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TENNIS

Sinner and Alcaraz wobble but advance to Monte Carlo quarter-finals

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FOOTBALL

Slot admits Liverpool in 'survival mode'

'PSG was by far the better team today and could have scored more than two goals'

AFP
Paris

Liverpool coach Arne Slot admitted his team were well beaten by Paris Saint-Germain in Wednesday's Champions League quarter-final first leg as he defended his decision to play with three central defenders and insisted the Reds still had hope going into the return.

"Paris Saint-Germain was by far the better team today and could have scored more than two goals, but the good thing was the Liverpool players showed fighting spirit and kept going," Slot said after his side went down 2-0 in the French capital.

Desire Doue gave PSG an early lead with a deflected strike and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia got their second goal after the hour mark, in a match which saw the hosts have 70 per cent possession and 18 attempts on goal to the visitors' three.

"Of course you think you can do better, but we were in survival mode for large parts of the game, and maybe also we are in survival mode at this period of the season," said Slot, whose team have won just one of their last six matches.

"It is really hard against this team. PSG was the better team, but we didn't give up and that is why we still have a chance in this tie, and now we can bring the tie back to Anfield, and in between there is still a very important game to play against Fulham."

Slot selected Joe Gomez as a third centre-back alongside Ibrahima Konate and Virgil van Dijk, while Mohamed Salah was left on the bench and did not feature at all - unlike Alexander Isak, who appeared as a late substitute for his first appearance since December after injury.

"The last part of the game it was more about surviving for us than it was ever about scoring," Slot said of his decision not to use the Egyptian off the bench. "Mo has so much quality but for Mo to be 20 to 25 minutes defending in his own box, I think it is better for him to save his energy for a lot of games we have coming up."

The Dutchman is under pressure with his team sitting fifth in the Premier League and now at real risk of an exit from Europe, un-



Liverpool's Ibrahima Konate (left), Virgil van Dijk (centre) and Alexis Mac Allister look dejected after their defeat to Paris St Germain in the Champions League quarter-final first leg match at the Parc des Princes in Paris. (Reuters)

less they can turn the tie around next Tuesday. He explained his decision to change the formation was mainly down to the attacking threat posed by PSG's full-backs, Achraf Hakimi on the right and Nuno Mendes on the left.

"Milos (Kerkez) had to play almost as a left-winger facing Hakimi, and then there were four defenders left, so you could almost explain it as a 4-3-3," he said. "Just think about what would have happened if

we had played with real wingers against Hakimi and Nuno Mendes."

Liverpool must now attempt to bounce back at home to Fulham in the Premier League before the return against PSG, who have a weekend off after their Ligue 1 game at title rivals Lens was postponed.

"I think we played very well against a top-class side - they changed their system but we are used to that because teams have a habit of changing the way they play against

us," said PSG coach Luis Enrique. "It is just a shame because we created a lot of chances in the second half and could have scored more goals."

PSG beat Liverpool in the last 16 last season, going through in a penalty shoot-out at Anfield. "I have been to Anfield many times as a player and coach and it is always complicated, but mentality is always the same, wherever we play, we always go out to win the game," said Luis Enrique.

Four Qatari referees named for World Cup

Doha: Qatari referees have received a major vote of confidence on both the global and continental stages, with officials from the country named for the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the decisive rounds of the AFC Champions League.

FIFA has announced the list of referees for the 2026 World Cup, set to be hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19. The tournament will be the biggest in history, with a 48-team line-up and 104 matches to be played. There are 41 more match officials than at Qatar four years ago, where 32 teams played 64 matches.

The list features a Qatari refereeing team, underlining growing international trust in the country's officiating standards and ability to handle football's biggest stages. Abdul Rahman al-Jassim has been selected as referee, with Saud Ahmed and Talib Salem al-Marri named as assistant referees, while Khamis al-Marri will serve as Video Assistant Referee (VAR).

At the continental level, Qatari officials will also play a prominent role in the final rounds of the AFC Champions League, to be held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia from April 16 to 25. The Asian Football Confederation has selected four Qatari referees for the decisive stage, including international referees al-Jassim and Salman Fallahi, alongside assistant referees Ramzan al-Nuaimi and al-Marri.

FIFA UNVEILS 52 REFEREES FOR WORLD CUP, INCLUDING SIX WOMEN

FIFA unveiled its list of match officials for the World Cup, including 52 referees, six of whom are women. Football's governing body will also take 88 assistant referees and 30 video match officials, who hail from all six confederations and 50 member associations.

"The fact that six women match officials have been selected continues a trend that was started four years ago in Qatar as we aim to further develop women's refereeing," said Pierluigi Collina, FIFA's chief refereeing officer, with six women having already refereed in 2022.

Team Qatar GT ready for European Le Mans Series season-opener in Barcelona

Barcelona: Team Qatar GT is set to begin its 2026 campaign in the European Le Mans Series, with round one taking place at the renowned Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya from today until Sunday. The team arrived in Barcelona last week to take part in the official Prologue pre-season test, using the sessions as final preparations ahead of the opening round of the championship. Team Qatar GT will compete in the GT category in collaboration with Iron Lynx, featuring a strong driver lineup of Abdulla al-Khelaifi, alongside Julian Hanes and Adam Christodoulou.

The Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) said in a statement: "Following extensive preparations and productive testing, the team is fully focused on delivering a strong performance at the season opener against top international endurance racing competitors. With a competitive season ahead, Team Qatar GT aims to make an immediate impact and proudly represent Qatar on the European endurance racing stage."

