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TENNIS

Alcaraz beats
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PREVIEW

Muaither eye historic triumph against Rayyan in QSL Cup final

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Having exceeded their own expectations to reach the QSL Cup final, Muaither are now ready and eager for the all-important clash against Al Rayyan, to be played at Stadium 974 today at 7pm.

Muaither, coached by former player Nabil El Zhar, have stood out in the tournament, which adopted a new format featuring 20 teams including top Qatar clubs. The side impressed across ten matches, winning six and drawing two before defeating Al Arabi 3-2 on penalties in the semi-finals. Beyond the results, Muaither's players have demonstrated strong match temperament. Their biggest test yet, however, will come against the might of The Lions, Al Rayyan.

Al Rayyan, who won most of their matches and finished with the highest points tally, secured their place in the final after overcoming Umm Salal in a marathon 17-16 penalty shootout following a 3-3 draw in the semi-finals.

Al Rayyan coach Vicente Moreno, speaking on the eve of the final, stressed that the match presents an opportunity for his side to clinch their first title of the season.

"We are extremely happy to be playing in the final, which is of great importance



Muaither's coach Nabil El Zhar is cautious yet confident about his team's chances against Al Rayyan

to us, as we aim to win our first title of the season. We have high-calibre players in every position, and I have strong confidence in my players to secure victory and lift the trophy," said Moreno.

The coach believes it is a significant opportunity for Al Rayyan and one they must seize. "I consider myself fortunate to be leading the team in just two matches and already competing in a championship final. We are only one step away from winning a title. This opportunity is a gift for me and we must make the most of it by winning the championship, because Al Rayyan are truly a great team that deserves to always be on the podium," he added.

Muaither coach El Zhar was cautious yet confident about his team's chances against Al Rayyan. "Al Rayyan are one of the best teams, boasting high-calibre players. Facing them will undoubtedly require us to exert double the effort and give our absolute best to achieve the desired result and lift the cup. Reaching the final was certainly not a stroke of luck. The team has proved its worth since the beginning of the tournament by delivering outstanding performances. I thank all the players and commend the high spirit they have displayed.

"Playing in the QSL Cup final will be a strong motivator for us in the coming period, especially since we have lost hope of competing for promotion to the Qatar Stars League next season. We hope luck will be on our side so that we can make our fans happy. The pressure will be greater on Al Rayyan, while the incentives are for our players. Therefore, we will enter the match calmly and without pressure, and give our best," said El Zhar.



Al Rayyan players at a training session yesterday.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Dembele double at Liverpool fires PSG into semi-finals

Defeat means there will be no glorious goodbye for Salah

AFP
Liverpool

Ousmane Dembele's double guided Paris Saint-Germain into the Champions League semi-finals as a 2-0 win over Liverpool at Anfield last night completed a 4-0 aggregate win for the holders.

To compound the English champions' woes, Hugo Ekitike suffered a serious-looking injury that could end his season and hinder Liverpool's chances of being back among Europe's elite next season.

Arne Slot's men sit fifth in the Premier League and will end the campaign trophyless after being kept at arm's reach by a PSG side that did not need to be at their brilliant best to reach a third consecutive semi-final.

Defeat means there will be no glorious goodbye for Mohamed Salah after nine memorable years on Merseyside. Slot showed little sentiment as he dropped the Egyptian to the bench on his final Champions League appearance in red. Alexander Isak was preferred up front as the most expensive player in Premier League history started for the first time since breaking his leg in December.

However, Salah was forced into action after just half an hour as Ekitike suffered a nasty-looking injury that could ruin his World Cup hopes with France.

The former PSG striker crumpled in a heap holding his lower right leg with a suspected ruptured Achilles.

Salah nearly made an immediate impact as from his cross Matvey Safonov made a fine save from Milos Kerkez before Marquinhos produced a remarkable block to deny Virgil van Dijk the opening goal. PSG had plenty of chances to have put the tie to bed in the Parc des Princes last week and were profligate once more in the first half.

Giorgi Mamardashvili scrambled back towards his line to punch away Dembele's attempted chip before the Ballon d'Or winner blazed over from close range with just the Georgian to beat. Slot admitted before kick-off that Isak could only last for 45 minutes due to a lack of match practice and the Swede made way for Cody Gakpo at half-time in a further



Paris Saint-Germain's Ousmane Dembele celebrates after scoring against Liverpool during the Champions League quarter-final second leg at Anfield in Liverpool. (AFP)

blow to Liverpool's firepower up front.

Kerkez had the best chance to set up a grandstand finale when he sliced wide another inviting Salah delivery. Liverpool thought they had been gifted a lifeline when Alexis Mac Allister was awarded a very generous penalty for minimal contact by William Pacheco, but VAR intervened to instruct referee Maurizio Mariani to reverse his original decision.

But as Liverpool poured forward in desperation, they became a sitting duck for the rapid PSG counter-attack. Dembele finally killed the tie off 18 minutes from time when he cut

onto his left foot and curled into the bottom corner from outside the box.

