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Sinner, Alcaraz start fast on Monte Carlo clay in race for No. 1

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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Title race heats up, favourites face bottom-placed sides

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Defending champions Al Sadd and first-time title hopefuls Al Shamal today will engage with teams that are eager to get out of the relegation zone as the Qatar Stars League moves into a tight finish with the penultimate week of the 12-team competition.

Al Sadd will meet eleventh-placed Al Sailya while Al Shamal will play bottom-placed Al Shahania in a simultaneous 6.30pm kick-off for all six games today.

The 18-time champions Al Sadd, on 39 points, have two matches left in the league. Al Shamal, who are in sight of clinching the prestigious Falcon Shield for the first time in the club's history, have 37 points but more importantly they also have an extra postponed game on hand.

Interestingly, Al Sadd and Al Shamal will come face-to-face in their final tie of this QSL season on April 28 - and which could well turn out to be the eventual decider.

But before that, another blip from Al Sadd, who were held to a 1-1 draw by Al Rayyan in the previous round and had lost two matches prior to that, could get them into deeper trouble.

On Friday, Al Sadd's Italian coach Roberto Mancini was livid at the end of the Qatar Clasico against Al Rayyan as his side al-



Al Sadd's coach Roberto Mancini and Al Shamal coach David Prats address the media yesterday, on the eve of their Qatar Stars League matches.



lowed the rivals to steal a draw in stoppage time of play. The coach was more upset about Al Sadd letting go some of good chances to double their lead.

Mancini is however hopeful that Al Sadd would still be able to pull things off. "We are coming off a draw against Al Rayyan but things are going well because we have worked hard over the past two days, and we will strive with all our might to achieve victory and secure the three points," he said ahead of the clash with Al Sailya.

Al Sadd player Anas Abdulsalam said, "It is important to win the Al Sailya match but they are a good team. We must win the two remaining league matches to retain the title and we are capable of doing so."

Al Sailya however wouldn't want to give anything away and

QFA disciplinary committee reprimands Wakrah's Berkane

The Qatar Football Association's Disciplinary Committee has reprimanded Al Wakrah by suspending their player Redouane Berkane for one more match - in addition to the match he has already served, and fined him QR5,000 following a protest from Qatar SC. The committee, chaired by Hassan al-Hammadi, also fined Al Wakrah QR10,000 and the result of their match was ruled 3-0 in Qatar SC's

favour as per the rules of Disciplinary Regulations for 2025-2026 season. A statement explained that this decision was made after reviewing the protest submitted by Qatar SC on April 5 after Berkane played the match for Al Wakrah against them on April 3. Berkane was supposed to serve a two-match suspension after being sent off for violent conduct during their Week 18 match against Al

Shamal. "It should be noted that Al Wakrah did not comply with the aforementioned article and the player did not serve the minimum suspension, as the club only suspended him for one match," it stated. "Furthermore, in accordance with Article (55/1/a) of Disciplinary Regulations for 2025-2026 season, the player in question was listed despite being ineligible to participate in the match."

their coach Mirghani Al Zain stressed that his team still has a chance to move away from the relegation zone. "I have great confidence in all team members, the entire squad is ready to deliver and

everyone understands the magnitude of responsibility at this crucial stage," said Mirghani.

Al Shamal coach David Prats meanwhile said that his team will give their everything to win and

stay in contention for the title. "We will be facing a team that is striving to move away from the relegation zone. Al Shahania are a good team and we have the utmost respect for them, especially since

they have talented players with the ambition to win. However, Al Shamal will be playing to win and secure the three points in order to continue our winning streak and maintain the impressive run this season," said Prats.

Al Shahania's assistant coach Pejman Montazeri said, "Unfortunately, we are at the end of the season and in last place. We played very well in the last match and I am proud of the players, but we did not get any points.

"We have a very difficult match against a team competing for the league title. I think the players understand the situation; we need the points and I believe the team is ready to fight. We will see what happens," he added. Al Gharafa with 34 points are third in the table and would also be hoping to climb the ladder if the top two fall. Excitement is guaranteed as the first of the last two simultaneous QSL kick-offs light up the evening.

FIXTURES
(All matches kick-off at 6.30pm)
At 974 Stadium: Al Wakrah vs Al Gharafa

At Al Bayt Stadium: Al Sailya vs Al Sadd

At Al Thumama Stadium: Al Arabi vs Qatar SC

At Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium: Al Shahania vs Al Shamal

At Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium: Al Rayyan vs Umm Salal

At Khalifa International Stadium: Al Ahli vs Al Duhail

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Havertz's late strike against Sporting gives Arsenal win

Kane's goal gave Bayern the advantage despite a ferocious late rally from Real in a thrilling first leg

AFP
Lisbon

Kai Havertz snatched a last-gasp winner as Arsenal bounced back from their domestic distress to steal a 1-0 victory at Sporting Lisbon in the Champions League quarter-final first leg yesterday.

Mikel Arteta's side arrived at the Jose Alvalade Stadium rocked by successive defeats against Manchester City in the League Cup final and Southampton in the FA Cup quarter-finals.

Once again, the Gunners were below their best but they emerged with the win thanks to Sporting's lack of cutting edge and Havertz's clinical finish in stoppage-time.