The European Le Mans Series 2026 calendar includes six rounds across Europe: Barcelona, Spain - April 10-12; Paul Ricard, France - May 3; Imola, Italy - July 5; Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium - August 23; Silverstone, United Kingdom - September 13; Portimao, Portugal - October 10.



SHOWJUMPING

Al-Hadi, al-Suwaidi star at Hathab

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The ninth edition of the Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour resumed yesterday with the tenth round of the championship at the Qatar Equestrian Federation's main arena. The Tour paused for the prestigious Doha Equestrian Tour, which wrapped up over the weekend.

The three-day event features 14 rounds and saw over 65 riders competing in both the Amateur and Silver Tours.

The Silver Tour, contested at 130 cm, produced an exciting contest as Saudi rider Khaled al-Hadi claimed first and third place on Carlton de Sauvageonn (55.89 seconds) and Capoen (57.48). His compatriot Abdullah al-Sharbatly finished second on Inturido in 56.29 seconds. Awards were presented by Mohammed Saleh al-Marri, Head of the Championship's Facilities and Logistics Committee.

Meanwhile, Qatar's Sultan Jassim al-Suwaidi won the Amateur Tour at 100cm on Cat Ballou 27 in 26.79 seconds. Faisal Mohammed al-Nuaimi was second on Dilandra (28.27) and Salha Khalid al-Obaidli third on Roxette van de Achterhoek (28.38).

The event is organised by the Qatar Equestrian Federation in partnership with Al Shaqab.



Saudi rider Khaled al-Hadi claimed first and third place on Carlton de Sauvageonn and Capoen in the Silver Tour at Hathab yesterday.



Qatar's Sultan Jassim al-Suwaidi won the Amateur Tour at 100cm on Cat Ballou 27 in 26.79 seconds.

CRICKET

Choudhary smashes Lucknow to exciting IPL win over Kolkata

'I do not have words to describe but what a fantastic effort'

AFP
Kolkata

Youngster Mukul Choudhary played the innings of his life, smashing seven sixes on his way to an unbeaten 54 to haul Lucknow Super Giants to a dramatic, last-ball, three-wicket victory over Kolkata Knight Riders in the Indian Premier League (IPL) yesterday.

Chasing Kolkata's competitive 181-4 at Eden Gardens, Lucknow were in all sorts of trouble at 128-7 after 16 overs despite Ayush Badoni's fluent 54 when Choudhary, playing only his third IPL match, altered the script with a spectacular display of power hitting.

The powerful right-hander blasted a bouquet of sixes in the last four overs to score 52 off his last 19 balls and leave the home team still searching for their first victory.

"There is always pressure, but God has given us this opportunity, and I try to do what I can do," said the 21-year-old Choudhary, who revealed that he was playing only his second match under lights.

"My plan was to play till the end. I believe in myself so much that I knew if I batted till the end, I could take the team home."

LSG captain Rishabh Pant lauded Choudhary efforts.

"I do not have words to describe but what a fantastic effort. One thing I made sure is that personally, that trust and when you believe in someone, a player can do wonders. The character, with each and every match like this, it shows something is building. We don't want to talk much about it but something is cooking inside," he said.

"Badoni is now a senior pro in our team. That is the role we have given him. In a situation like him, when we talk about Badoni, these are the kind of contributions you want to see from Badoni.

"Shami is not getting any young. But the experience he brings to the side is invaluable. Having someone like him is amazing. Whole bowling unit is doing an amazing job," he said.

Kolkata had recovered from a



Lucknow Super Giants' Mukul Choudhary celebrates after winning the IPL match against Kolkata Knight Riders at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday. (Reuters)

mid-innings slump after being put in, Rowman Powell providing the impetus with an unbeaten 39 during a 70-run alliance for the fifth wicket with Cameron Green.

Lucknow began brightly through Mitchell Marsh and Aiden Markram, who put on 41. But once Vaibhav Arora dismissed both openers in the space of six deliveries in the fifth over, Kolkata applied relentless pressure.

Arora was tasked with defending 14 in the final over, but Choudhary and Avesh Khan scrambled the winning bye with one needed off the last ball.

Kolkata lost Kiwi opener Finn Allen in the second over of the contest, caught at third man off Prince Yadav, and were shackled in

the first four overs by Mohammed Shami's accuracy and swing, but once skipper Ajinkya Rahane and Angkrish Raghuvanshi spent a little time in the middle, they began to find their range. The floodgates opened in the sixth over when Raghuvanshi smacked Avesh for two fours and a six, and with Rahane opening his shoulders, runs came at a decent clip.

The second-wicket pair had added 84 when Lucknow broke through with leg-spinner Digvesh Rathi having Rahane smartly caught at mid-wicket by Shami.

That sparked a mini-collapse with the home side losing three for 12 in 19 balls, including Raghuvanshi for a fluent 45.

Lucknow surged back into con-

centration by conceding just 17 runs from overs 11 through 15, requiring Powell and Green to first steady the ship and then deliver the acceleration.

Green, the most expensive buy at the December auction in Abu Dhabi at Rs 25.2 crore (\$2.8 million), shrugged off a sluggish start with a flurry of late boundaries on his way to an unbeaten 32. Powell was more enterprising, smashing four fours and two sixes, but both were trumped by Choudhary.

BRIEF SCORE: Lucknow Super Giants 182 for 7 (Choudhary 54*, Badoni 54, Roy 2-32, Arora 2-38) beat Kolkata Knight Riders 181 for 4 (Raghuvanshi 45, Rahane 41, Rathi 1-25) by three wickets.

