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PREMIER LEAGUE

# Arteta tells spluttering Arsenal to embrace title pressure

'THERE ARE SIX GAMES TO GO. OBVIOUSLY IT IS A REALLY IMPORTANT ONE FOR BOTH TEAMS'

AFP  
London

Mikel Arteta has urged spluttering Arsenal to embrace the "huge privilege" of facing Manchester City in a potentially decisive showdown in the Premier League title race.

Arteta's side are six points clear of second-placed City ahead of their blockbuster clash at the Etihad Stadium tomorrow.

But City have a game in hand on the Gunners and a victory for Pep Guardiola's men would tilt the balance of power in their favour heading into the final weeks of the season.

Adding to the drama of the do-or-die battle, Arsenal are enduring an untimely loss of form after losing three of their last five games in all competitions.

They were beaten by City in the League Cup final, suffered a shock FA Cup quarter-final exit at second-tier Southampton and slumped to a home league defeat against Bournemouth.

The Gunners were well below their best once again on Wednesday when they edged past Sporting Lisbon, drawing 0-0 to secure a 1-0 aggregate victory in the Champions League quarter-finals.

But, despite criticism of Arsenal's perceived mental weakness under pressure, Arteta is convinced his players have the right character to take a huge step towards winning the Premier League.

"We have earned the right to be in this position and to be challenging, with an opportunity to win against arguably the best team and best manager this league has ever seen," Arteta told reporters yesterday.

"That is a huge privilege. We see this as a big opportunity for us. Who is more privileged to be in this position?"

"I don't know how Pep and Man City are feeling, but I feel very privileged to have earned the right to be in this position to play such a big and great game."

Arsenal are chasing a first English title since 2004 after finishing as runners-up for the last three seasons.

In 2023 and 2024 they squandered substantial leads that al-



Arsenal's manager Mikel Arteta reacts during the UEFA Champions League quarter-final, second-leg match, against Sporting Lisbon at the Emirates Stadium in London on Wednesday. (AFP)

lowed City to pip them to the title.

But Arteta knows that beating City this weekend would put Arsenal in a virtually unassailable position of strength.

"Winning at this stage, then you are a bit closer," he said.

"There are six games to go. Obviously it is a really important one for both teams.

"It will incline the balance a little bit but winning a game in the Premier League is so tough for everybody."

Arteta has challenged Arsenal to learn from the pain of their League Cup loss to City in a rematch with even higher stakes. "The pain we felt afterwards, (we need to) use that the right way on Sunday," he said. "To learn from that game and the things that we want to change for the next one."

Arteta refused to deny a report that a fire was lit at the club's

training ground this week in a motivational ploy after he told his team to play with "pure fire" against Sporting.

"Every game we use different themes to try and prepare for the game in the best possible way and that depends on what we do," he said.

"The best ones are the players' initiative, those are the ones I love the most."

Arsenal have failed to win any of their past 10 league games at the Etihad Stadium, losing seven of those meetings, in a barren run stretching back to 2015.

Arteta dismissed suggestions that he could tell Arsenal to play for a draw to maintain their six-point lead over City.

"We prepare every game to win, that is why we are where we are and we are going to continue to do the same," he said.

## If Man City lose it's over, says Guardiola ahead of Arsenal title showdown

Pep Guardiola said an Arsenal victory at Manchester City yesterday would end the Premier League title race, but that his side would have a lot more work to do even if they beat the Gunners.

Mikel Arteta's men hold a six point lead at the top of the table, but City have home advantage and a game in hand on the leaders.

Should Guardiola's side win the battle between the top two and at struggling Burnley on Wednesday, they would go top for the first time in months.

Aiming to win a first league title in 22 years, Arsenal appear to have hit the wall in recent weeks.

Defeat to City in the League Cup final last month has sparked a run of just one win in five games in all competitions.

However, Guardiola is wary of the challenge facing his side in the coming weeks with tricky visits to Everton and Bournemouth in the run-in.

"If we lose, yeah, it's over," said Guardiola at his pre-match press conference yesterday.

"But the other two results, knowing that Arsenal didn't win (against) Bournemouth, we still have games to play. Six games is a lot, given our calendar (run-in) especially."

Arsenal have also faced the extra strain of edging past Sporting Lisbon to reach the Champions League semi-finals in midweek, while City have had seven days to prepare.

Arteta hailed his players' effort in becoming the only English side to make the final four despite a brutal schedule across four competitions.