Arsenal will be firm favourites to advance to the semi-finals in the second leg in north London on April 15, but they will have to improve significantly to win the tournament for the first time.

Those agonising losses to City and second-tier Southampton marked the first time that Arsenal had been beaten in successive matches this term, with the embarrassing FA Cup defeat just the Gunners' fifth of the season.

The after-shocks were still being felt as Arsenal struggled to find any momentum in Lisbon, but not for the first time this season they found a way to win ugly.

Aiming to finally banish accusations that they are English football's nearly men by winning their first major trophy since the 2020 FA Cup, Arsenal have faced pointed questions about their perceived lack of mental strength.

Grinding out the win in Lisbon was a suitable riposte to the crit-



Arsenal's Kai Havertz celebrates scoring against Sporting CP in the Champions League first leg quarter-final in Lisbon yesterday. (Reuters)

ics. Insisting his players were "hungrier than ever", Arteta had urged Arsenal to use the "pain" of their recent defeats as motivation and they rose to the challenge.

Sitting nine points clear of second-placed Manchester City, the Premier League leaders are also on course for their first title in 22 years.

Playing in the last eight for the first time since 1983, Sporting's 17-game winning run at home made them dangerous opponents for Arsenal.

Injury-hit Arsenal were still without Jurrien Timber, Piero Hincapie, Eberechi Eze and Bukayo Saka, although Declan Rice returned after missing the Southampton game and England's recent friendlies.

David Raya was also back in goal for Arsenal after missing the previous two games and the Spaniard quickly made his presence felt.

Ousmane Diomande's deft pass split the Arsenal defence, sending Maxi Araujo clear for a fierce strike that Raya tipped onto the crossbar at full-stretch.

Raya was forced into action again to smother Geny Catamo's low drive from an acute angle inside the penalty area.

Arsenal were on the rack but Noni Madueke nearly gave them the lead against the run of play with an in-swinging corner that cannoned off the bar.

Unable to establish any attacking rhythm in a cagey half, it took Arsenal 42 minutes to muster a shot on target.

Even then Martin Odegaard's blast from the edge of the area was straight at Sporting goalkeeper

Rui Silva. Arteta's frustration was palpable as he urged Madueke and Ben White to press harder when Sporting were in possession.

Arsenal were marginally improved after the break and Leandro Trossard dragged his shot wide from 18 yards before Odegaard almost caught out Silva with a free-kick immediately after half-time.

Martin Zubimendi thought he had given Arsenal the lead in the 63rd minute with a close-range finish, but the midfielder's goal was disallowed for offside against Viktor Gyokeres.

Odegaard and Trossard limped off to add to Arsenal's injury woes.

Sporting went close to snatching a late goal when Luis Suarez's cross reached Catamo for a flicked header that Raya pushed away.

But Arsenal grabbed the winner in stoppage-time via Arteta's substitutes. Gabriel Martinelli played a superb pass over the Sporting defence and Havertz beat the offside trap to slot past Silva from 10 yards as Arteta punched the air in delight.

In Madrid, Luis Diaz and Harry Kane scored the goals that gave dominant Bayern Munich a crucial 2-1 quarter-final first leg win away to Real Madrid yesterday.

Kylian Mbappe's strike 16 minutes from time gave record 15-time winners Real a lifeline at their Bernabeu home in a gripping battle.

Vincent Kompany's side, arguably the strongest team in Europe this season, produced a masterclass in the first half and could have been several goals ahead.

Instead they had only one from Diaz, which Kane added to after the interval, but Mbappe's goal kept Alvaro Arbeloa's side in the tie.

The round's glamour fixture was a European classic - a record 29th time these teams have faced each other in the competition.

Bayern flew out of the blocks and Konrad Laimer's rasping effort narrowly over the bar showed that Kompany's side had come to the Spanish capital to attack.

After nine consecutive matches against Madrid without a win, Bayern were determined to put an end to that streak and show why many consider them favourites to lift the trophy this season.

CRICKET

Openers Jaiswal, Sooryavanshi go bold as Royals win

In a rain-delayed IPL game, Rajasthan easily beat Mumbai Indians



Rajasthan Royals' players Yashasvi Jaiswal (left) and Vaibhav Suryavanshi in action during the IPL match against Mumbai Indians in Guwahati on yesterday. (@rajasthanroyals)



AFP
Guwahati, India

Openers Yashasvi Jaiswal and 15-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi hit blistering knocks to lead Rajasthan Royals to a convincing 27-run win over Mumbai Indians in a rain-hit IPL clash yesterday.

Jaiswal, who hit an unbeaten 77, and fellow left-hander Sooryavanshi, who struck 39 off 14 balls, helped power Rajasthan to 150-3 in a contest reduced to 11-overs-a-side in Guwahati.

Rajasthan then kept five-time champions Mumbai down to 123-9 to earn their third win in as many matches this season to

move to the top of the 10-team table in the T20 tournament.

Persistent rain and wet ground in the north-eastern city forced the match to be delayed by two hours and 40 minutes from its original start time of 7.30pm local time (1400 GMT).

Jaiswal set the tone as he hit four fours and one six in the first over and Sooryavanshi smacked India pace ace Jasprit Bumrah for a six on his first ball faced.

He hit another six off Bumrah and kept up the blitz until the T20 sensation mishit a shot off Shardul Thakur to be caught at deep extra cover by Tilak Varma.