PAKISTAN SUPER LEAGUE

Mendis, Babar shine in Peshawar Zalmi's win over Karachi Kings

Agencies
Karachi

Ascintillating hundred from Kusal Mendis and dominant bowling enabled Peshawar Zalmi to inflict the heaviest Pakistan Super League (PSL) defeat, beating Karachi Kings by 159 runs in Karachi yesterday.

Set to chase a daunting 247-run target, the 2020 champions could muster 87 runs before getting bowled out in 16.1 overs and thus succumbed to their first defeat in the ongoing eight-team tournament.

Wicketkeeper batter Azam Khan remained the top-scorer for the Kings with a cautious 25 off 27 deliveries with the help of three fours and a six, while fellow middle-order batters Saad Baig (14) and Khushdil Shah (10) were the others to amass double figures. Nahid Rana, Sufiyan Muqem and Iftikhar Ahmed jointly led the Zalmi's bowling charge with three wickets each, while Shoriful Islam chipped in with one. Mendis earned Player of the Match after smashing 109 off 52 balls, including 14 fours and four sixes.

Kings captain David Warner's decision to field first backfired as the 2017 champions accumulated a mammoth 246/3 in their 20 overs, courtesy of a monumental 191-run partnership for the second wicket between Mendis and Babar Azam.

Zalmi, however, had a contrasting start to their innings as they lost opening batter Mohammad Haris (zero) on the second delivery of the first over, bowled by Khushdil Shah.

Following the early setback, Mendis joined Babar in the middle, and the duo turned the game on its head with a dominant partnership, which yielded 191 runs off just 97 deliveries.

Abbas Afridi eventually broke the marathon partnership in the 17th over by dismissing Mendis, who walked back after top-scoring with a blazing 109 off 52 deliveries, studded with 14 fours and four sixes. Afridi inflicted

another blow to the Zalmi's batting expedition by getting rid of Michael Bracewell on the final delivery and brought the total down to 197/3 in 17 overs.

Babar, on the other hand, carried his bat all the way through and returned after scoring an unbeaten 87 off 51 deliveries, laced with 10 fours and two sixes. He also shared an unbeaten 49-run partnership for the fourth wicket with Abdul Samad, who bolstered the Zalmi's total at the backend with a quickfire 40-run cameo, coming off just 12 deliveries. Afridi was the pick of the bowlers for the Kings, taking two wickets for 55 runs in his four overs, while Khushdil could claim one.

BRIEF SCORES: Peshawar Zalmi 246 for 3 (Mendis 109, Babar 87) beat Karachi Kings 87 (Rana 3-7, Iftikhar 3-9) by 159 runs.

Islamabad beat Lahore

Islamabad United cruised to a nine-wicket victory over Lahore Qalandars in a low-scoring PSL clash yesterday, securing their third win of the tournament.

Chasing a modest target of 101, United lost just one wicket by the 11th over, thanks to an outstanding batting display from Devon Conway.

Islamabad got off to a shaky start as opener Sameer Minhas was dismissed for five runs off eight balls, which included a boundary, by Shaheen Afridi on the first delivery of the third over. Conway then combined with Mohammad Faiz to build a steady partnership, taking their side past the 50-run mark by the sixth over. Conway finished unbeaten on 59 off 35 deliveries, including seven fours and three sixes, while Faiz contributed a brilliant 34 from 19 balls, hitting six fours, to guide Islamabad United to a comfortable win.

BRIEF SCORES: Islamabad United 104 for 1 (Conway 59*, Faiz 34*, Shaheen 1-22) beat Lahore Qalandars 100 all out (Raza 25, Green 3-19, Imad 2-13, Gleeson 2-13) by nine wickets



Peshawar Zalmi's Kusal Mendis and Babar Azam added a record 191-run for the second wicket against Karachi Kings yesterday.

MOTORSPORT

Verstappen set for fresh F1 angst as engineer nears Red Bull exit

AFP
London

Four-time world champion Max Verstappen's future in Formula One was again cast in doubt yesterday after reports emerged that his long-time race engineer is set to leave Red Bull.

Gianpiero Lambiase will take up a position with Red Bull's rivals McLaren, the BBC, the UK Press Association and Sky Sports all reported.

Neither McLaren nor Red Bull have made a public comment, but the BBC said the move had been confirmed by "senior insiders" at both teams, speaking on condition of anonymity.

A deal appears to be in place for British-Italian Lambiase to join UK-based McLaren when his Red Bull contract expires at the end of next season - although he could leave even sooner.

Lambiase has worked with Verstappen since the Dutchman, who won the last of his quartet of world titles in 2024, joined Red Bull a decade ago. His impending exit raises more questions about Verstappen, who hinted during last month's race in Japan he is ready to quit Formula One.

Verstappen, whose current Red Bull deal runs until 2028, is a lonely ninth in the championship -- with just 12 points from the opening three races. In Japan, the 28-year-old, a leading critic of this season's new regulations, labelled his car "undriveable".

Speaking about his overall feelings, he told reporters: "I don't



know the right word in English for it. I don't know what it is in Dutch either. I don't know what to make of it to be honest.

"There are probably no words. I don't get upset about it, and I don't get frustrated by it anymore with what is going on. There is a lot of stuff for me personally, to figure out."

In a subsequent BBC interview, Verstappen said: "When you just think about it is it worth it? Or do I enjoy being more at home with my family? Seeing my friends more when you're not enjoying your sport?"

Lambiase's exit would mark the departure of yet another senior figure from Red Bull, with Christian Horner sacked as team principal last year.