The French international then inflicted the final blow with a cool finish from Bradley Barcola's cross in stoppage time. PSG will face a tougher test against the in-form Bayern Munich or 15-time winners Real Madrid in the last four. But after ending the Qatari-backed French champions' long wait to conquer Europe last season, Luis Enrique's men remain on course to become the only side other than Madrid to retain the competition in the Champions League era.

SPOTLIGHT

Atletico resist Barca to reach semi-final

AFP
Madrid

Atletico Madrid sent 10-man Barcelona crashing out of the Champions League and reached the final four with a 3-2 aggregate victory despite 2-1 quarter-final second leg defeat.

Lamine Yamal and Ferran Torres fired visitors Barca ahead inside 24 minutes but Ademola Lookman's strike gave Atletico the edge in the gripping all-Spanish tie once again after their 2-0 win in the first leg. Diego Simeone's side returned to the semi-finals for the first time since 2017 by holding on against the La Liga champions in a compelling and bloody battle.

Barcelona ended the game with 10-men as Eric Garcia was sent off for bringing down Alexander Sorloth as he ran in on goal, hampering their chance of finding a third goal to force extra-time. Atletico, who have never won the competition and lost the 2014 and 2016 finals with Simeone at the helm, will face Arsenal or Sporting Lisbon in the semi-finals.

Barca coach Hansi Flick benched forwards Marcus Rashford and Robert Lewandowski for workhorses Torres and Gavi, looking to press Atletico relentlessly in the sixth match between these sides this season. Goalkeeper Juan Musso tipped a Yamal effort around his post after just 32 seconds, with Barca roaring out of the blocks in a fiery atmosphere at the Metropolitano stadium.

The teenage winger fired the visitors ahead after just four minutes when he harried Clement Lenglet into giving the ball away.

Torres nudged it back to Yamal who slipped a low shot through Musso's legs to hush the home fans and ignite Barca's attempted comeback bid.

Barcelona doubled their lead in the 24th minute to level the tie on aggregate when Torres left Lenglet trailing, reached Olmo's pass and fired across Musso into the top corner. Fermin Lopez could have notched Barca's third but Musso clawed out his header and left the midfielder bleeding after his boot caught the Spaniard in the face.

Atletico pulled their way back into the game in the 31st minute after Barca switched off defensively for the first time. Marcos Llorente charged in down the right behind the Catalans' high defensive line and crossed for Lookman to convert. Barcelona were upset when Olmo went to ground under pressure in the box and their appeals were waved away.

The five-time winners were frustrated again early in the second half when Torres volleyed home but the goal was disallowed for offside. Flick sent on Rashford and Lewandowski with around 20 minutes remaining to find the goal that last season's semi-finalists needed to progress.

Barca stopper Joan Garcia made a fine save with his leg to thwart Robin Le Normand from close range as Atletico almost pulled level on the night.

Matteo Ruggieri was left with blood streaming down his face after Gavi caught him with an elbow, with tensions rising. The game spun away from Barca when Eric Garcia was sent off for clipping Sorloth's heels as he ran through on goal, similar to Pau Cubarsi's red card in the first leg.



Atletico Madrid's Antoine Griezmann (right) celebrates with team-mates at Metropolitano Stadium in Madrid. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Stokes dismisses talk of McCullum rift

AFP
London

England captain **Ben Stokes** has dismissed suggestions of a collapse in his relationship with coach **Brendon McCullum**, although he says the way they work together will "look a little bit different" this season.

Stokes and McCullum, a former New Zealand captain, have been in a close alliance since joining forces in 2022.

But there appeared to be a difference in their respective approaches as England slumped to a woeful 4-1 series Ashes loss in Australia last season.

As all-rounder Stokes opted for

a more grinding, disciplined approach, as the series wore on, while McCullum continued to stand by his mantra of ultra-aggressive 'Bazball' cricket.

Both men backed each other in public at the end of the series and Stokes reiterated that position following media reports a post-Ashes review had revealed tensions between the duo.

"Saying we weren't aligned, I think, is a massive overstatement," Stokes said in an in-house interview with the England and Wales Cricket Board published yesterday.

"When you're in a position of leadership along with someone else, if anyone thinks that you're always going to agree on everything, then it's just impossible."

England are back in Test action

in June, against New Zealand, before taking on Pakistan at home as well. Stokes said there would be a change in how he worked with McCullum as the team look to return to winning ways ahead of the 2027 Ashes in England.

"I'm very confident in mine and Brendon's ability to be able to work together, because we've done it for such a long period of time now, but work together in a slightly different way," he said.

"The main point of me and Brendon is our alignment towards winning things and making this team as good as they can be. That's always been the thing since we started. It might just look a little bit different now to how that operates - on the back of four years working together.

"Hopefully we'll still be together at the end of 2027, winning what we want to win."

Stokes is currently recovering from a facial injury after being struck by a stray ball in pre-season training but is expected to lead England in the first Test against New Zealand at Lord's on June 4.

But Brydon Carse could miss that match after withdrawing yesterday from the Indian Premier League because of an injury to his right hand.

Carse, 30, was the only ever-present England quick bowler during the Ashes.

But he was struck on his bowling hand while batting in the nets for Sunrisers Hyderabad before this year's edition of the IPL got underway.



INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Chennai bat in solid fashion to crush Kolkata

LEFT-ARM SPINNER NOOR AHMAD GRABS 3-21 IN BIG CSK WIN

AFP
Chennai, India

Afghan spinner **Noor Ahmad** returned impressive figures of 3-21 as Chennai Super Kings beat Kolkata Knight Riders by 32 runs for their second straight IPL win yesterday.

Five-time winners Chennai posted 192-5, riding on knocks from Sanju Samson, who hit 48, and Dewald Brevis (41) after being invited to bat first at their home MA Chidambaram Stadium.

Noor then turned on the heat with his left-arm wrist spin to keep Kolkata down to 160-7 in reply as they remain winless in their five outings.

Kolkata sit last in the standings with one point, which came courtesy of a washed-out game.

Chennai kept up their momentum after starting the season with three consecutive defeats, and now with back-to-back victories move to eighth place.

One of the most successful franchises in the T20 tournament, Chennai are still awaiting the return of MS Dhoni, who is recovering from a calf injury and is yet to play a game in this edition. Three-time champions Kolkata lost three early wickets in their chase, including Finn Allen (one) and Sunil Narine (24), but were in the hunt before Noor struck.

Noor took down skipper Ajinkya Rahane for 28 and Australia's Cameron Green for a golden duck on successive balls but the hat-trick was avoided by Rinku Singh in his next over.

But Rinku did not last long and



Chennai Super Kings' Ayush Mhatre (left) bumps fists with Sanju Samson in their IPL match against Kolkata Knight Riders in Chennai yesterday. (Reuters)

was caught out at long-on for six as Kolkata slipped to 90-6.

Rovman Powell, who hit an unbeaten 31, and Ramandeep Singh (35) attempted to revive the chase but could never keep up with the asking rate.

Earlier, Samson, who hit a century in the previous match, kept up his form to hand the team a quick start in his 32-ball knock laced with four fours and three sixes. Ayush Mhatre's 17-ball 38 and crucial runs by Brevis and Sarfaraz Khan (23) allowed Chennai to post a challenging total de-

spite tidy bowling by Kolkata at the backend.

Ruturaj Gaikwad, the CSK captain, said yesterday: "Feeling good. Defended a good score. Felt it was a par score, given wicket changed drastically after the first 7-8 overs. It started spinning and gripping."

BRIEF SCORES
Chennai Super Kings 192 for 5 (Samson 48, Tyagi 2-35) **beat Kolkata Knight Riders 160 for 7** (Ramandeep 35, Noor 3-21) **by 32 runs**



Chennai Super Kings' Noor Ahmad celebrates. (AFP)

COMMENT

Wisden laments India's 'Orwellian' control of world cricket

AFP
London

Wisden has criticised Indian political interference in global cricket administration, labelling the current situation "increasingly Orwellian".

The UK-based *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*, which dates back to 1864, is an annual record of all major cricket worldwide and is regarded as the sport's "Bible".

In its 163rd annual edition, to be published Thursday, editor Lawrence Booth highlighted what he sees as an unhealthy and politicised Indian dominance of the global game.

The International Cricket Council has an Indian chief executive, Sanjog Gupta, and an Indian chairman, Jay Shah, who is the son of Amit Shah, India's minister of home affairs and a longstanding ally of the prime minister, Narendra Modi.

Wisden describes the Board of Control for Cricket in India, which Shah led before taking over at the ICC, as "the sporting adjunct of India's ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)".

Booth also highlighted how politics intruded upon the 2025 Asia Cup, which took place against a backdrop of a brief military conflict between India and Pakistan, leading to the players refusing to shake hands when the border rivals played each other.

"Was there a clearer indictment of the game's governance in 2025 than Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Mohsin Naqvi's assertion that 'politics and sport can't go together'?" Booth wrote.

"Presumably he had forgotten he was also his country's interior minister."

Booth added: "It was obvious long before this latest grandstanding that the BCCI were the sporting adjunct of India's ruling BJP."

'Indian exceptionalism'
"But the relationship became explicit when India captain Suryakumar Yadav dedicated the first of India's Asia Cup wins over Pakistan to the armed forces.

"And the idea that cricket was



ICC chairman Jay Shah looks out from the stands before the start of IPL match between Delhi Capitals and Sunrisers Hyderabad in Visakhapatnam on March 30, 2025.

now a legitimate proxy for more lethal activity was hammered home on X by India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, after his country beat Pakistan in the final: 'Operation Sindoor on the games field. Outcome is the same - India wins!' The real-world Operation Sindoor had left dozens dead, on both sides of the border."

Booth also cited the case of Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman, who was released from a \$1 million deal with Indian Premier League franchise Kolkata Knight Riders - amid rising tensions between the two nations following the murder of Hindu men in Bangladesh.

Mustafizur's exit from the IPL sparked a chain of events that led to Bangladesh's removal from this year's men's T20 World Cup, after their government refused to let them travel to India.

"The sport's governance grows ever more Orwellian, pretending that Indian exceptionalism comes without consequence, and blaming those lower down the food chain for lashing out.

