.

Studio City, racing for Faleh Suwayed al-Ajami, from the Mohammed al-Ghazali yard and partnered by Faleh Bughenaim, finished third, a length behind the runner-up.

In the race two of the day, al-Ghazali and Casamento guided Al Qaws to victory in the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-65) over 1900m for four-year-olds and upwards, with fourteen declared runners.

The six-year-old grey gelding, carrying the colours of Al Ghazali Stud, doubled his tally following his first victory in January, holding on by half a length. The trainer-jockey hit the winner's circle for the first time yesterday, when Gulf Legend won the Thoroughbred

Handicap (65-85) over 2500m (Class 4) for four-year-olds and upwards, featuring a field of 13.

The five-year-old bay gelding, in the silks of Sheikh Abdul Rahman Rashid al-Thani, prepared by al-Ghazali and with Casamento at the reins, continued his excellent recent run, adding a second win this season following a victory and a runner-up effort in February, scoring by three and a half lengths while completing a double on the day for both trainer and jockey.

RESULTS
61st Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Al Jassasiya Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
1 - Al Jassasiya Cup, Thoroughbred Handicap (80-100)
Dubawi Spectre, Jassim Ghazali,

Marco Casamento
2 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Rumooz, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Soufiane Saadi
3 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-65)
Al Qaws, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
4 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75)
Star One, Maayouf bin Hashim al-Shamari, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
5 - Thoroughbred Handicap (65-85)
Gulf Legend, Jassim al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
6 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (0-60)
Tafawok, Jihad El Ahmad, Szczepan Mazur
7 - Thoroughbred Handicap (75-95)
Future Man, Mohd Ahmed Mohd Hasan al-Sulaiti, Jefferson Smith

THE 'MILLION DOLLAR' SENNA HELMET BOUGHT AT JAPAN GP

When Canadian collector Darren Jack discovered that an Ayrton Senna helmet he values at a million dollars was for sale in Japan, he jumped on a plane to acquire the piece of sporting history that the legendary Brazilian driver had with him during his fatal final Formula One Grand Prix. Jack, who AFP met at the Japan Grand Prix last weekend, showed off the iconic yellow helmet in its original 'A.S.'-initialised bag, which both belonged to the three-time world champion, who was killed aged 34 in a crash at the Imola circuit in San Marino on May 1, 1994. The Bell helmet is not the one Senna wore during that fatal race. But it is one of the three or four he had with him at the start of the 1994 season in Brazil, Japan and Imola, Jack claims. "Senna" definitely wore it in Brazil during the race weekend. But it travelled with the team to round two in Pacific Grand Prix and to Imola in this final race weekend," Jack said. "It was the only race weekend he had the Senna logo on. So this was added for Imola, which is significant because it means it was there. And

it's quite a crazy moment to think that (it's a) part of life and part of history." As evidence, Jack presented photos and videos from that period, which have been compared and analysed using recognition software, along with authentication letters, serial numbers, and letters from the manufacturer Bell and the Japanese seller. Jack, the CEO of a motorsport memorabilia collection, refused to reveal how much he paid for the item, but insisted "it's clear that it's a million-dollar helmet". However, despite already receiving lucrative offers - including from inside the F1 paddock at Suzuka - Jack said he won't sell the helmet... yet. "I love having it. I'm proud to own it. I'm a passionate collector first. That's how I started the business," the 46-year-old said. "So for me, it's a dream. What would I spend the money on? "There was a current F1 driver, who shall remain unnamed, who basically said, 'what if I gave you a million dollars now for it in the paddock this weekend?' And I said, 'no, not for sale.'"



Darren Jack, a Canadian motorsports memorabilia collector from Toronto, poses with the racing helmet worn by late Formula One legend Ayrton Senna, in Nagoya on March 30, 2026. **(AFP)**

GOLF

PGA Tour, Masters chairman support Tiger recovery pause

AFP
Washington

Tiger Woods received support from the PGA Tour and Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley after stepping away from golf to work on his health and well-being after a traffic accident.