Design guru Adrian Newey and sporting director Jonathan Wheatley both left their posts before Horner's exit.

Meanwhile, Formula Two races originally scheduled for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia will be added to Formula One grand prix weekends in Miami and Montreal next

month in the series' first foray into North America.

The second and third rounds of the season, after the opener in Australia in March, were called off due to U.S. and Israeli airstrikes on Iran and after Iranian drones and missiles hit some Gulf capitals.

Formula Two said in a statement yesterday that it will race on the continent for the first time in Miami on May 1-3 and Montreal on May 22-24.

The second round of the season would otherwise not have been until Monaco in early June.

"It was not an easy thing to do, but bringing F2 to North America for the first time is really fantastic," said CEO Bruno Michel.

"It's something we have been wanting to do for a long time, and it enables us to ensure we're back racing as quickly as possible."

Formula One has not rescheduled its grands prix, with the calendar set to drop to 22 races, and is on a month-long break before resuming in Miami for what will be the fourth round of its season.

Gopinath, last survivor from India's first Test-winning team, dies at 96

Chingleput Gopinath, the last surviving member of the first India team to win a Test match, has died at the age of 96, the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association (TNCA) said yesterday.

Gopinath was the second-oldest living cricketer after Australia's Neil Harvey. India lost all six of the series they had played until then, including the one-off Test against England that marked their debut. They had drawn matches with England, Australia and West Indies but victory elud-

ed them for nearly two decades. When England visited India for a five-match series in 1951-52, the first three matches were drawn, before England won the fourth Test by eight wickets.

But the hosts finally broke through in Chennai in February 1952 as they beat England by an innings and eight runs to clinch their first win in a Test match and first draw in a Test series.

Batting at number eight, Gopinath scored 35 as India declared at 457-9 after England posted

266 in their first innings. The visitors folded for 183 in the second innings as Ghulam Ahmed and Vinoo Mankad took four wickets. Gopinath had made his Test debut earlier in the series, impressing with an unbeaten 50 in his first innings. It was the only half-century in his eight-match Test career.

"A true pioneer of Indian cricket ... your legacy will forever be etched in the game's rich history," the TNCA said in a statement.

FOCUS

Japan to host T20 World Cup qualifiers at new Asian Games cricket venue

AFP
Tokyo

Japan's new cricket venue, built for this year's Asian Games, will host men's T20 internationals for the first time next month, said the International Cricket Council.

Baseball-mad Japan has constructed a cricket stadium for the Asian Games, which are being held in Nagoya and the wider Aichi region from September 19-October 4. The new ground in Nissin, outside Nagoya, will stage the East Asia-Pacific (EAP) qualifiers for the 2028 men's T20 World Cup from May 8-18.

The biggest East Asia-Pacific qualifying tournament ever will see nine teams battling to move a step closer to the T20 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

Matches will also take place at the Japan Cricket Association's headquarters in Sano, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) outside of Tokyo.

"This is an extraordinary opportunity for Japan to show our capacity to host pathway events for the EAP Region across multiple venues," said JCA chief operations officer Alan Curr.

"We will be stretched like no time ever before,

but are confident we can deliver an event that will showcase the best of the EAP region as well as create excitement for cricket at the Asian Games later this year."

Hosts Japan will be joined at the tournament by the Cook Islands, Fiji, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, South Korea, Samoa and Vanuatu.

Brazil's Cardoso first bowler to take nine wickets in a T20 international

Brazil's Laura Cardoso became the first bowler to take nine wickets in a T20 international in men's or women's cricket as her team claimed a 189-run victory over Lesotho at the Kalahari Women's Tournament in Botswana's capital yesterday.

Medium pacer Cardoso took nine wickets, including a hat-trick, for four runs in three overs as Lesotho collapsed for 13 in 6.2 overs after Brazil posted 202-8.

Bhutan's Sonam Yeshey previously had the best bowling figures in the format after he took eight wickets for seven runs against Myanmar last year.

Cardoso, 21, has played 48 T20 matches for Brazil, taking 55 wickets.

Brazil, who lead the six-team tournament with five straight wins, play Mozambique today.

TENNIS

Sinner and Alcaraz wobble but advance to quarter-finals

'I WAS STRUGGLING A LITTLE BIT, WAS A BIT TIRED'

AFP
Monaco

Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz both suffered second-set stumbles yesterday in their race for the number one ranking but recovered to reach the last eight of the Monte Carlo Masters.

Sinner, who said he ran out of steam in the second set, beat the wildly erratic Tomas Machac, 6-1, 6-7 (3/7), 6-3. Alcaraz followed Sinner on to the centre court and his match went to a similar pattern before he beat Tomas Etcheverry 6-1, 4-6, 6-3.

Alcaraz, the defending champion, could lose the No.1 ranking to Sinner, who was finishing a ban last year and has no ranking points to lose this week. The Italian came into Monaco after winning the Masters tournaments in Indian Wells and Miami.

On Thursday, Sinner galloped through the first set but slowed in the second, allowing Machac to hit his way back into the match.

"I was struggling a little bit, was a bit tired," Sinner said. "I felt great before the match, in the second set I struggled a bit with trying to find the right energy. This can happen. I tried to push myself through which I've done."

Machac squandered two set points on serve at 5-4 in the second but then romped through the tie-break. That ended Sinner's record streak of 36 straight sets in 1000-level events but he stayed cool to stretch his run of Masters wins to 19.

Even with his opponent struggling, the Czech kept flailing for winners. He handed Sinner the third-set initiative when wild hitting handed the Italian a break to love in the third game.