"Predictably, almost no prominent voices in the Indian game addressed the root cause of the carnage: the politicisation of a sport that, whatever Naqvi may say, has never been untouched by the real world, yet never more poisoned by it either."

ANNOUNCEMENT

Muzarabani given 2-year PSL ban after IPL switch

Reuters
Lahore

Blessing Muzarabani has been banned from the Pakistan Super League (PSL) for two years after the Zimbabwe fast bowler joined Indian Premier League (IPL) side Kolkata Knight Riders, despite having agreed to play for PSL team Islamabad United.

The 29-year-old, who went unsold in the IPL and PSL auctions, was signed by Islamabad but he chose to play for Kolkata instead, as the IPL franchise's replacement for Mustafizur Rahman, who was released following instructions from the Indian Cricket Board (BCCI).

The IPL and the PSL have been held almost simultaneously since last year, making it impossible for an international player to participate in both leagues.

"Despite a clear offer and an un-



equivocal acceptance of essential terms, the player chose to disregard these obligations in favour of a conflicting arrangement," the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) said in a statement yesterday.

"The attempt to move away from such commitments without valid cause is a violation of contractual obligations and principles of good faith that govern global professional sports."

South African bowler Corbin Bosch, who last year snubbed Peshawar Zalmi to play for Mumbai Indians in the IPL, was banned from the PSL for one year.

FOCUS

Indian cricketers dominate Wisden honours

AFP
London

Indian cricketers, including men's Test captain Shubman Gill and women's star Deepti Sharma, dominated the Wisden cricket awards announced on Monday.

The UK-based *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack*, which dates back to 1864, is an annual record of all major cricket worldwide and is regarded as the sport's "Bible".

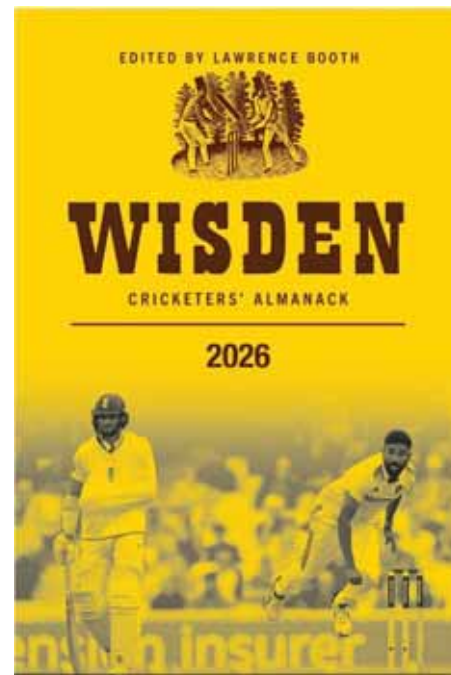
The publication named four Indian players who starred in a thrilling 2-2 drawn Test series in England last year among its five cricketers of the year.

Batter Gill, spin-bowling all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja, wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant and fast bowler Mohammed Siraj were all on the list.

The only English player in the group of five was former Test opener Haseeb Hameed, who led Nottinghamshire to the County Championship in 2025.

Players can only receive the award once in their careers and it is based predominantly on performances during the previous English season.

Gill also received the Wisden Trophy for Test performance of the year after he scored 269 and 161 in the second Test at Edgbaston.



Deepti Sharma succeeds compatriot Smriti Mandhana as Wisden's leading women's cricketer of the year for her all-round performances

in India's 50-over World Cup triumph, with Australia fast bowler Mitchell Starc receiving the men's award.

The prolific Abhishek Sharma was named *Wisden's* leading T20 cricketer of the year.

Wisden editor Lawrence Booth, however, criticised the increasing Indian influence on English domestic cricket's Hundred, with four of the eight franchises now linked to owners of Indian Premier League teams after a huge influx of private investment.

"The competition's new ownership structure risks turning The Hundred into an IPL proxy event, more for the benefit of Indian businessmen than English cricket," wrote Booth.

He also pulled no punches in labelling England's woeful Ashes campaign as "feckless, reckless and legless".

England, humiliated 4-1 by Australia, were criticised for insufficient planning, confused tactics and an over-relaxed approach to off-field behaviour, highlighted by reports of excessive drinking during a mid-tour break.

"In the game's long history, it is hard to think of a privilege so carelessly squandered, a chance so blithely spurned," wrote Booth.

"England were feckless, reckless and legless. These were the wing-and-a-prayer Ashes and England got what they deserved. What a waste. What a shame."

TENNIS

Alcaraz bounces back with easy first round win

'LITTLE BY LITTLE I STARTED FEELING MAYBE A BIT BETTER'



AFP
Barcelona

World number two Carlos Alcaraz eased to a 6-4, 6-2 victory over Finnish qualifier Otto Virtanen yesterday to begin his push for a third Barcelona Open title.

The Spaniard, who lost the Monte Carlo Masters final to new number one Jannik Sinner on Sunday, can reclaim top spot if he triumphs this week in Barcelona, as he did in 2022 and 2023.

Alcaraz, who finished as runner-up last year in Catalonia, started the first round clash slowly but found his rhythm in a dominant second set.