The 50-year-old golfing legend was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence last Friday after the crash on Jupiter Island, Florida, in which no one was injured.

Woods, who passed a breathalyzer exam but refused to take a urinalysis, pleaded not guilty to driving under the influence on Tuesday and later said in a statement he was stepping away from golf to work on himself.

"I know and understand the seriousness of the situation I find myself in," Woods said.

"I am stepping away for a period of time to seek treatment and focus on my health. This is necessary in order for me to prioritize my well-being and work toward lasting recovery.

"I'm committed to taking the time needed to return in a healthier, stronger and more focused place, both personally and professionally."

Woods had not dismissed talk of playing in next week's Masters when he competed in a TGL indoor simulator event last week, but his status was listed as a non-playing past champion on the Masters website on Wednesday.

"Augusta National Golf Club

and the Masters Tournament fully support Tiger Woods as he focuses on his well-being," Augusta National chairman Ridley said in a statement. "Although Tiger will not be joining us in person next week, his presence will be felt here in Augusta."

That likely means Woods will not be attending next week's Masters Champions Dinner.

Woods, a 15-time major winner, also quickly drew support from the PGA Tour.

"Tiger Woods is a legend of our sport whose impact extends far beyond his achievements on the course. But above all else, Tiger is a person, and our focus is on his health and well-being," the PGA Tour said in a statement. "Tiger continues to have our full support as he takes this important step."

Woods has not competed at the PGA Tour level since the 2024 British Open. He last completed 72 holes in an event at the 2024 Masters, where he finished 60th. PGA Tour chief executive officer Brian Rolapp said in a statement that Woods had helped him adjust to his role, which he began last June.

"Tiger Woods is one of the most influential figures the sports world has ever known," Rolapp said.

"Over the last year, I have come to appreciate Tiger not only for his impact on the game, but for his friendship and the perspective he has shared with me as I joined the golf industry.

"My thoughts are with him and his family as he takes this step, for which he has my full respect and support."

CYCLING

Late-charging Ganna denies Van Aert at Across Flanders

AFP
Waregem, Belgium

Filippo Ganna won the one-day semi-classic Across Flanders race yesterday as local favourite Wout van Aert was agonisingly caught just 100m from the finish after a brave solo breakaway.

"This is an amazing victory for me," said Ganna, of the Ineos-Grenadiers team, who had to fight back after breaking his front wheel and handlebars in two separate incidents earlier in the 185-kilometre race from Roeselare to Waregem.

"Wout made an impressive performance. To catch him was not easy, but in the end, the legs supported me to the finish line."

Three days after another long-range bid by Van Aert - alongside his great rival Mathieu van der Poel when he was caught a kilometre from the finish of In Flanders Fields - the Belgian was again denied at the death.

And it was the second straight year he had finished second in this race, called Dwars door Vlaanderen in Dutch, meaning

he has not won a major one-day race in more than two years.

The 31-year-old Belgian was far from down after the race.

"On this race I found the confidence that I've been lacking, I feel on good form," said Van Aert.

Van Aert had launched his attack up the Eikenberg cobbled climb with about 40km to ride and quickly caught three riders from an earlier breakaway.

He shed those three companions one by one as a charging peloton ate into the 45-second lead they had built up.

With the gap coming down, Ganna and Belgian Florian Vermeersch launched a counter-attack to try to catch Van Aert.

Vermeersch, who similarly was part of unsuccessful counter-attacks at In Flanders Fields and two days before that when Van der Poel won the E3 Saxo Classic, faded, but Ganna pushed on.

And the Italian was rewarded as he surged past the fading Van Aert with 100m left to finish just ahead of the Belgian and one second in front of the peloton, with Norwegian Soren Waerenskjold winning the race for third place.

FOOTBALL

Al Wajba emerge triumphant in Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Wajba clinched the title of the third Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament with a 1-0 victory over Al Rayyan in the final, capping a strong run in the youth competition for players aged 10 to 14.

The champions received QR7,000 along with gold medals, while the team's captain marked the occasion by wearing a traditional bisht during the awards ceremony, echoing a memorable football moment from Qatar's recent history.