Sinner held serve twice before breaking to love to wrap up victory in two hours and one minute.

His quarter-final opponent, sixth seed Felix Auger-Aliassime, needed to expend less energy. The Canadian was leading Casper Ruud 7-5, 2-2 when the Norwe-



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz plays a forehand return to Argentina's Tomas Martin Etcheverry during the Monte Carlo Masters match yesterday. (AFP)



Italy's Jannik Sinner celebrates after winning over Czech Republic's Tomas Machac in the Monte Carlo Masters match yesterday. (AFP)

gian retired. "I hope I can recover as much as I can for tomorrow," said Sinner. Alcaraz also blazed through the first set. "I was hitting the ball really well in the first set, like ten out of ten," said the Spaniard.

But in the second he made 23 unforced errors. "I had the chance to break his serve in the second set and I didn't take it and every time you don't take the opportunities at this level you have to run back," said Alcaraz. "He gained a little

confidence, played more aggressive, hitting the ball better."

Alcaraz re-established control when he broke in a marathon second game in the final set but was struggling to put his first serve in play. The top seed saved a break point to go 5-2 up and then needed three match points to clinch victory in 2hr 23min in his next service game.

Alcaraz said his troubles had a lot to do with his opponent. "Especially on clay he's a great fighter," Alcaraz said. "It's been a great day, a great battle."

The Spaniard will next face Alexander Bublik for the first time.

Kazakh Bublik, who beat Jiri Lehecka 6-2, 7-5, is, like Alcaraz, known for his drop shot. Alcaraz said the two men had practised together. "It's going to be fun to play," he said. "Let's see who has the best drop shot."

Earlier, 19-year-old Joao Fonseca reached the quarter-finals of a Masters 1000 event for the first time when he strode to a convincing 6-3, 6-2 win over Matteo Berrettini. The teenager is the youngest man to reach this stage in Monte Carlo since Rafael Nadal and Richard Gasquet in 2005. "It is super special," Fonseca said on court. "Of course I want more. I am very confident and focused."

The Brazilian's last-eight opponent will be world number three Alexander Zverev. "I am excited to play him for the first time," Zverev said of Fonseca. "He is a young upcoming talent and I think we will play each other a lot more in the next couple of years."

Germany's Zverev despatched Belgian Zizou Bergs 6-2, 7-5.

CYCLING

Aranburu sprints to Basque Country stage, Seixas extends lead

AFP
Galdakao, Spain

Local boy Alex Aranburu sprinted to victory in the fourth stage of the Tour of the Basque Country yesterday as French youngster Paul Seixas stretched his overall lead.

Aranburu pipped Norwegian Tobias Halland Johannessen by four seconds with Italian Christian Scaroni eight seconds further behind after a 167.2km ride centred around Galdakao to the north-east of Bilbao.

Aranburu, 30, from nearby Ezkio-Itsaso, secured a third success on the race, after stage victories last year and in 2021.

"It's always special to ride and win at home," Aranburu said.

"In the final two kilometers there were full-on attacks and the legs were burning," he added.

Seixas, considered a leading hope for French cycling, extended his lead in the yellow jersey by 20sec to 2min 19sec with Primoz Roglic in second place and Florian Lipowitz in third 2min 28sec behind.

The 19-year-old finished eighth on the stage thanks to fine descent into Galdakao having dominated the two opening days in northern Spain.

"I didn't take all the risks I know of," Seixas said.

"I trust myself right now, it's quite psychological the descents."

"There are moments of the year where I feel better than others, at this race I feel really at



Alex Aranburu celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the 4th stage of the Tour of Basque in Galdakao yesterday. (AFP)

ease," he added.

American Brandon McNulty made an early break after the race left Galdakao but was caught with 36km to go. With 10km left, Cofidis' Aramburu splintered from the pack and was joined by Uno-X Mobility's Johannessen as they returned into Galdakao.

But inside the final 500m they were almost caught by a small chasing pack before Aranburu, wearing a Basque flag sticker on his helmet, having been born an hour away from the finish line, secured the victory with a powerful sprint.

Today's penultimate stage is a 176.2km ride starting and ending in Eibar in the most challenging stage of the race.

Sabalenka pulls out of Stuttgart Open with injury

World No.1 Aryna Sabalenka yesterday pulled out of next week's Stuttgart Open citing an injury sustained at the Miami Open in March.

The Belarusian wrote on social media that she had failed to recover in time for the clay court tournament, which starts on Monday. "Unfortunately, I suffered an injury after Miami, and even though I tried everything to recover in time, I'm not ready to compete," Sabalenka yesterday.

The 27-year-old did not specify the nature of the injury. The four-time Grand Slam winner has made it to the final in Stuttgart in four of the past five years but is yet to win the tournament. "I always love coming back to Stuttgart. The atmosphere, the fans, and the support I feel there are so special to me. And of course, I was really hoping to have another chance."

Sabalenka beat local favourite Coco Gauff 6-2, 4-6, 6-3 to win the Miami Open to make it a "sunshine double," having won the WTA 1000 at Indian Wells two weeks prior.

(AFP)

BOXING

Croke Park boss eager to stage Fury-Joshua fight in Dublin

AFP
London

The long-awaited 'Battle of Britain' between former world heavyweight champions Tyson Fury and Anthony Joshua could take place outside the country at Dublin's Croke Park, according to the stadium's chief executive.

Fury, 39, reiterated on Wednesday ahead of his return from retirement against Arslanbek Makhmudov at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium on Saturday that he wanted to face Joshua before the end of 2026.