"I didn't have much time to adjust in terms of training - this morning was the first practice session I'd done here in Barcelona, which makes it a bit hard to find good sensations at the start," said Alcaraz afterwards. "I'm happy to have come through the problems I had in the first set.

"Little by little I started feeling maybe a bit better, and I'm happy to win the match in straight sets and give myself another chance to

try to feel a bit better in the next round."

Alcaraz received some treatment from the physio on his forearm but said he hoped it was "nothing" and without time to rest between tournaments that it was normal to have "little niggles".

World number 130 Virtanen started strongly in front of a full crowd at the court named after Spanish great Rafael Nadal, pushing hard on Alcaraz's serve, while holding his own relatively comfortably. However, Alcaraz broke in the 10th and final game of the first set to take the lead.

In the second set, the players

exchanged breaks before Alcaraz broke to love and consolidated for a 4-1 lead. Alcaraz opened up a triple match point on Virtanen's serve and hit a cross-court winner to capitalise on the first of those.

The seven-time Grand Slam winner will face Czech Tomas Machac in the second round.

Earlier on, second seed Lorenzo Musetti defeated Martin Landaluce 7-5, 6-2 for his first win since the Australian Open.

Australian Alex de Minaur overcame Sebastian Ofner 7-6 (9/7), 6-4, while Karen Khachanov suffered a surprise 6-3, 6-4 defeat by Camilo Ugo Carabelli.

FOCUS

Zverev edges past Kecmanovic in Munich first round

AFP
Munich

Alexander Zverev fought to a 6-3, 3-6, 7-6 (7/2) win over Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic in the first round of the ATP event in Munich yesterday.

Reigning champion Zverev seemed in control after taking the first set but the third-ranked German made a series of errors as Kecmanovic began to show more resistance.

World number 58 Kecmanovic rallied to win the second set and forced a final-set tiebreak against the top seed.

In chilly, windy conditions in the Bavarian capital, Zverev eventually shook off Kecmanovic after two hours and 18 minutes.

"Today is a very cold day so it was difficult to put on the pressure. At the end of the day, I'm happy I won," Zverev said.

"Now we can get started. I can't play any worse than I did in the second and third sets today. But I played my best tennis in the crucial moments, which is the main thing."

The 28-year-old will face Canada's Gabriel Diallo in the last 16. Zverev has won the Munich title three times, in 2017, 2018 and last year.

Kecmanovic, 26, is the only player other than Jannik Sinner to have defeated Zverev since his semi-final exit at the Australian Open in January. He beat Zverev in the second round in Acapulco in February.

Elsewhere on Tuesday, sixth seed Luciano Darderi beat China's Zhang Zhizhen 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 6-1, while Denis Shapovalov defeated eighth seed Tallon Griekspoor 6-4, 3-6, 6-2.

Alexander Bublik, Flavio Cobolli and Joao Fonseca also all booked their spots in the second round with straight-set victories.



Germany's Alexander Zverev celebrates after winning his first-round match in Munich against Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic.

BADMINTON

Asian silver medallist Shetty hopes to inspire new generation talent

Reuters
Hyderabad

Ayush Shetty's silver medal at the 2026 Asia Championships has given Indian badminton a new men's singles contender as the country begins to shape its plans for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

In a cricket-dominated nation, badminton's rise has largely been driven by women. Saina Nehwal's bronze medal at the London Olympics, followed by Pusarla Sindhu's back-to-back silver and bronze medals at Rio and Tokyo pushed the sport into the mainstream.

With Nehwal announcing her retirement in January and the 30-year-old Sindhu battling inconsistency, Indian badminton has been searching for new talent. While 17-year-old Tanvi Sharma emerged as a prospect after winning silver at last year's World Junior Championships, the men's singles category has lacked a clear torchbearer to follow former world number one Kidambi Srikanth and Olympian Parupalli Kashyap.

"It's good for Indian badminton if there are more men's players performing," Shetty told Reuters.

"Whenever we perform, we gain recognition and peo-

ple watch more badminton. It would be really good if my silver medal can inspire more people to follow the sport."

The 20-year-old reached the Asia Championships final by upsetting defending champion and world number one Kunlavut Vitidsarn of Thailand and world number four Jonatan Christie of Indonesia. Lakshya Sen won silver at the All England Open in March and the Indian men's team lifted the Thomas Cup trophy in 2022.

"I think Lakshya Sen had a fantastic tournament at All England... we are now trying our best to lead Indian badminton in the men's singles," Shetty said.

Shetty became only the seventh Indian to win a men's singles medal at the Asian Championships, and the first since HS Prannoy's bronze in 2018.

Preparation for the tournament also exposed Shetty to the elite end of the global game. He trained alongside Denmark's two-time Olympic champion Viktor Axelsen.

"When you train alongside great players, you learn a lot of things, especially how they manage themselves off-the-court and on-the-court," he said.

Shetty has his sights set on the August World Championships in New Delhi followed by the Asian Games in Nagoya, Japan.

Swiatek banks on Nadal's former coach to reignite her season

Iga Swiatek is hoping to benefit from new coach Francisco Roig's experience and technical expertise when the world number four begins her claycourt season at the Stuttgart Open this week after a disappointing start to the year.