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. He started this edition with a blazing fifty to live up to expectations. Jaiswal shifted the spotlight on himself as he raised his second successive fifty in 23 balls and blasted the bowlers to all parts of the ground in his 32-ball knock laced with 10 fours and four sixes.

Jaiswal, Player of the Match, said: "I had something in my mind because it was only a three-over powerplay, so was thinking who I could take on. DC (Deepak Chahar) bhai was bowling, so I thought I could take him (on). Then Bumrah bhai was going to bowl, so I was thinking Vaibhav can take him and then I can take (on) someone else. It is not easy (playing all formats). Mumbai were never in the chase

after they lost South African opener Ryan Rickelton for eight in the first over off Rajasthan's England import Jofra Archer.

Nandre Burger took down India's T20 World Cup-winning captain Suryakumar Yadav for six and Mumbai were 22-3 when Sandeep Sharma trapped senior batter Rohit Sharma for five. Leg-spinner Ravi Bishnoi struck twice in one over, dismissing skipper Hardik Pandya for a duck and Varma for 14.

BRIEF SCORES
11 overs Rajasthan Royals 150 for 3 (Jaiswal 77*, Sooryavanshi 39, Ghazanfar 2-21) **beat Mumbai Indians 123 for 9** (Rutherford 25, Dhir 25, Burger 2-21, Bishnoi 2-25) **by 27 runs**

SPOTLIGHT

Retired Tamim to lead Bangladesh's interim cricket board



AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh has dissolved its cricket board citing "gross irregularities" in an election last year, and appointed an interim leadership headed by ex-captain **Tamim Iqbal**, the National Sports Council said yesterday.

Cricket and politics go hand-in-hand in Bangladesh, and the sport was hit by the turmoil that wracked the country after a 2024 uprising ousted longtime ruler Sheikh Hasina. A new government was elected in February.

"An independent committee under the National Sports Council has found gross irregularities in the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) election held in 2025," Aminul Ehsan, director of sports at the government body, told reporters yesterday.

The committee said that a "significant number of irregularities took place" during the BCB election in October, which was won by former national captain Aminul Islam Bulbul.

The country's first Test centurion who captained Bangladesh in their first World Cup appearance in 1999 had taken over as temporary BCB president in March 2025, and was then elected unopposed for a four-year term in October.

But Ehsan said a letter had been sent to the International Cricket

Council "stating that a decision has been made to dissolve the BCB committee".

An 11-member ad hoc committee led by Tamim is required to hold an election within three months, the sports council official said.

Tamim scored more than 15,000 runs for Bangladesh in a career spanning 15 years, and remains the only Bangladeshi to score hundreds in all formats of international cricket.

The decision to dissolve the board comes ahead of a "goodwill visit" to India by Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman to rebuild frosty diplomatic relations.

Cricket, a sport beloved by both nations, added to bitter divisions after Bangladesh refused to take part in the World Cup in India in February, citing security concerns.

Dhaka made that decision after Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman was told to leave his Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise Kolkata Knight Riders, sparked by online outrage by right-wing Indian Hindus.

They had invoked alleged attacks on a fellow Hindu community in Muslim-majority Bangladesh. Dhaka said the scale of the violence was exaggerated.

Bulbul was at the forefront of Bangladesh's decision not to play, saying at the time that "the dignity and security" of the country's cricketers was the board's priority.

FOCUS

Warner charged in Sydney

AFP
Sydney

Former Australian opener David Warner has been charged with drink-driving after he was pulled over in Sydney during the weekend, reports said yesterday.

The 39-year-old, who still plays Twenty20 cricket for franchises around the world, was allegedly at the wheel of a van that stopped and parked short of a random testing site on Sunday.

National broadcaster ABC said

officers approached the vehicle and breath-tested Warner who returned a positive result.

He was arrested and taken to a local police station where he was charged with mid-range drink driving, ABC and other local media reported. He is due to appear in court on May 7.

Police in a statement outlined the incident but did not name Warner, who retired from international cricket in 2024 after racking up 8,786 runs across his 112 Tests.

He most recently appeared for the Karachi Kings last week in the Pakistan Super League.

MAKHMUDOV HAILS HEAVYWEIGHT 'LEGEND' FURY AHEAD OF LONDON CLASH

London: Arslanbek Makhmudov says he is relishing the chance to measure himself against boxing "legend" Tyson Fury at London's Tottenham Hotspur Stadium on Saturday. Canada-based Russian Makhmudov, 36, will be going up against 37-year-old two-time former world heavyweight champion British boxer Fury. Makhmudov, however believes he can beat the local hero, even if he remains seemingly unsure of his route to victory. "I don't know how I will beat (Fury), but of

course I believe I will win," Makhmudov told the *Guardian*. "This guy, he is a legend, one of the best heavyweights in history." He added: "Tyson Fury is the professor of mind and boxing. A lot of boxing is mental and he is a master. But boxing is also spiritual. I am going to be strong, spiritual and smart. "You can say this is a war between mental and spiritual and we'll see who is more successful. "Inshallah it is spiritual."