Al Raya Medical secured third place after defeating Al Shaab 2-1 on penalties following a 1-1 draw, earning QR3,000 and bronze medals.

Al Rayyan finished runners-up, taking home QR5,000 and silver medals.

The tournament, held at Al Furjan Stadium in Al Thumama, was organised by the local organising committee in cooperation with the Qatar Sports for All Federation, bringing together 13 teams from across the country.

Chairman of the Organising Committee Hassan Ali al-Ishaq praised the event's execution and impact, saying: "This year's tournament was a model of organisation and professionalism. It brought together teams from across Qatar and provided a valuable opportunity to discover young talent."

He added: "We received many positive comments, and the tournament continues to grow as a leading Ramadan event for age groups."

Executive Director of the federation Abdullah al-Dosari highlighted its continued development, stating: "We will continue to organise tournaments in

a strong and distinctive manner." He added that the competition's success reflects the efforts of the organising team and its role in encouraging youth participation in sport.

Tournament Director Youssef Ali Abdul Noor underlined the level of competition, saying: "We are delighted with the great success of this edition."

He added: "The tournament has become an important platform for discovering talent, and we have seen players with promising potential for the future."

Al Wajba players and officials celebrate with the trophy after winning the third Al Thumama Ramadan Tournament with a 1-0 victory over Al Rayyan in the final. Al Raya Medical finished third after defeating Al Shaab 2-1 on penalties following a 1-1 draw.



FOOTBALL

Ailing Italy at new low after missing out on yet another World Cup

Azzurri fell at the play-offs again, this time after a penalty shoot-out against Bosnia

AFP
Rome

Italians will once again be forced to watch a World Cup from the sidelines after another play-off disaster highlighted just how far one of the great footballing nations has fallen. Four-time world champions, the football-mad country finds itself at its lowest ebb and without a clear path to a brighter future after missing out again through the play-offs, this time following a penalty shoot-out defeat to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

GATTUSO THE SCAPEGOAT?

Gennaro Gattuso knew he had a tough job on his hands when he was appointed in June, asked to replace Luciano Spalletti and take Italy to the World Cup with automatic qualification looking near-impossible after a 3-0 hammering at the hands of Erling Haaland's Norway.

One of the heroes of Italy's 2006 World Cup triumph, Gattuso remained vague on his future as coach even as Gabriele Gravina, the head of Italy's football federation (FIGC), asked him to stay beyond the end of his current contract which expires this summer.

Gattuso was a curious appointment given his spotty coaching career but Italy did not perform all that badly under him, with six wins from eight matches and 22 goals scored. He has created a strong team spirit which was lacking under the volatile Spalletti, but another humbling defeat to Norway in November, 4-1 at the San Siro of all places, laid bare the limits of a team sorely missing the star power of years gone by.

And Gattuso could yet pay the price for his team's failure, which came after being outplayed almost from the first minute by the exuberant Bosnians, as Gravina's position at the head of the FIGC is not completely safe.

A board meeting next week will decide on whether Gravina, who was elected FIGC chief in 2018 after Carlo Tavecchio stepped down following Italy's first World Cup play-off defeat to Sweden the previous year, will stay in place.

TWENTY YEARS OF HURT

The 20th anniversary of Italy's last World Cup win falls on July 9, during this summer's finals in the United States, Canada



Italy's goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma (left) argues with the referee after defender Alessandro Bastoni received a red card during the FIFA World Cup 2026 European qualification play-off final against Bosnia-Herzegovina in Zenica. (AFP)

and Mexico. But, if anything, that dramatic win on penalties over France feels even further away than that.

Faced with an empty summer, even Italy's victory at Euro 2020 has been devalued as the country fails to produce world class talent and its clubs, once the European elite, slip further behind their rivals, and above all the moneybags Premier League.

Italy, whose European title defence ended at the last 16 in 2024 with a footballing lesson by Switzerland, have not played a knockout match at a World Cup since 2006: for context, the iPhone was introduced to the market one year later.