The Polish six-times Grand Slam champion lost in the quarter-finals of the Australian Open and tournaments in Doha and Indian Wells before a shock second-round defeat by Magda Linette in the Miami Open last month. That prompted Swiatek to part ways with her coach Wim Fissette and hire Roig, who worked with her idol Rafa Nadal from 2005-22 and more recently with Briton Emma Raducanu.

"I'm really happy to start with Francis," Swiatek told a press conference in Stuttgart. "I was basically looking for someone with a good eye, really technical, but also a person that is experienced enough to help me through some different kind of situations. I feel Francisco has lived through everything

on tour. "It's going really amazing... I was able to find a new coach pretty fast, which is a positive thing because when you do that in the middle of the season, it's nice to have some security in that."

Swiatek, who has won four French Open titles on her favoured clay courts, began preparations for the Grand Slam that begins on May 24 with a training block at Nadal's academy in Mallorca under the watchful eyes of the Spaniard.

"I asked if it would be possible for him to come and maybe be some kind of inspiration, also hear some feedback from him," Swiatek said.

"It was a privilege to have him on court. I honestly didn't have many expectations because I know he's super busy and he has a lot of stuff to do, even though he always has different projects and everything.

"Now I'll continue with Francisco. He'll be the person that takes care of the whole process. That's the plan for now."



FORMULA 1

Mansell backs Verstappen in criticising new rules

Reuters
London

Nigel Mansell said he had "total sympathy" with Red Bull's four-times world champion Max Verstappen in slamming Formula One's new rules era but expected the governing FIA to make changes to get back to "proper racing".

Red Bull's Verstappen has been outspoken against the sacrifice of flat-out speed for energy management, calling the situation "fundamentally flawed" while McLaren's world champion Lando Norris has branded the racing "artificial".

Mansell, the 1992 world champion with Williams who was nicknamed "Il Leone" by Ferrari fans for his raw speed and big-

hearted bravery, told Reuters on Tuesday that he recognised their frustrations.

"I've got to echo and support the drivers 100%," he said at an appearance to publicise a Pop-Up Hotel, complete with pool and palm trees, for his home British Grand Prix at Silverstone in July.

"It's very disappointing to have the stallion of all racing cars, Formula One, appearing in the first races that they're not actually racing at times. That's very alien to the fans, certainly alien to a race car driver who's trying to input their special skills into it.

"And I have total sympathy with Max. Would I have voiced it as strong as he has? Perhaps not... but you know, what Lando says is perfect. What all the others have said is true. And I think the powers that be, they're listening."

Formula One's governing body



held an initial meeting of technical experts last Thursday to discuss possible changes to the regulations after the first three races, with several more sessions to come before the next race in Miami on May 3.

The new power units, split

roughly 50-50 between electric and combustion power, have brought new challenges with drivers having to ease off the throttle early and coast into high-speed corners so the combustion engine can recharge the battery.

The FIA has scheduled a Sporting Regulations meeting with another technical session tomorrow. There will then be a "high-level meeting with representation from all stakeholders" on April 20 to seek a consensus on preferred options put forward.

Mansell hoped the cars would soon again be driven "as they should be" and warned it would be a huge mistake if they don't tweak it enough.

"Hopefully, they will tweak it enough (so) that what we've been witnessing in the first couple of races won't be carried forward into the next races," he said.

The Briton also tipped seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton to come back strong after finally stepping onto the podium with Ferrari following a barren 2025 and at the age of 41.

"I'm sorry, I'm biased about Lewis. I think he's fantastic, what he's achieved is monumental," said the 72-year-old.

"If he's given the goods to do the job, I still think he can win. And I think he has all the capabilities to win another world championship, which will be epic.

"I think you'll see he's got fire in his belly more now than ever. I think Ferrari could do extremely well this year once everyone stops coasting all the time and we can have proper racing again.

"Let Formula One be Formula One as it has been. It just needs tweaking. As long as they tweak it enough, happy days."

Jepchirchir to miss London Marathon due to injury

World champion Peres Jepchirchir has withdrawn from this month's London Marathon because a stress fracture delayed the start of her training, race organisers said yesterday. Tokyo Olympic gold medallist Jepchirchir won the London Marathon in 2024 and last year's World Championship title. "I was only able to resume training in late January," the 32-year-old Kenyan said in a statement. "I know that to be competitive at the London Marathon you have to be at your top level and despite my best efforts, I'm just short of that due to my lack of training." Jepchirchir also missed the event last year due to an ankle injury. Olympic champion Sifan Hassan has also withdrawn from the race on April 26 due to an Achilles injury.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Arteta urges pure fire as Arsenal eye semi-finals

'What we are trying to achieve is difficult, is challenging, and is bumpy'

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta has challenged Arsenal to play with "pure fire" as they look to bounce back from a series of damaging defeats in today's Champions League clash against Sporting Lisbon.

Arteta's side can reach the semi-finals of the competition for a second successive season if they finish off Sporting at the Emirates Stadium.

The Gunners go into the quarter-final second leg with a 1-0 lead after last week's game in Lisbon.

But that narrow success was Arsenal's only victory in their last four matches, with three defeats sparking claims Arteta and his team are choking as the pressure mounts at the business end of the season.