Makhmudov, who has lost just two of his 23 professional bouts to date and has 19 knockouts to his credit, highlighted Fury's boxing intelligence as one of the biggest threats to his hopes of victory and cited the 'Gypsy King's' victories over Wladimir Klitschko and Deontay Wilder as evidence. He also accepts he will be fighting in front of an overwhelmingly pro-Fury crowd of some 60,000 on Saturday but has no qualms following a points win over Dave Allen in Sheffield, northern England last

year. Makhmudov endured hardship as a youngster, before moving to Montreal nine years ago, and at one point even travelled to Moscow to fight a bear. "It was very terrible, to be honest," he recalled. "One of my friends make me an offer (to fight the bear). He said: 'Do you want to make crazy stuff?' I said: 'OK, I cannot refuse.' "But I will never do it again. The bear tried to bite me and it was a good thing that never happened."



COMMENT

Australian Dennis criticises media portrayal following wife's death

Reuters
Sydney

Former cycling world champion Rohan Dennis said the media had created a false narrative about him after the Australian received a suspended jail sentence last year over the death of his wife.

Melissa Hoskins, an Olympic track cyclist and former world champion, died after being struck by a car driven by Dennis in an inner northern suburb of Adelaide in 2023.

The court had heard how she held on to the car as he attempted to drive off following an argument,

causing her to fall. Dennis had admitted to an aggravated count of creating the likelihood of harm, and the judge said that although he had disregarded his wife's safety he was not criminally responsible for her death.

He was sentenced to one year, four months and 28 days in jail, suspended for two years, and his driver's licence was suspended for five years.

In a statement on social media, Dennis said he loved his wife and never intended to hurt her.

"The narrative which the media ran with was clear. They wanted me to look like the husband who abused his wife," the 35-year-old said. "The media speak about the

children and how saddened they are for the children. Yet they happily stalk, follow and harass not just adults in my family but even when the kids are involved.

"They know I never intentionally or unintentionally used a vehicle as a weapon... Time for all you so called journalists and media outlets to back off and leave my family alone."

In addition to two time trial world titles, Dennis won team pursuit silver at the 2012 Olympics and a time trial bronze at the Tokyo Games.

Hoskins won team pursuit gold at the 2015 world championships and was on the Australian team at the 2012 and 2016 Olympics.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Athens in running to host inaugural world marathon championships

AFP
Paris, France

Negotiations are underway for Athens to host the inaugural world marathon championships in 2030, World Athletics announced yesterday.

The marathon race will remain part of the World Athletics Championships in 2027 and 2029, but from 2030 will become a standalone annual event, with men and women competing in alternate years.

"We are delighted to be exploring the possibility of a standalone World Marathon Championships with Athens, the place where

this iconic discipline was born," World Athletics president Sebastian Coe said in a statement.

The origins of the marathon - which is now run over 42.195km (26.2 miles) - go back to ancient Greece with the race for men first introduced in the modern Olympic Games in 1896.

The women's marathon made its Games debut in Los Angeles in 1984.

"Few events in sport carry the weight and resonance of the marathon; it is both a test of the very highest performance and a celebration of mass participation," said Coe.

"This is an opportunity to create a dedicated global celebration of marathon running, held in a

setting that honours its heritage while shaping a modern championship that reflects the scale and spirit of the global running community." World Athletics confirmed "the opening of formal exploratory discussions" for Athens to host the inaugural championships.

"This roadmap ensures the event meets the rigorous technical and operational standards required for the world's most prestigious stage," said World Athletics CEO Jon Ridgeon.

Agreement has also been reached with the Hellenic Athletics Federation (SEGAS) to elevate the Athens Marathon, known as 'The Authentic', to Elite Label status.

SPOTLIGHT

Sinner and Alcaraz start fast on Monte Carlo clay

EASY PICKINGS FOR THE WORLD'S TOP TWO PLAYERS AS FANS ENTHRALLED BY SLICK TENNIS

AFP
Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco

Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz continued their duel for the world number one ranking before the French Open as they opened their clay court seasons by crushing their opponents into the red Monte Carlo dirt yesterday.

With Usain Bolt in the crowd, the world's top two sprinted to second-round victories at the Masters event.

No. 2 Sinner took one hour and four minutes to dispatch Frenchman Ugo Humbert 6-3, 6-0. He was followed onto centre court by top-ranked Alcaraz, who took five minutes longer to beat Argentine Sebastian Baez 6-1, 6-3.

Sinner is chasing a first significant clay court title and seeking to dethrone defending Monte Carlo champion Alcaraz as world number one, although the Spaniard said after his match that it was inevitable the 24-year-old Italian would take top spot in the next few weeks.

Sinner came into the season's first clay court event following his impressive "Sunshine Double" in March at the Indian Wells and Miami Masters 1000 tournaments, winning the two titles without dropping a set.

His victory yesterday ran his winning streak in 1000-level events to 18 matches.

"It was a good performance from my side," Sinner said, adding



Italy's Jannik Sinner eyes the ball as he plays against France's Ugo Humbert during the Monte Carlo Masters in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, south-eastern France, yesterday. (AFP)

the first clay event "is never easy." "You have to change your game style a little bit, how you approach certain situations," he said.

"I come here with good feelings but, at the same time, not many expectations."

Alcaraz had no such reservations.

"It's been almost one year the last match I played on clay," he said. "To be honest, I missed it. I

missed getting myself dirty a little bit."

Last season, Alcaraz entered four clay-court tournaments, winning three, including Monte Carlo, and losing the final in Barcelona.