"Today's results are the consequence of our attitude from 20 years ago, when we clung onto our best players like (Fabio) Cannavaro and (Francesco) Totti, thinking they would last forever," said Gianluigi Buf-

fon, another World Cup winner from 2006 involved with the national team. "Right then we should have been rethinking our tactical and technical models."

GRASSROOTS REFORM

Too late to have any effect on the current senior team, the FIGC announced earlier this month a new project for youth football, led by long-term coach Maurizio Sciacchi, who has had success with Italy's national youth teams.

Cesare Prandelli, Italy coach for the dismal display at the 2014 World Cup, is now involved in the FIGC's efforts to reform youth football after having criticised the way clubs coach the spontaneity out of young players.

"If 10 years ago we'd have had the good fortune to have a talent like Lamine Yamal,

we would have let him get away," Prandelli said last year. "Our coaches would have taken away his joy of playing."

The new project announced on March 18 centres on offering training for coaches at a vast number of youth football clubs who train some 700,000 children.

Simone Perrotta, who reports to Sciacchi, said that the aim is "to get the federation inside the clubs" and harmonise training methods in such a way as to encourage the development of individual skills and encourage invention.

Just 33 percent of Serie A players are eligible for national team selection. That number is higher than the 29.2 percent of English players in the Premier League, while Germany (41.5 percent) and France (37.5 percent) both have a higher proportion of locals in top division squads.

Italy's sport minister asks football chief to step down

Milan: Italy's Sport Minister Andrea Abodi said the head of the country's football federation should step down after the national team failed to qualify for a third consecutive World Cup.

The Azzurri fell at the play-offs again, this time after a penalty shoot-out against Bosnia and Herzegovina on Tuesday, and will miss this summer's finals.

The head of the federation (FIGC), Gabriele Gravina, said he would not resign but a board meeting next week would decide whether he will keep his position. "It's clear that Italian football needs to be rebuilt from the ground up and that starts with changes at the top of the FIGC," Abodi said in a statement.

Gravina has been in charge of the FIGC since late 2018, when he was elected to be the permanent replacement for Carlo Tavecchio who stepped down after Italy's first World Cup play-off disaster against Sweden the year before. A FIGC source confirmed to AFP that Gravina would hold a meeting today afternoon with the heads of Italy's three professional divisions, and both the the players and referees' associations. Some fans made their feelings known about Gravina and the FIGC by chucking eggs at the governing body's headquarters in Rome.

Abodi's comments come amid hostilities between the Italian government and Gravina, who when speaking to the media after Italy's defeat lashed out at a perceived lack of support or football from the state. Gravina admitted that Italian football "is in a profound crisis".

"It is a crisis that requires serious reflection and not only by the FIGC but also from politicians who have only pushed for resignations," said Gravina.

He also referred to other sports as "amateur" and "state sports" compared to football due to the large number of athletes, particularly Olympians, who are nominally employed by different arms of Italy's armed forces and police. Italy claimed a record 30 medals at the recent Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics, including 10 golds, and left the 2024 Summer Games in Paris with 40 medals.

The Mediterranean nation also has top performers in a wide variety of other sports, with tennis star Jannik Sinner, a four-time Grand Slam winner, the most obvious example.

"I believe it is a mistake to deny responsibility for the third missed World Cup qualification and accuse the institutions of a presumed failure," added Abodi.

SPOTLIGHT

Australian journeyman emerges as India's unlikely football saviour



Perth-born Ryan Williams, whose mother is Anglo-Indian and his father English, pounced for the opening goal in India's 2-1 win over Hong Kong in Asian Cup qualifying on Tuesday in Kochi.

AFP
New Delhi

A journeyman Australian has emerged as an unlikely saviour of Indian football after the 32-year-old took just four minutes to score on his debut for the country and made a small piece of history.

Perth-born Ryan Williams, whose mother is Anglo-Indian and his father English, pounced for the opening goal in India's 2-1 win over Hong Kong in Asian Cup qualifying on Tuesday in Kochi. It was the fastest goal scored by a debutant for India, whose long-suffering football fans have never seen their country reach the World Cup.