The duo have almost got into the same ring on several occasions, only for contract disputes, fitness issues and losses elsewhere to derail previous attempts to stage the super-fight.

Their camps had reportedly been close to an agreement before Joshua decided to take time out from boxing following a car crash which led to the death of two close friends in December.

The 36-year-old Joshua, however, is now back in training and was present for Derek Chisora's defeat by Deontay Wilder last Saturday.

Croke Park, with a capacity of over 80,000 in the Irish capital, is one of Europe's largest stadiums. They are now trying to arrange a fight between Fury and Joshua, with Irish women's boxing heroine Katie Taylor on the undercard.

"The real hope is that we will

get Tyson Fury here later on in the year," Croke Park stadium chief executive Peter McKenna told the BBC yesterday.

"That would be such a world-billing event that we would be able to facilitate a Katie Taylor fight here. A lot of stars need to align. Katie's manager needs to agree, Eddie Hearn needs to agree, Tyson Fury's promoter needs to agree.

"I am very confident that all three are coming to the sense that this is one of Ireland's greatest sporting athletes and it would be such a 'wow' to have her here and for her to finish her career here."

A possible stumbling block is if Joshua wants a 'warm-up' fight before he faces Fury, with promoter Eddie Hearn suggesting earlier this week that Wilder could be an option.

Fury warned Joshua time was running out, given he will end his own 16-month absence from the ring on Saturday against Russian boxer Makhmudov.

"This fight (with Joshua) was supposed to happen so many times over the last 10 years, but then someone has had one more fight in between and someone has got knocked out or injured," Fury said. "I think we should get this fight on as soon as possible in case something happens in between. "The problem is that in heavyweight boxing anything can go wrong, there are no easy fights. And if you get knocked upside down, it's finished, it's done. I want it as the fight next and I'm sure AJ feels the same."

MASTERS

Nicklaus hopes to continue role as honorary starter

Reuters
Augusta

The 90th edition of the Masters Tournament officially began with the honorary starting threesome of Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Tom Watson yesterday.

Shortly after sunrise at Augusta National Golf Club, the trio of golfing legends emerged from the iconic clubhouse to a resounding applause from the patrons gathered on a chilly Georgia morning.

With a youthful exuberance that greatly belies his 90 years of age, Player took the first swing of the tournament and piped his drive.

"Getting to the first tee with the enthusiasm of all the people, which is an essential ingredient in life, I think - enthusiasm - the love they give you out there is quite remarkable," he said.

Player was followed by Nicklaus, 86, who had his son Jack Nicklaus Jr. working as his caddie. The six-time Masters champion astutely warned the gallery before hooking his shot over the crowd.

"I don't know what was running through my head other than not to hurt anyone," Nicklaus quipped, adding that he had carpal tunnel surgery earlier this year and was primarily focused on holding onto the club. "That was my issue today. I'm fortunate that I got it over somebody's head."

Watson, 76, followed with a well-struck drive and the tournament was officially on.

The trio has won a combined 11 Masters and made 140 collective appearances at the tournament, including 37 honorary starter ceremonies.

Nicklaus was asked whether



Honorary starter Jack Nicklaus of the United States follows his shot from the first tee during the first round of the 2026 Masters Tournament in Augusta, Georgia. (AFP)

he intends to continue with being part of the tradition in future years. "As long as I can still hit the golf ball," he said. "I played once this year, I played in February. I played once last year. I don't really play golf anymore."

"But it's such a nice ceremony, and it's a real honor to be invited. I hope to be able to do it as long as I can not kill anybody."

Player said the walk from the clubhouse to the first tee each year evokes a flood of memories and gratitude.

"Funny enough how your mind goes back very quickly, and I

thought of President Eisenhower, who I admired so much, who was a member of this club which started it off - how much I love coming back here every year of my life, an integral part of my life, and such a fantastic tournament," he said.

"I think the word, as you get older, is gratitude. Just to be able to be on that first tee is an honor."

Player is making his 68th visit to the Masters this week, a tournament he once called the fourth most important major on the golf calendar.

That view has evolved steadily with the growth and evolution of

the only major to be contested at the same venue every year.

"They've evolved faster than any other tournament. It's one of the greatest events in the world," he said. "It's one of the most beautiful places historically, and there's nothing but admiration for what they've done."

"Every year you come here, you're absolutely in awe. Buildings that would take years to build, they do in nine months. It's quite remarkable. It's now inundated with history, and it will go even from more strength to strength in the future."

HORSE RACING

Sussex claims The Late Yousef Al Romaihi Cup

By Sport Reporter
Doha

Sussex delivered a commanding performance in the 3200m Thoroughbred Open Handicap, clinching The Late Yousef Al Romaihi Cup at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

The seven-year-old bay gelding secured back-to-back wins this campaign, turning the race into a one-horse show with a pillar-to-post display. Always well clear of his rivals, Sussex powered home alone in the straight to win by a commanding 10 lengths.

Under the care of M.H.K. al-Attayah, he was partnered by Jefferson Smith. The meeting featured a total of 10 races.

Always well clear of his rivals, Sussex travelled comfortably at the head of affairs and steadily increased his advantage throughout. While rivals and spectators alike may have expected him to weaken over the extended trip, the opposite unfolded, as he continued to find more with every stride, his strength and dominance becoming increasingly evident. In the home straight, he powered further clear without coming under any real pressure, sealing an emphatic and authoritative success.