Guardiola insisted Arsenal have shown themselves to be the best team in England until now and warned his players about being "distracted" by the focus on the title race. "They have been the best so far but we want to challenge them," added Guardiola.

"I said today to the players, 'it is just a football game' and we have to approach it like a football game. If you get distracted by emotions, that is how you lose focus."

"What is the target? It is to perform well and that is exactly what you have got to do in all the aspects required to challenge a team like Arsenal."

However, City striker Erling Haaland has described the clash as "like a final" for the title.

"It's a massive game without a doubt. We all know the importance of this game. It's like a final," Haaland told Sky Sports.

"It's probably the biggest and the best game there will be, so hopefully it can be an amazing game."

"These are the games you want to play and these are the moments you want to be in."

Guardiola confirmed that Nico O'Reilly, who scored both goals in the League Cup final, is fit despite coming off injured in last weekend's 3-0 win at Chelsea. Captain Ruben Dias, though, remains sidelined.



Pep Guardiola thinks that his side would have a lot more work to do even if they beat the Gunners.

SPOTLIGHT

## Ambassadors of Korea, Japan visit Ali Bin Hamad Al Attiyah Arena ice rink

HE Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to the State of Qatar Yun Hyunsoo and HE Ambassador of Japan to the State of Qatar Naoto Hisajima visited the ice rink at the Ali Bin Hamad Al Attiyah Arena, located at Al Sadd Sports Club, to review the facilities dedicated to ice sports.

The recent visit came in response to an invitation from the Qatar Winter Sports Committee, as part of its ongoing efforts to develop and promote ice sports in the country and enhance their presence at both regional and international levels.

The ambassadors were received by Hassan Hissam al-Hebabi, Secretary-General of the Committee, who accompanied them on a tour of the venue.

The visit provided an overview of the rink's capabilities, including its modern equipment and advanced infrastructure, reflecting Qatar's progress in supporting various sports, including winter disciplines.

During the visit, the two ambassadors took part in a friendly curling match alongside members and staff of their respec-

tive diplomatic missions, in an atmosphere marked by sportsmanship and reflecting the strong relations between their countries and Qatar.

The Qatar Winter Sports Committee exchanged commemorative gifts with the ambassadors in appreciation of their interest in ice sports, in the presence of the accompanying delegations, in a gesture that reflects mutual respect and cooperation.

On this occasion, Hassan Hissam al-Hebabi expressed his appreciation to the ambassadors for their visit, noting that ice sports in Qatar are entering a phase of notable infrastructure expansion, which will further strengthen their standing and support the future development of winter sports in the country.

For his part, the Ambassador of the Republic of Korea expressed his gratitude for the warm welcome, praising the advanced standard of the ice rink and its modern facilities, and noting that it represents a model of developed sports infrastructure reflecting the comprehensive progress witnessed by the sports sector in Qatar.



INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

# Gujarat's Gill consigns Kolkata to fifth defeat

Opening batsman Gill hit third straight half-century for the Titans



Gujarat Titans' captain Shubman Gill (left) celebrates after scoring a half-century during the IPL match against Kolkata Knight Riders in Ahmedabad yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Ahmedabad, India

**S**kipper Shubman Gill led the way with 86 off 50 balls as Gujarat Titans beat Kolkata Knight Riders by five wickets in the IPL, consigning the three-time champions to a fifth loss in six games this season.

Gill hit a third straight half-century for the Titans, following up on 76 against Delhi Capitals and 50 against Lucknow Super-Giants in the previous two games. He now averages 59.52 in 27 T20s played at Ahmedabad.

Striking at 172, Gill hit four sixes and eight fours as Gujarat finished with 181-5 in reply to Kolkata's 180. Cameron Green - the most expensive overseas player in IPL history - overcame poor form to top score in the Kolkata innings with 79 from 55 balls.

"The only thing that matters is winning," said Gill. "We would

have liked to finish the game a couple of overs earlier. I was disappointed the way I got out. I wanted to be there till the end and finish it. Hopefully, I will be able to do that the next chance I get."

Gill was full of praise for his two opening bowlers with Mohammed Siraj, who took 2-23, and Kagiso Rabada who finished with 3-29.

"The way Rabada and Siraj bowled, it looked as if they would pick up wickets every ball. Kolkata has a long batting line-up so it was important to keep taking wickets in the middle overs."

Gujarat move to fourth in the table, their third win in five games giving them six points. Kolkata are tenth - and last - with five losses and a no-result in six games. Chasing 181, Gujarat got off to a fine start - Gill and Sai Sudharsan (22) put on 57 in 31 balls for the first wicket.