Sinner missed the start of the 2025 clay season as he finished a ban, but returned to reach the finals in Rome, where he fell to Alcaraz, and at Roland Garros, where he led the Spaniard by two sets and

had three championship points before losing a five-set, five-hour marathon.

Ranking points are wiped out after a year, but as Sinner has none to lose in Monte Carlo, Alcaraz said the Italian's return to the top is inevitable.

"I'm going to lose the number one in the world," said Alcaraz after his win. "I don't know if it's going to be in this tournament or the next



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in action in his match against Argentina's Sebastian Baez at the Monte Carlo Masters yesterday. (AFP)

one." "It is going to be really difficult to defend all the points and even if I do, Jannik is going to add some points in this tournament. Number one is not on my mind but to be my best on clay and let's see how the clay court season is going to be."

'I surprised myself'

Sinner took a few games to find his rhythm against Frenchman Humbert, whom he had faced only twice, the last time five years ago, but broke serve in the fifth game before holding to love and taking a 4-2 lead.

Humbert saved a double break point but eventually lost his serve again and the first set 6-3.

The second set was a one-way affair. The Italian did not concede a single game to the Frenchman, sweeping him aside 6-0 in 23 minutes.

Sinner will face either Argentine Francisco Cerundolo or Czech Tomas Machac in the next round.

Alcaraz raced through the first set but stuttered in the second before winning the last seven points to surge to victory.

"A really good start to the tournament for me," he said "I surprised myself with the level. I thought I was going to play a little bit worse."

He will next face either another Argentine, Tomas Etcheverry, or Frenchman Terence Atmane.

GOLF

McIlroy feels motivated as Masters battle set to begin

Reuters
Augusta, Georgia

Rory McIlroy thought that winning his first Masters and completing the career grand slam would be the defining moment in his golf career, only to find out that it simply moved the goal posts.

McIlroy has been asked repeatedly over the past 12 months about what his motivation is now that he has won all four majors, including that Masters triumph that eluded him for the better part of two decades. But it might have taken returning to Augusta National this week to bring his perspective full circle.

"I think what I've realized is, if you can just really find enjoyment in the journey, that's the big thing," McIlroy, 36, said yesterday. "Because, honestly, I felt like the career grand slam was my destination, and I got there, and then I realized it wasn't the destination."

McIlroy acknowledged that he feels more relaxed around Augusta National. The Northern Irishman is hosting his first Champions Dinner today rather than dining elsewhere and wondering whether he'll ever get to join what he called "one of the best traditions in sport."

The proverbial weight is off his shoulders. McIlroy arrived at Augusta National on Saturday, earlier than he ever does so that he could take in some of the Augusta National Women's Amateur ahead of playing a round with his father on Sunday.

In previous years, McIlroy would typically arrive Sunday night or even Monday evening. This year, he wants to soak in every last moment he has as the reigning champion.

"I think for the past 17 years I just couldn't wait for the tournament to start, and this year I wouldn't care if the tournament never started," he said with a laugh. "It's completely different. I feel so much more relaxed. I know that I'm going to be coming back here for a lot of years, going to enjoy the perks that the champions get here."

"It doesn't make me any less motivated to go out there and play well and try to win the tournament, but yeah, just more relaxed



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland high-fives patrons as he walks to the 10th hole tee box during a practice round prior to the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia. (AFP)

about it all." McIlroy didn't elaborate on where those goal posts have shifted to in his mind, only that they "keep nudging a little bit further and further out of reach."

For so many years the story at Augusta National for McIlroy has been about when he was finally going to conquer the Masters. Twelve months after finally getting the job done, he was asked what he believes the story is this time around.

"I think the story as it relates to me is what do I do from now onwards? What motivates me? What gets me going? What do I still want to achieve in the game? I think that's the story," he said.

One goal post that is right in front of him is successfully defending his Masters title. That feat has only been accomplished by three legends of the game: Jack Nicklaus in 1965-66, Nick Faldo in 1989-1990 and Tiger Woods in 2001-02. Only 18 players have won multiple Masters titles at any point in their careers.

That quest will begin tomorrow for McIlroy, when he tees off in the first round. But there is plenty to soak in before then, beginning with the Champions Dinner, followed by the Par 3 Contest today. This year, he brought his daughter Poppy's putter from home for her to play with.

"I keep saying this, it's a dream come true. It's incredible," McIlroy said of finally winning the Masters. "I really tried to embrace

and enjoy every part of it." And come the first tee tomorrow?

"I know that I can do it now," he said. "So that should make it a little easier for me to go out and play the golf I know I can play."

Faldo commemorates Masters win over Norman with 'Six back in '96' gear

Nick Faldo reached into a bag while standing under the giant oak tree outside the Augusta National clubhouse and pulled out a white hat. Then a T-shirt. Then another hat. All of them read the same thing: "Six back in '96"

Thirty years on, the Englishman is not letting anyone forget.

It has been three decades since Faldo won his third Masters title after starting the final round six shots behind leader Greg Norman. What followed was one of the most stunning reversals in major championship history - a five-shot triumph built on Faldo's brilliant closing 67 and Norman's shocking unravelling to a 78.

The 68-year-old Faldo arrived at this week's Masters well prepared to mark the occasion.