Foehn, representing Hamad Ramzan al-



Jefferson Smith rides Sussex to victory. PICTURES: Juhaïm

Naimi and handled by Hadi al-Ramzani, with Alberto Sanna aboard, finished best of the rest to take second, 2 1/5 lengths ahead of the Jassim al-Ghazali-trained Gulf Legend, who kept on for Sheikh Abdul Rahman Rashid al-Thani under Salem

Alajmi to take third.

The trophy was presented by Ali, Fahad, and Mubarak Yousef al-Romaihi, in the presence of Saad Ali al-Kubaisi, Deputy Director of the QREC Registration & Stud-book Department.



Connection of Sussex pose with the trophies.

RESULTS 64TH AL RAYYAN RACE MEETING - THE LATE YOUSEF AL ROMAIHI CUP

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

- 1 - The Late Yousef Al Romaihi Cup - Thoroughbred Open Handicap (Class 2) Sussex, MHK al-Attayah, Jefferson Smith
- 2 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate Louvay De Mireval, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Marco Casamento
- 3 - Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate Bin Narain, Ahmed al-Jehani, Arnaud de Lepine
- 4 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate Ayash, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Marco Casamento

- 5 - Thoroughbred Novice Plate Edgartown, Alban de Mieulle, Faleh Bughenaim
- 6 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-80) Court Poet, Nayef Batal al-Otibi, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
- 7 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (60-80) Mejlal, Mohammed Ahmed al-Hajri, Salman Fahad al-Hajri
- 8 - Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate Dabida, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
- 9 - Local Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75) Best Way, Alban de Mieulle, Soufiane Saadi
- 10 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (70-90) Mohimma, Jean de Mieulle, Faleh Bughenaim

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Barcelona lodge UEFA complaint after Atletico loss

Row centres on an incident when Atletico's Pubill handled the ball

Reuters
Barcelona

Barcelona have carried their fury beyond the dugout and into UEFA's inbox, lodging a formal complaint over the officiating in their 2-0 home defeat by Atletico Madrid in the Champions League quarter-final first leg.

The row centres on an incident early in the second half when Barca appealed for a penalty after Atletico goalkeeper Juan Musso appeared to have put the ball back into play from a goal kick before defender Marc Pubill handled it inside the six-yard box to retake it.

Referee Istvan Kovacs waved play on and the VAR team did not summon him to the monitor, drawing furious reactions from the Barcelona bench. "Barcelona inform that the club legal services have submitted a complaint to UEFA today regarding the events in the Champions League quarter-final first leg against Atletico Madrid," the club said in an official statement.

"The complaint centres around a specific action. In the 54th minute of the match, after play had been restarted correctly, an opponent player picked up the ball in their area without being shown the corresponding penalty," it added.

"Barcelona understand that this decision, along with a grave lack of intervention by VAR, represents a major error. Accordingly, the club has requested an investigation be opened, access to refereeing communications, and where applicable, official acknowledgment of the errors and the adoption of the relevant measures."

Interpretations of similar incidents have varied. In the Champions League quarter-finals in April 2024, the referee did not award a penalty to Bayern Munich after Arsenal defender Gabriel Magalhaes touched the ball following what appeared to be a restart from goalkeeper David Raya. Later in 2024, VAR



Barcelona coach Hansi Flick pushes away defender Joao Cancelo from referees after their loss to Atletico Madrid at the Camp Nou in Barcelona on Wednesday. (Reuters)

intervened to award Club Brugge a penalty in a comparable exchange involving Aston Villa goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez and defender Tyrone Mings.

After the game, Barcelona manager Hansi Flick tore into the officiating, raging over a second-half penalty call and Pau Cubarsi's red card that left his team a man down before halftime. "I don't know why VAR hasn't been used. The referee... I think he's brilliant. We all make mistakes, but what's the point of VAR? I just can't understand it. It should have been a penalty, a second yellow and a red card as he already had a booking. This is exactly what shouldn't happen," Flick said.

Atletico manager Diego Simeone saw it differently. "It's a matter of common sense," Simeone told reporters. "The referee saw it as

it was. That Marc (Pubill) received what appeared to be a pass from his teammate to start the move, the referee saw it the same way as Marc saw it. Then we can look at as many situations as we like."

Barcelona had already been reduced to 10 men in the 44th minute when Cubarsi was sent off for hauling down Giuliano Simeone as the last man. Julian Alvarez brilliantly curled in the resulting free kick before the interval and Alexander Sorloth sealed the win after the break. Flick also questioned the dismissal. "I'm not sure if he made enough contact because the ball was behind him; I'm not entirely sure," he said. "I don't know. It might be, or it might not be. I don't know if he touched him enough. But in other situations, when the ball is touched by the hand, it's very clear to me."

Eritrea players disappear after winning AFCON qualifier

Johannesburg: Only three of 10 local footballers in an Eritrea squad returned home after a 2027 Africa Cup of Nations qualifier, a Confederation of African Football (CAF) official told AFP on Wednesday.

The other seven are believed to have disappeared when the national team arrived in South Africa en route from Eswatini to Eritrea via Egypt, said the official, who requested anonymity.

"This incident is a mystery. Eritrea beat Eswatini on March 31 in Lobamba and no one seems certain what happened thereafter," he said. "We believe all the players left Eswatini for South Africa. But when the travelling party landed in Cairo, seven players were missing."

A member of the Eritrean community in South Africa told AFP he had seen several of the missing footballers in Johannesburg, but declined to give further details, citing safety concerns.

AFP understands the seven missing players include goalkeepers Kibrom Solomon and Awet Maharena and defenders Wedeb Fessehaye, Yosief Tesegay and Nahom Awet. Veteran midfielder Medhane Redie and striker Amanuel Benhur were the other defectors, who have joined dozens of Eritrean footballers who abandoned national teams when in other African states.