Gill continued stitching vital partnerships - 38 with Jos Buttler, who scored 25, and 46

with Washington Sundar, who made 13. Mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy came on as an impact sub, and dismissed both Buttler and Sundar, picking up 2-34 in four overs.

The skipper scored 50 off 27 balls, his sixth at this venue where he also has four T20 hundreds.

Green took a superb catch to dismiss Gill three overs before the end, but the Titans were never in any bother chasing a sub-par score on a batter-friendly surface.

Earlier, Kolkata had struggled against the pace of Rabada and Siraj.

Skipper Ajinkya Rahane was out for a golden duck to Siraj, while Angkrish Raghuvanshi made eight. Rabada also removed Tim Seifert for 14 - unable to use the width provided and offering a simple catch to fellow New Zealander Glenn Phillips.

For once, Green came good when Kolkata needed him.

They had bought the Austral-

ian for an eye-watering Rs25.20 crore (\$3mn) in the 2025 auction, but he has struggled for form. He had three single-digit scores in the previous five games, with 32 not out against Lucknow his best score.

This time Green hit 50 off 34 balls - his first for Kolkata and third overall in IPL. He held the innings together, rebuilding from 32-3 and adding 55 with Rovman Powell who scored 27.

His key partnership came with Anukul Roy who only scored nine but helped put on 60 off 23 balls for the fifth wicket.

Kolkata, however, lost four wickets for 19 runs in another lower-middle order collapse, and despite Green's best efforts, finished with a sub-200 score.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
Gujarat Titans 181 for 5 (Gill 86, Varun 2-34) beat Kolkata Knight Riders 180 (Green 79, Rabada 3-29, Siraj 2-23, Ashok 2-45) by five wickets

REVIEW

## Mumbai's IPL campaign fizzles amid Bumrah's barren bowling run



Mumbai Indians' captain Hardik Pandya reacts after his team's defeat against Punjab Kings at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai on Thursday. Mumbai have lost five matches out of six. (AFP)

Reuters  
Mumbai

**M**umbai Indians head coach Mahela Jayawardene has defended Jasprit Bumrah after the struggling pace spearhead went a fifth Indian Premier League match without a wicket in Thursday's seven-wicket defeat by Punjab Kings.

After winning their opening match of the season for the first time since 2012, it has been all downhill for five-times champions Mumbai with a run of four straight losses leaving them ninth in the 10-team league.

Jayawardene was at a loss to explain Bumrah's barren run but said it was noticeable that teams were more cautious against his bowling and focusing their attack on Mumbai's other bowlers.

"I think Bumrah is bowling well - it's just where we are not putting pressure in the powerplay," Jayawardene said of Bumrah, who was instrumental in India's back-to-back T20 World Cup wins and finished as the leading wicket-taker in this year's edition.

"I can't put a finger on why he's not taken wicket ... but as a unit we have lacked penetration in differ-

ent surfaces and that's something that we need to work (on)."

"He bowled some really good balls initially to Shreyas (Iyer) but wasn't lucky enough. I think once he starts taking wickets, (opponents) might not be able to stop him doing that."

Iyer smashed 66 off 35 balls as IPL leaders Punjab chased down a target of 196 with 21 balls to spare.

Former Sri Lanka captain Jayawardene said Mumbai have not been clinical enough at key moments.

"I know we are playing good cricket. We are not taken out completely, but at the same time the other teams are much better, clinical," he added.

"We are finding some sparks in certain areas but the other side is finding that, especially with the ball."

Mumbai captain Hardik Pandya said the team may have to make some difficult decisions to stop the rot.

"We really need to see if we need to make some difficult calls, or if we need to keep continuing and hope that we turn things around," the all-rounder said.

"These are some hard questions, which eventually we need to answer, and the ownership has to be taken."

## Usman Tariq spins Quetta to 4-wicket win in PSL



Usman Tariq of Quetta Gladiators celebrates a wicket during a Pakistan Super League match against Lahore Qalandars in Karachi yesterday. Gladiators won by six wickets. Tariq took 3 for 18 as Qalandars were bowled out for 134 in 19.5 overs. Gladiators completed the chase in 16.2 overs for the loss of four wickets.

SPOTLIGHT

## Absolute shocker: Canada T20 World Cup game under ICC scrutiny after corruption claim

AFP  
New Delhi

**T**he International Cricket Council said yesterday it is investigating Cricket Canada over allegations of match corruption, including the team's loss to New Zealand at the recent T20 World Cup hosted by India and Sri Lanka.