"There is no fear. Pure fire. That's it. Me, the first one. Pure fire. That's what I want to see on the players, on the people, on myself," he insisted at his pre-match press conference.

"Fire! I'm on fire. I'm on fire. That's it. Nothing else. I'm dreaming so much. I've done so much to be in this position because I know how this club was. I've done so much and this is beauty."

Losing the League Cup final against Bournemouth in the Premier League on Saturday left Arteta facing pointed questions about Arsenal's character.

Arsenal are just six points ahead of second-placed City, who have a game in hand and host the Gun-



Arsenal's Spanish manager Mikel Arteta (left) during a training session in London yesterday, on the eve of their UEFA Champions League quarter-final second-leg match against Sporting Lisbon. (AFP)

ners in a seismic showdown on Sunday.

The north Londoners have finished Premier League runners-up for the past three seasons - twice blowing substantial leads to City in 2023 and 2024.

They have also failed to win a trophy since the 2020 FA Cup, which remains the only silverware won by Arteta in over six years in charge.

There is a growing feeling of déjà vu among a nervous Arsenal fan-base, but Arteta launched a passionate defence of his squad.

"We are in April, we have an incredible opportunity ahead of us. Let's confront it, let's go for it by really putting absolutely every-

thing into it," added the Spaniard.

"I want to get it done for all these people that have been in this journey with us. And because they deserve it, because it's been unbelievable. That's what is driving me every single day. I have zero fear."

Arsenal haven't lifted the Premier League since 2004 and have never won the Champions League.

If they make the Champions League last four this season, it would be the first time they have reached the semi-finals of the competition in two consecutive seasons.

Arteta, whose side lost to Paris Saint-Germain in last year's semi-finals, acknowledged the size of

the task facing Arsenal as they try to do a Premier League and Champions League double.

"What we are trying to achieve is difficult, is challenging, and is bumpy and it's supposed to be like this," he said.

"I said to the players, 'Guys, we are trying to do something that hasn't been done in the history of the club in 140 years. So that tells you the difficulty of what you are doing'."

"We have the opportunity tomorrow to go to the semi-finals. We are competing to win the Premier League and we are in a really strong position. 'So the team is doing something incredible because it's never been done before.'"

PREMIER LEAGUE

Iraola to leave Bournemouth at the end of season

AFP
London

Bournemouth manager Andoni Iraola said "this is the right moment for me to step away", as the Premier League club announced yesterday he would leave when his contract expires at the end of the season.

The Spaniard joined the south coast club in 2023 and led them to their equal highest top-flight finish of ninth last season, earning their largest points tally of 56, and reaching the FA Cup quarter-finals.

"It has been an honour to manage AFC Bournemouth and I am proud of what we have achieved together," said Iraola, who replaced Gary O'Neil as Bournemouth boss, in a club statement confirming his departure.

"I'm thankful to the players and staff that I've worked with, as well as Bill (Bournemouth chairman Bill Foley), who have all made my time here so special.

"As for the fans, you have continued to show your fantastic support to myself and the team, and for that I will always be grateful. I feel this is the right moment for me to step away, but I will always carry fantastic memories of this club."

Tuesday's announcement came just days after Iraola, who has six games left at Bournemouth this season, oversaw a superb 2-1 win away to Premier League leaders Arsenal last weekend.

Foley, in the same statement, said: "Andoni has been instrumental in shaping the direction of this football club over the past three seasons. He brought intensity, innovation, and a clear philosophy that elevated AFC Bournemouth both on and off the pitch.

"We are incredibly thankful for his leadership and will always have great memories of our time working together, as well as the things we accomplished."



Bournemouth, who also confirmed fitness coach Pablo de la Torre will leave at the end of the season, reportedly wanted to keep Iraola but talks over a new deal were unsuccessful.

The 43-year-old Iraola, one of the most highly-regarded coaches in Europe, will now leave the Cherries for free at the end of the campaign.

Iraola has been linked with a return to Spanish side Athletic Bilbao and there have also been suggestions he could become the new full-time manager of Manchester United, despite the English giants' resurgence this season under caretaker boss Michael Carrick.

He spent 12 years at Bilbao as a player, making over 500 appearances for the club.

Iraola's final home game will be against Manchester City on Sunday, May 17, ahead of a trip to Nottingham Forest on the last day of the Premier League campaign. He could bow out on a high by securing the first European qualification in Bournemouth's history.

They are currently 11th, two points adrift of a seventh-placed finish which would get them into next season's Conference League.

PREVIEW

Buoyant Bayern pledge to 'push through the pain' against Real

AFP
Munich

Bayern Munich coach Vincent Kompany said yesterday his side need to be ready to "push through the pain barrier" to make it past Real Madrid and qualify for the Champions League semi-finals.

Bayern beat Real 2-1 in the first leg in Madrid and need to avoid defeat at home on Wednesday to reach the final four. Kompany told reporters that Bayern's desire against the 15-time European champions would be key.

"It depends on many things. In games like this, the individual quality of the players is always decisive. But there's also the collective intensity and a readiness to push through the pain barrier," Kompany said. "Every detail matters in games like this, but for us what's most important is that we're mentally and physically well prepared.