Williams, who made one appearance for the senior Australia team and has represented the

Socceroos at youth level, called it "a dream". "You couldn't write it, (debut) in Kerala, the home of football," the attacker and India's new hero said in a video released by the All India Football Federation (AIFF). "It hasn't fully sunk in yet. We will spend a couple of days enjoying it."

Williams is a youth product of Championship strugglers Portsmouth and has played at various clubs in England's football leagues. He moved to India's top-tier competition, the Indian Super League, with Bengaluru FC in 2023 and has since worked to earn a national call-up while processing his Indian passport.

He got that in November last year, setting the stage for his eagerly anticipated goal-scoring debut. "All of my mum's family - which is the Indian side of my fam-

ily - are in Perth. That's who I grew up with," he said in an interview.

"So when we went around my nana's (grandmother) house, it was always Indian food and loads of uncles, aunts and cousins everywhere. Coming to India and seeing that was kind of like putting two and two together."

Despite the euphoria over Williams' debut India finished bottom of their qualifying group.

The victory over Hong Kong was India's only win in six group games. The country of 1.4bn people is a lowly 136th in the FIFA rankings, a spot above Latvia (population 1.9mn).

In the build-up to the match coach Khalid Jamil and several players were locked out of their own stadium after the state association failed to pay a security deposit.

Final ticket sales phase begins for World Cup

Washington, United States: The fourth and final phase of ticket sales for the 2026 World Cup in North America began yesterday, FIFA announced.

The phase for the June 11-July 19 event in the United States, Mexico and Canada involves more than three million tickets. This "last-minute" sales phase opened at 1500 GMT on the official website, FIFA.com/tickets, the global governing body stated in a press release.

Tickets are being sold on a "first-come, first-served" basis and will remain available until the end of the competition on July 19, it added. Tickets will be released for sale on a rolling basis - including, on occasion, for matches taking place on the very same day - according to FIFA. At the scheduled time, prospec-

tive buyers were directed to a "waiting" page to "queue" while awaiting access to the site, a wait that could last several hours. "A countdown will appear before you can enter the ticket sales phase. Once the countdown is over, an 'Enter' button will be available for 5 minutes. Click it to access," instructions specify.

In total, nearly seven million tickets are being offered for the competition, taking into account the capacities of the 16 stadiums hosting the global tournament.

More than three million of these tickets have already been sold during the first three sales phases - including over one million during the random selection draw phase alone (held in January and February), which received 500 million requests, according to FIFA.

The global governing body is likely to break the all-time record of 3.5 million tickets sold for a World Cup - a mark set during the 1994 edition. This summer, the tournament will feature 48 teams and 104 matches, 78 of which will take place on American soil. The issue of ticketing has sparked controversy, with FIFA facing accusations of offering tickets at exorbitant prices, in disregard of promises made when the tournament was awarded to the three host nations. On March 24, Football Supporters Europe (FSE) - an organisation representing European fans - and Euroconsumers - a group representing consumers across the continent - announced they had filed a complaint against FIFA with the European Commission.

SHOWJUMPING

Qatar Equestrian Federation Cup kicks off at Al Shaqab today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Equestrian Federation Cup, part of the Doha Equestrian Tour 2026, kicks off today and will run for four days at the Longine Arena in Al Shaqab. More than 170 riders representing 21 countries will compete in one- to five-star categories for a total prize purse of €784,000.

The first day of the tournament features four classes in the one- and five-star categories, with jumps ranging from 110cm to 150cm. The second and third days will feature eight classes: six in the one-, three-, and five-star categories at varying heights, and two classes for the Future Riders and Juniors categories. The fourth and final day of the championship will feature three three-star and five-star classes, in addition to the Grand Prix for



the three-star class at a height of 150 cm and the Grand Prix at a height of 160 cm, with jump-off rounds. This inaugural championship is organised by the Qatar Equestrian Federation, Al Shaqab and the Qatar Olympic Committee.