"Oh big time," Faldo, wearing his Green Jacket, told Reuters when asked if his 1996 Masters win was on his mind this week. "We got T-shirts and hats that say 'Six back in '96.'"

Faldo then disappeared into the clubhouse before returning shortly after with a bag of white hats and T-shirts emblazoned

with what he called a "fun theme" that he had made for friends, family and business people.

Despite the celebratory mood, Faldo said he did not dare reach out to Norman - a two-time British Open winner who never won a Masters - to mark the anniversary of his 1996 triumph, which was his sixth and final major title.

"No, never," said Faldo. "You kidding me? I don't think so. I wouldn't want to be reminded, no."

Faldo showed plenty of class on the 18th green in 1996, embracing Norman in a sympathetic gesture followed by a subdued celebration that was an act of respect after his rival suffered an epic collapse.

A World Golf Hall of Fame member and iconic Ryder Cup figure who established himself as one of golf's all-time greats, Faldo has found that no moment in his career travels with him quite like Augusta 1996.

The story has even reached the halls of power on the other side of the world. Faldo recalled a trip to the Philippines about two years ago, where he was designing a golf course and sat down for lunch with members of the nation's government.

"We were having lunch with the government and we thought we'd start talking golf courses and they said tell us about '96," said Faldo. "I said 'you're joking?' I don't mind telling the story, it's a good one for me."

CHALMERS URGES MCEVOY TO SWIM IN AUSTRALIA 4X100M RELAY TEAM AT OLYMPICS



Gold Coast, Australia: Sprint King Kyle Chalmers has urged new 50m freestyle world record holder Cameron McEvoy to rejoin Australia's relay team in a bid to upstage the United States at the 2028 Olympics.

McEvoy, 31, was part of the country's 4x100m freestyle team that claimed bronze at the Rio Olympics in 2016 and Tokyo in 2021. But he skipped the event at Paris in 2024 when they won silver. Chalmers was a member of all three medal-winning squads and wants McEvoy back on board so Australia have a better chance to take down their all-conquering American arch-rivals.

"I actually want to message him and just say, 'Cam, if you want to be a part of that relay team, I'll give up my spot as the anchor,'" Chalmers, 27, told local media on the sidelines of the Australian Open yesterday.

"I'll swim the heat so he can rest and be straight to the final.

"If it was to work out, I feel we would have a very good chance of beating America at their home Olympics, which is on night number one which would set the team up for an amazing week in the pool." Olympic champion McEvoy clocked 20.88sec at the China Open last month to shatter the 17-year-old 50m freestyle world record set by Cesar Cielo in the era of polyurethane bodysuits. He is not swimming at the Australian Open and has yet to indicate whether he would be open to a return to the longer distance.

McKeown edges O'Callaghan, dominant Pallister wins 400m Olympic champion Kaylee McKeown edged Mollie O'Callaghan in a sizzling 100m backstroke victory at the Australian Open yesterday, while Lani Pallister dipped under the magical four-minute mark to take the 400m freestyle.

Backing up her dominant 200m

backstroke win on Monday, McKeown hit the wall on the Gold Coast in 58.06, well clear of the reigning Olympic 200m freestyle gold medallist who touched in 58.98.

"I was really happy with my processes tonight," said McKeown. "It's really nice being out there with Mollie and the other girls. It kind of takes the pressure off. You feel like you're racing with friends."

McKeown said last week a key goal this year was to reclaim her world record from American Regan Smith and be the first woman ever to go under 57 seconds. Smith's world best is currently 57.13 and McKeown's 57.16. The pair have an intense rivalry, sharing the 20 fastest times in history.

Pallister followed an impressive victory in the 800m freestyle with another speedy swim over 400m as she accelerates preparations for the Commonwealth Games and Pan Pacific Championships this year.

The 23-year-old touched in 3:59.36 to clock the fastest time of 2026.

"I'm happy with the 3:59. That's my second-fastest time ever, just behind worlds last year in Singapore," she said.

"So really happy with my progress this season and going forward into the Commonwealth Games and Pan Pacs - it's going to be a really big year." Pallister is among a small cohort, including Katie Ledecky, Summer McIntosh and Ariarne Titmus, to dip under four minutes. Shayna Jack claimed the women's 50m freestyle in 24.60 ahead of Olivia Wunsch and O'Callaghan, while Sam Short was untouchable in the men's 800m freestyle, coming home in 7:41.04. In other races, Kyle Chalmers added to his 100m freestyle win by taking the 50m butterfly in a personal best 22.77 -- the quickest of the year.

PREVIEW

PSG wary of wounded Liverpool ahead of European showdown

Enrique plays down the defending champions as favourites against Liverpool in UCL quarter-finals

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain star Vitinha insisted his side remain very wary of the threat posed by Champions League quarter-final opponents Liverpool despite the Anfield club coming into the heavyweight tie in poor form.

"Liverpool are Liverpool, even if they are not in ideal form. They are still a great team," Vitinha told reporters yesterday, the eve of the first leg between the sides at the Parc des Princes. "It will be a great match here, and at Anfield, and tomorrow we will need to be at 100 percent. It will still be a very, very difficult game," he added, with the return leg set for next Tuesday.

The tie is a repeat of the Champions League last-16 encounter between the clubs a year ago, when Liverpool won 1-0 in Paris only for Luis Enrique's side to claim victory by the same score at Anfield and then go through on penalties.