The game in Chennai - which Canada lost by eight wickets - is under scrutiny following allegations of corruption highlighted in a documentary aired by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) on Thursday.

"The ACU (anti-corruption unit) is aware of the programme broadcast by CBC," Andrew

Ephgrave, interim general manager of the ICC's Integrity Unit, said in a statement.

The documentary by the public broadcaster made wide-ranging accusations of corruption and poor governance against Canada Cricket.

In the Chennai game, suspicion is focused on the fifth over bowled by captain Dilpreet Bajwa during New Zealand's chase, according to the ESPN Cricinfo website.

He started with a no-ball, bowled a wide, and ended up conceding 15 runs in the over.

Canada scored 173 for four wickets in 20 overs, while New Zealand replied with 176 for two off 15.1 overs. The ICC, the game's world governing body, is also investigating a telephone call involving then Canada coach Khurram Chohan in which he claims that sen-

ior Cricket Canada board members put pressure on him to select certain players, it said.

"Governance matters in relation to ICC Members are considered by the ICC, where they fall under its jurisdiction, in accordance with the ICC's standard constitutional processes," Ephgrave said.

Cricket Canada said it was treating the matter with "utmost importance".

"Recent promotional material alludes to allegations related to organized crime and match-fixing - issues that Cricket Canada takes extremely seriously," the organisation said on its website.

"Where matters are raised, we are committed to reviewing them responsibly and taking appropriate steps as needed."

FOCUS

## Tickner picks four as New Zealand beat Bangladesh in first ODI in Mirpur



New Zealand's Blair Tickner (centre) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Bangladesh captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz during the first ODI at Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Dhaka

**P**aceman Blair Tickner took four quick wickets as New Zealand held their nerve to beat Bangladesh by 26 runs and take a 1-0 lead in the three-match one-day international series yesterday.

Chasing 248 on a slow surface at the Mirpur stadium in Dhaka, Bangladesh lost their last six wickets for just 37 runs and were bowled out for 221 off 48.3 overs.

Bangladesh were off to a shaky start after pacer Nathan Smith struck twice off consecutive deliveries in the third over, removing Tanzid Hasan Tamim (2) and Najmul Hossain Shanto for a duck.

Smith could have had another wicket when Saif Hassan edged one to first slip but Henry Nicholls spilled a simple chance.

Saif made the most of the reprieve, scoring 57

off 76 balls for his second ODI half-century, and adding 93 runs with Litton Das to revive the innings.

Litton contributed a patient 46 off 68, but both fell at crucial moments.

Saif was caught while trying to pull Will O'Rourke, and Litton was undone by Dean Foxcroft's turning off spin.

Towhid Hridoy kept Bangladesh in the hunt with a composed 55 off 59 balls, registering his 12th ODI half-century.

He shared a steady stand with Afif Hossain, who was out for 27 while attempting a big hit off Jayden Lennox.

With the required rate climbing, Tickner removed Mehidy Hasan Miraz before sending back Rishad Hossain and Shoriful Islam off successive balls in the 46th over.

Tickner also got rid of Taskin Ahmed to ensure a fine win for the Kiwis with nine balls to spare.

Earlier, Bangladesh bowlers produced a dis-

ciplined performance to restrict New Zealand to 247-8 after the visitors opted to bat first.

Shoriful impressed on his return, removing Nick Kelly early and conceding just nine runs in his opening five overs.

Shoriful was drafted in the squad at the last minute to replace Mustafizur Rahman, who has a knee injury.

Nicholls anchored the New Zealand innings with a composed 68 and shared useful stands with Will Young (30) and Tom Latham (14) before falling to Rishad Hossain, who picked up two key wickets.

Foxcroft's aggressive 59 off 58 balls and Nathan Smith's unbeaten 21 provided late impetus to the New Zealand innings.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
New Zealand 247 for 8 (Nicholls 68, Foxcroft 59, Shoriful 2-27) beat Bangladesh 221 (Saif 57, Hridoy 55, Tickner 4-40, Smith 3-4) by 26 runs

MOTORSPORT

# Russell says he would understand if Verstappen walked away from F1

Reuters  
London

Championship favourite George Russell said he would understand if Max Verstappen walked away from Formula One in the sport's new era and he would not be surprised either way.

Speaking to reporters via a video call yesterday, on what would have been a Saudi Grand Prix weekend but for the cancellation of April Middle Eastern races due to the Iran war, the Mercedes driver said his old rival's current frustration was "only natural".