"We're also looking forward to the match and that's something you need, positive emotions."

Bayern dominated much of the match in Madrid but still needed veteran goalkeeper Manuel Neuer to pull off several spectacular saves. "My feeling after the match was that we could have gone a level higher. And that's pretty good when you win 2-1 at the Bernabeu and think, 'We could have done more,'" Kompany added. "But then you need to show it." Bayern's Michael Olise starred in the



Bayern Munich's coach Vincent Kompany (left) with Michael Olise during a training session in Munich yesterday, on the eve of the Champions League quarter-final second leg match against Real Madrid. (AFP)

opening leg and Kompany said there were no limits to the France winger's talent.

"For sure he will be one day," Kompany said when asked if Olise was one of the best in the world. "I think now he's on the right path. He's on a level of the best players in Europe at the moment."

The former Manchester City captain has Bayern on track for a Champions League semi-final less than two years after he was relegated from the Premier League with Burnley, in what was his first season managing in the top flight of a major European league.

The 40-year-old said he does not care that he is being hyped as one of football's best new coaches, as he did not listen to criticism during his time at Burnley.

"Don't believe the hype and don't believe the drama, it's what I always say. You can't live feeling

you're the worst coach two years ago and you're the best coach today," Kompany said. "It doesn't work that way. The way you become the worst, is if you let this outside noise affect your day to day."

Kompany also praised Marie-Louise Eta, who on Sunday became the first female coach of a men's team in a top-five European league when she was named Union Berlin boss. "It's a key moment. It's easy to minimise and say she's just a coach like everybody else - and of course that's how we have to treat her - but at the end it's something special," the Belgian said.

"It opens up opportunities to little girls who are now playing football and thinking, 'now, I can coach anywhere, I can make a real career in this game and be successful like what I'm seeing on TV!'" "Those stories, they're really important."

Younousse and Tijan enter semi-finals

Qatar's top beach volleyball pair, Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan powered into the semi-finals of the 2026 AVC Beach Tour - 25th Samila Open in Thailand after a flawless run marked by dominant straight-sets victories. The Qatari duo, former Olympic bronze medalists, and Asia's top beach volleyball pair, topped Pool B with authority before continuing their momentum in the knockout rounds. They secured their semi-final place with a convincing 21-9, 21-7 win over China's Li Wei and Du Hongjun, then followed it up with another clinical performance against Kazakhstan's Bogatu Sergey and Kirill Gurin, winning 21-16, 21-18 in Round 2. Younousse and Tijan will now face Australia's D'Artagnan Potts and Jack Pearce in the semi-finals, as they aim to extend their unbeaten streak and push for the title.



SHOWJUMPING

Al Shaqab to host FEI Group VII Finals

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The FEI Group VII Finals kick off today at the Longines Arena in Al Shaqab, bringing together more than 100 riders from across the region. Running over four days, the championship will feature junior, youth, and senior athletes competing for a total prize purse of €318,000.

In a milestone addition, this year's event introduces the Under-25 class for the first time. Sanctioned by the International Equestrian Federation (FEI), the category is designed for riders aged 16 to 25 and is already established across Europe and the United States.

The U-25 class runs alongside the Global Champions Tour, contributes to international rankings, and offers a vital pathway for emerging talent to gain top-level competitive experience.

Competition begins from 5PM to 8:30PM, opening with junior and youth classes at heights of 110 cm and 120 cm, followed by the U-25 class at 135 cm.

The second day continues with individual and team competitions across all categories, with jumps ranging from 110 cm to 140 cm. On Friday, action starts at 2PM with a local junior class, followed by team competitions for juniors and youth. The highlight of the day will be the U-25 Grand Prix at 145 cm, scheduled for 9:30PM. The championship concludes on Saturday with a full afternoon of junior and youth competitions, featuring heights up to 135



This year's FEI Group VII Finals introduces the Under-25 class for the first time.

cm. Tournament Director Sheikh Talal bin Khalid al-Thani highlighted the event's continued growth, noting steady improvements in both organization and competition level.

He emphasised Qatar's rising prominence on the international equestrian stage and its commitment to developing the sport.

"The introduction of the U25 category marks a significant step forward," he said. "It strengthens the development pathway for young riders, helping them progress to elite levels while gaining valuable international experience ahead of major global competitions."

Asian Champions League to expand from 24 to 32 teams

The Asian Champions League is set to expand from 24 to 32 teams, the region's governing body for football said yesterday, adding it will "promote inclusivity and excellence".

The move will take effect from next season once it is signed off by the Asian Football Confederation's executive committee, the AFC said, hailing it as a "landmark expansion".

The group phase of the continent's top club competition is split into two sections, East and West, before

going into the knockout rounds. The structure will remain broadly the same but the two groups will from 2026-27 increase from 12 to 16 teams each. The top six in each group will automatically progress to the last 16 while clubs in seventh to 10th will go through to a newly established knockout stage playoff.

The tournament has been branded the AFC Champions League Elite since 2024-25. The last 16 and quarter-final matches in the 2025-26 campaign take place this week in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.