Those who returned to Asmara were captain Ablelom Teklezghi, fellow midfielder Nahom Tadese and striker Romel Abdu.

The United Nations estimates about 80 Eritreans involved in football, including players, coach-

es and officials, have defected during the past 20 years.

Indefinite military service after completing schooling is cited as the main reason for the defections from the east African country.

Eritrea has been governed by President Isaias Afwerki since gaining independence from Ethiopia in 1993 and human rights groups consistently describe his rule as "highly repressive".

During a state visit to Kenya three years ago, Afwerki said such allegations were "fantasy".

Recently appointed Eritrea coach Hesham Yakan, a defender in the Egypt 1990 World Cup squad, chose 24 players, including 14 based abroad, for the two-leg preliminary qualifier against Eswatini.

His selection included Eritreans based in Australia, Egypt, England, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, the Philippines and Sweden.

Ali Suleiman from Egyptian top-flight side Ismailia Electricity Club scored three goals as Eritrea won 2-0 and 2-1 to qualify for the main qualifying phase, which will comprise 12 four-team groups.

The first leg against Eswatini was staged in Moroccan city Meknes because Eritrea does not have an international-standard stadium. It was the first Cup of Nations match involving Eritrea since 2007. Subsequently, they competed in three World Cup qualifying competitions and also several regional tournaments. During trips outside the country, players from both Eritrean senior and under-age national teams regularly disappeared and sought asylum.

Donnarumma denies Italy players wanted bonus for World Cup qualification

Milan: Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma said he was hurt by reports claiming the national team's players had demanded a bonus if they qualified for this year's World Cup.

Four-times champions Italy missed out on the finals for the third consecutive time after losing 4-1 on penalties to Bosnia and Herzegovina in last month's playoff final.

"As captain, I never went to ask the Italian national team for a single euro," Donnarumma said. "What the national team does, as always, in every competition, is give a gift to the players who qualify for a tournament. That was all there was to it, but nobody asked the federation for anything; our reward was getting to go to the World Cup."

Italy's failure to qualify for the June 11 to July 19 tournament in North America resulted in Italian Football Federation President Gabriele Gravina resigning amid political pressure and the country's former goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon stepping down as the team's delegation chief.

Head coach Gennaro Gattuso also left his position. "We have to start afresh, move on," Donnarumma, 27, said. "We have to bounce back; there are four years until the next World Cup, and in the meantime there are major competitions like the European Championship and the

Nations League. Before thinking about the World Cup, we need to focus on these big tournaments in between and we need to start again strongly straight away."

ARGENTINA TO FACE HONDURAS AND ICELAND IN WORLD CUP WARM-UPS

Argentina will wrap up their World Cup preparations in June with friendly matches against Honduras and Iceland in the United States, the Argentine football federation said.

World champions Argentina will face Honduras on June 6 at Kyle Field in College Station, Texas, before taking on Iceland three days later at Jordan-Hare Stadium in Auburn, Alabama. In the World Cup Argentina will be in Group J alongside Austria, Algeria, and Jordan. Argentina begin their title defence on June 16 against Algeria.

ENGLAND TO PLAY NEW ZEALAND AND COSTA RICA IN PREPARATORY MATCHES

England will play New Zealand and Costa Rica in Tampa and Orlando in their final preparatory games before this summer's World Cup campaign, the English FA said. New Zealand, playing in their first World Cup since 2010, will play England on June 6 before Thomas Tuchel's side face Costa Rica, who reached the quarter-finals in 2014, four days later.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Robertson to leave Liverpool at end of season

AFP
Liverpool

Andy Robertson will bring down the curtain on his nine-year career at Liverpool at the end of the season, the faltering Premier League champions announced.

The 32-year-old has made 373 appearances for the club, winning two Premier League titles and the Champions League as a key member of the side that restored the Reds to the top of the English and European game under Jurgen Klopp. However, he has dropped down the pecking order this season since the arrival of Milos Kerkez and his contract, which expires at the end of the campaign, will not be renewed.

The Scotland captain is the second high-profile departure from Liverpool in the coming months after Mohamed Salah announced he will also depart at the end of the season. "I'll always look back on amazing memories at this football club, I've put my heart and soul into the club for nine years and I've not got many



regrets," said Robertson. "I've grown as a man and as a person. This club will always mean the world to me, the fans will mean the world to me. It has been a hell of a journey."

Less than a year on from winning the Premier League, Liverpool have endured a miserable campaign, marked by tragedy off the field. A close friend of Robertson's, forward Diogo Jota died in a car accident in July. On the field, Arne

Slot has struggled to find the right balance from an expensively assembled squad that sits fifth in the Premier League.

Liverpool were also dumped out of the FA Cup 4-0 by Manchester City last weekend and lost 2-0 in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final against Paris Saint-Germain on Wednesday. Robertson's rise was one of the success stories of Klopp's glorious reign at Anfield.

Signed from relegated Hull for £8mn (\$11mn) in 2017, he quickly became a fan favourite. He sits behind only former team-mate Trent Alexander Arnold as the defender with most assists in Premier League history.

On top of Premier League and Champions League glory, Robertson won the FA Cup, two League Cups, the Club World Cup and UEFA Super Cup. "I'm still fully focused on trying to end this season as positively as possible, to help these lads and to try to give a few more good moments to the fans," added Robertson. "That's my aim and hopefully then we can do it and maybe closer to the end of the season you'll have me down a camera crying my eyes out."