They went on to become European champions for the first time in their history, while Liverpool won the Premier League.

However, Arne Slot's side have struggled to rediscover their best form this season, and come into Wednesday's showdown off the back of a 4-0 hammering by Manchester City in the FA Cup quarter-finals last weekend.

They have won just one of their last five matches in all competitions and sit fifth in the Premier League, meaning a place in next season's Champions League is far from assured. "It was an incredible tie," Vitinha said about last year's meeting of the sides. "There was a bit of frustration in the first match. I don't remember Liverpool having a chance apart from the goal they scored at the end.

"We played well and yet we still lost. I remember saying that by playing like that we could go to Liverpool and win.

"Fortunately we did that, but that was last year. This is a different year, there have been changes in the two teams. Lots of things happen in football in a year, and it will be a different game for sure."

One new face in the Liverpool team this time will be Hugo Ekitike, the France striker who returns to Paris to face the club where he struggled to make an impact during an 18-month spell between 2022 and 2024.

Ekitike is Liverpool's top scorer this season with 17 goals and recent performances make him a genuine contender to start for France at the World Cup.

"Hugo is a fantastic guy. I enjoyed the year I spent with him. You could see the quality he had even if it wasn't the right context for him. I wish him all the best except for these two matches," Vitinha said of the forward. PSG



Paris Saint-Germain's Goncalo Ramos (centre) controls the ball during a training session at the Campus Paris Saint-Germain in Poissy, on the western outskirts of Paris yesterday. (AFP)

coach Luis Enrique indicated that his side will go into the game without two key players, with Spain midfielder Fabian Ruiz still not ready to return from the knee injury which has kept him on the sidelines since January.

Winger Bradley Barcola, among the goals in the 8-2 aggregate demolition of Chelsea in the last

round, is also expected to miss out despite returning to training.

"We are trying to find the best conditions for the player and he needs to tell us when he is ready," the coach said of Barcola.

Of Ruiz, he added: "Fabian has not yet trained with the squad, so how can he play? He has improved a lot and we are very happy. That

shows he is on the right road but he still has some way to go."

Asked about his team's status as favourites, the former Barcelona boss pointed out: "It is impossible to say one team is the favourite. Last year everyone said Liverpool were the favourites, and the team that went through was Paris Saint-Germain."

Isak named in Liverpool squad

Alexander Isak has been included in the Liverpool squad for yesterday's Champions League quarter-final first leg at Paris Saint-Germain as the Sweden striker returns from a lengthy injury absence.

Isak has only made 16 appearances for Liverpool since his British record move from Newcastle last year after struggling with a series of fitness issues. In December, Isak was injured in a tackle by Micky van de Ven while in the process scoring the opening goal in a 2-1 win against Tottenham, leading to surgery on an ankle injury which included a fibula fracture.

After 15 weeks on the sidelines, the 26-year-old is finally ready to feature in a Liverpool squad again. "Alexander Isak is among the players that departed John Lennon Airport for Paris this afternoon, ahead of Wednesday night's quarter-final first leg at Parc des Princes," Liverpool said on their website. Isak returned to group training last Thursday and worked with his team-mates on Tuesday morning before jetting off to France. Isak's absence has been keenly felt and his place in the 21-man squad for the trip to Paris could be a major boost for Arne Slot's spluttering side.

SPOTLIGHT

Maguire signs 1-year Man Utd extension

AFP
London

Manchester United defender Harry Maguire is set to remain at Old Trafford for at least another season after signing a new one-year contract.

The 33-year-old England centre-back was in the final months of his current deal but Maguire, who joined United from Leicester in an £80 million (\$106 million) move in 2019, has agreed new terms that include an option for a further year.

"Representing Manchester United is the ultimate honour," Maguire said in a statement issued yesterday. "It is a responsibility that makes myself and my family proud every single day.

"I am delighted to extend my journey at this incredible club to at least eight seasons and continue to play in front of our special supporters to create more amazing moments together."

He added: "You can feel the ambition and potential of this exciting squad. The determination throughout the whole club to fight for major trophies is clear for everyone to see and I am confident that our best moments together remain ahead of us."

Maguire has been ever-present for United since former Old Trafford favourite Michael Carrick took caretaker charge after Darren Fletcher was briefly at the helm following the end of Ruben Amorim's turbulent 14 months' reign in January, with the Red Devils rising to third in the Premier League and a return to the Champions League now in sight.

His form earned Maguire an England recall last month as he



Manchester United's Harry Maguire signs autographs for fans at Carton House in Dublin yesterday. (AFP)

made his first international appearances in 18 months, when he played both friendlies at Wembley, to put himself in contention for a place at this year's World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Maguire has so far made 266 appearances for United, including winning the FA Cup and League Cup with the English football giants.

United director of football Jason Wilcox said: "Harry represents the mentality and resilience required to perform for Manchester United. "He is the ultimate professional who brings invaluable experience and leadership to our young, ambitious squad.

"Harry, like everyone at the club, is completely determined to help Manchester United to achieve regular and sustained success."

Maguire is with United in Dublin this week as the senior squad take part in a training camp during a three-and-a-half week gap between league fixtures, created both by the recent international window and the club's early exit from cup competitions.