Red Bull's four-times world champion Verstappen has been a vocal critic of the new rules and engines, and what he calls "anti-racing", and has said he will be doing "stuff that makes me smile" in the downtime before F1's next race in Miami in May.

"Formula One's bigger than any driver," said Russell when asked if he felt there was a danger Verstappen could decide he'd had enough. "You wouldn't want to lose Max because I think we all enjoy racing against Max," he added.

"You do understand and recognise the frustration but he's achieved what most drivers dream of, winning a championship. He's got four of them. And at the end of the day I guess you get to a point in life that you want, there's not really much more for him to achieve in Formula One.

"He's ticked all the boxes. Maybe he can go after the records but knowing him as I do and knowing drivers who have won or achieved similar things, at one point you want to do what puts a smile on your face."

**RACING SPORTSCARS AT THE NUERBURGRING**  
Verstappen is racing a Mercedes

GT3 sportscar in qualifiers at the Nuerburgring Nordschleife this weekend as he works towards competing in a 24-Hour endurance race at the circuit next month.

"The Nuerburgring is a special place. There's no other track like it," the 28-year-old Dutch driver said in March. "The 24h Nuerburgring is a race that's been on my bucket list for a long time, so I'm really thrilled we can make it happen now."

Russell, who has driven many laps of the historic 'Green Hell' track, said it would put a smile on anyone's face.

"I would love to have that chance to go and race around the Nordschleife," he said.

"But my goal now is to become a Formula One world champion. If I have four of them under my belt, I'd probably be doing the same (as Verstappen). He's in a very different stage of his career and I think

you'd understand if he stayed and you'd understand if he went."

Verstappen has been linked to Mercedes in the past, either as Russell's teammate or replacement, and he and the Briton have had an at times explosive rivalry.

In the past the Dutch driver has been dominant while Russell struggled with a 'porpoising' car that was hard -- and painful -- to drive.

The Briton observed that the cars in previous years were big and heavy but Verstappen was not complaining then because he was winning.

Russell, who won the season-opening race in Australia and is second in the standings after Italian teammate Kimi Antonelli won the next two races, said his was a multi-year deal and he was sure to remain at Mercedes next season.

Verstappen is ninth with a highest finish of sixth and one retirement in the three races.

## South Korea unveils plan to bring back F1

South Korea wants to host a Formula One race for the first time since 2013 after unveiling a new circuit design that officials say is financially viable. The plan would see races held on a five-kilometre street circuit in the city of Incheon, just outside the capital Seoul, although the idea is still in its infancy and faces several obstacles. The Korean Grand Prix was part of the Formula One calendar at a different circuit in the south of the country from 2010 but was axed after three years because of costs and tepid interest locally. Incheon city officials said Thursday their new plan can bring in money and they hope to draw up to 400,000 visitors over the three-day race weekend. Incheon Mayor Yoo Jeong-bok told reporters they are ambitiously aiming to stage the first race in 2028. The track design was developed after looking at street circuits in Singapore and Las Vegas. "It is possible to link the F1 Grand Prix, which has developed into a form of entertainment, with K-culture," the plan says. "We expect to hold various cultural performances, such as inviting world-famous artists, to elevate Incheon's cultural and tourism infrastructure to a world-class standard." Formula One currently holds races in 24 locations around the world, including China, Japan and Singapore. Vietnam was set to stage a race in 2020 but the event was cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic and has not appeared on the calendar since. Thailand last year approved a bid to host a race. F1 declined to comment on the South Korean plan.

TENNIS

# Zverev fights past Cerundolo to reach Munich semi-final

SHELTON OVERCAME BRAZILIAN TEENAGER FONSECA

AFP  
Munich

Top seed Alexander Zverev battled back from a set down to beat Argentina's Francisco Cerundolo yesterday and book a spot in the semi-finals of the Munich ATP tournament.

The three-time Munich champion won 5-7, 6-0, 6-2 and will take on Italy's Flavio Cobolli on Saturday for a place in the final. Zverev burst out of the blocks and served for a 5-1 lead in the opening set but appeared to suddenly lose his rhythm, winning just one more game as Cerundolo powered back to take the opening set.

As the second set began, and with the support of the home crowd, the 28-year-old found his form as swiftly as he had lost it, bouncing back to win the final two sets while dropping just two games.

"Even in the first set when I was up 4-1, he started playing unbelievable. He started returning unbelievable," Zverev said.