United return to league action against Leeds at Old Trafford on Monday, April 13.

FOCUS

Flick to defend 'emotional' teen Yamal

AFP
Barcelona

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said he would defend teenage star Lamine Yamal against criticism for his occasional "emotional" outbursts, ahead of today's Champions League quarter-final first leg against Atletico Madrid.

The 18-year-old winger did not celebrate Barca's late winner in the 2-1 victory at Atletico in La Liga on Saturday that took the Catalans seven points clear at the top of the table.

Yamal was visibly irritated, with Spanish media reporting it was because a member of the Barcelona coaching staff admonished him from the sidelines for shooting when he could have passed. The Spain international has also shown his anger at being substituted by Flick in the past, and the coach said he would back Yamal regardless.

"What we have to see is that Lamine is 18 years old and for me he's an unbelievable player, you can see it when you watch the game again - what he's doing is unbelievable," Flick told reporters Tuesday.

"But he's only 18, sometimes he's angry when I substitute him. He had a situation, where he dribbled past four or five players and then shot and missed.

"Sometimes he's frustrated he didn't score this goal and he's like that, he's emotional, and this is good. I will always support him."

Flick admitted Yamal's shows of disapproval on the sideline sometimes create headlines that are not ideal for the team.

"He's a fantastic player, on the right (path), we will help him to develop," the German coach said.

"Not everything that he's doing is good as it creates this noise



Barcelona's Lamine Yamal attends a training session yesterday, on the eve of the Champions League quarter-final match against Club Atletico de Madrid at the Joan Gamper training ground in Sant Joan Despi, near Barcelona yesterday. (AFP)

around our team. I know everyone is looking to him because he's a fantastic player but we also have to see that he's 18 years old.

"Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. I said to him, no problem you can do it and I will always protect you. This is what I want for him, show everyone one the pitch how good he is and he will be one of the best, maybe the best player in the future."

Yamal shone last season as he helped Barca to the Champions League semi-finals, as close as they have come to the trophy since winning it in 2015.

Flick said the quarter-final tie against Diego Simeone's Atletico would be tricky to navi-

gate, starting at Camp Nou on Wednesday in the first leg.

"Atleti is a tough team, they have the right attitude, a lot of intensity, fast players, fantastic players on the pitch," said Flick.

"On Saturday they rested many players but the quality was very high. They love to defend, they know how to defend in a deep block, it's not so easy to score two goals at Atletico. It's always tough. There will be a lot of emotions in this game because it's two legs, we try to give our best to get a good result tomorrow."

Marcus Rashford is in line to start on the left flank in place of injured winger Raphinha. The England international, on loan

from Manchester United, scored against Atletico on Saturday.

Flick said he still needed to improve on his defensive work rate but acknowledged Rashford was doing well, although he has not said if he wants the club to execute the purchase option they have for the forward.

"(Pressing) is also a part of our game which is very important, not just with the ball (where) everyone knows he's fantastic," said Flick. "(Dribbling) one on one he's doing really good, but to defend is also part of our game and part of football. "But he's doing good, he's adapted a lot, and we need him... to help his team-mate on the flank."

FORMER ARSENAL MIDFIELDER RAMSEY RETIRES AT 35

Former Wales captain and Arsenal regular Aaron Ramsey announced his retirement from football at the age of 35 yesterday.

The midfielder, who spent over a decade in London with Arsenal before spells at Juventus, Nice and Cardiff, has been without a club since leaving Mexican side Pumas at the end of last year. A combination of injuries and limited match time meant Ramsey won the last of his 86 Wales caps in 2024 and he was overlooked for his nation's agonising penalty shoot-out loss to Bosnia and Herzegovina in a World Cup qualifier last month.

Defeat in that game ended any hopes Ramsey had of bowing out on football's

biggest stage. "This has not been an easy decision to make," he said on Instagram.

"After a lot of consideration, I have decided to retire from football. "Firstly, I want to start with Wales. It has been my privilege to wear the Welsh shirt and experience so many incredible moments in it. It would not have been possible without the incredible input of all the managers I have played under and all the staff who have helped me in many ways.

"To the Red Wall (Wales fans). You have been there through thick and thin! You have been there through the highs and lows, and you have been an essential and indispensable part of our success.

I can't thank you enough. We've been through everything together and it's been an honour to represent you. Diolch (thank you).

"Secondly, thank you to all the clubs I've been lucky enough to play for.

Thank you to all the managers and staff that have helped me be able to live my dream and play at the highest level." Ramsey was a key figure in Wales' run to the European Championship semi-finals in 2016, earning a place in UEFA's team of the tournament, and also featured in the next edition in 2021 as well as the 2022 World Cup.

Wales manager Craig Bellamy, speaking ahead of what proved to be Ramsey's last international appearance, against

Montenegro, said: "We're talking about one of the best players to ever play for Wales.

"We're talking about a player who's represented Arsenal and won cups, he's been at Juventus and Nice. What he brings into the squad with young players - they're aspiring to be that." Bellamy, however, left Ramsey out of his squad him for the recent World Cup clash, saying: "He hasn't played competitive football in seven months. He's not at a club. It's a situation I'm sure which will resolve itself." Ramsey won three FA Cups, a Serie A title and two Italian cups, a Scottish Cup with Rangers and two runners-up medals in the Europa League.