"My first-serve percentage was very high, and he started returning a foot in front of the baseline. So there was nothing I could do, to be honest."

The German came into Friday's

match holding a 4-3 career advantage over the fifth-seeded Cerundolo but had never previously beaten the Argentine in three matches on clay.

"Definitely happy to get the win today against Francisco, for the first time on clay," Zverev said on court after the win.

Zverev, whose most recent title came in Munich a year ago, is chasing a record fourth triumph at the tournament, having also won in 2017 and 2018. On the other side of the draw, American second seed Ben Shelton overcame Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca to keep hopes of a 2025 Munich final rematch with Zverev alive.

Shelton, the world number six, won 6-3, 3-6, 6-3. The American has never won a clay court tournament, having lost in straight sets to Zverev in Munich a year ago.

In the semi-finals, Shelton will take on Alex Molcan, who cruised past Denis Shapovalov in straight sets 6-4, 6-4.

Earlier, Cobolli was the first to book a spot in the final four after he defeated Czech Vit Kopriva 6-3, 6-2. Playing on his favourite surface, the fourth seed won the opening set and cruised to a 5-1 lead in the second.

He missed two match points on Kopriva's serve before finishing it off in the following game.



Germany's Alexander Zverev celebrates after winning his quarter-final against Argentina's Francisco Cerundolo in Munich yesterday. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

# Andreeva sinks Swiatek to reach Stuttgart semis

AFP  
Stuttgart

Teenage Mirra Andreeva came from a set down to stun Iga Swiatek and reach the semi-finals of the WTA clay-court tournament in Stuttgart yesterday.

Andreeva beat the two-time Stuttgart champion 3-6, 6-4, 6-3 and will face either top seed Elena Rybakina or Leylah Fernandez in the semi-finals.

Swiatek has won four of her six Grand Slams on the French Open clay and was considered among the favourites for the Stuttgart tournament but struggled against the energetic Russian. The Pole capitalised on some clumsy baseline errors from her opponent to win the opening set but Andreeva converted a crucial break point to take the second set.

Swiatek ran out to a two-game lead in the deciding set but Andreeva broke back twice to take the initiative, and the match. The 18-year-old rising star also eliminated defending champion Jelena Ostapenko in the first round of the tournament.

Earlier yesterday, Karolina Muchova broke through for a first win over Coco Gauff, eliminating the French Open champion in three sets. Muchova had never beaten world number three Gauff in six matches, including a loss in the fourth round of this year's Australian Open, but prevailed 6-3, 5-7, 6-3 to reach the Stuttgart semi-finals for the first time.

The 12th-ranked Muchova will face Elina Svitolina for a place in the final. After ensuring Gauff exited the tournament in the quarter-finals for the third straight year, Muchova said she tried not to let the daunting record impact her preparation.

"It was a great fight. I'm just happy that I finally, finally beat her," Muchova said. "This was actually our first match on a clay court. On clay we were 0-0 in the matches - I tried to keep it positive." Fourth seed Svitolina moved past Czech Linda Noskova 7-6 (7/2), 7-5 to book her semi-final spot. The in-form Ukrainian has now reached five semi-finals this season. Svitolina told reporters she had re-discovered her fighting spirit after a difficult 2025.



Russia's Mirra Andreeva in action during her quarter-final against Poland's Iga Swiatek yesterday. (Reuters)

## INJURED ALCARAZ, DJOKOVIC PULL OUT OF MADRID OPEN

Carlos Alcaraz will miss the Madrid Open for the second consecutive year after withdrawing yesterday with a wrist injury, dealing another blow to the world number two's clay court preparations ahead of his French Open title defence. Novak Djokovic, who still working through the injury problem, has pulled out of the event.

The 22-year-old Spaniard picked up the injury in a 6-4, 6-2 first-round win over Otto Virtanen in Barcelona but withdrew from that

tournament when tests revealed the problem was more serious than initially expected. Alcaraz pulled out of the Madrid Open last year due to hamstring and groin injuries.

"There is news that is extremely hard to give. Madrid is home, one of the most special places on the calendar for me, and that's why it hurts me so much not to be able to play here for the second year in a row," Alcaraz wrote on Instagram. "It hurts me especially not being able to be in front of my people,

in a tournament that is so special. Thank you for the love as always and I hope to see you soon." The injury throws a spanner in the works as the Australian Open champion hopes to retain French Open title next month.

The twice Barcelona champion had returned to competition 48 hours after losing the Monte Carlo Masters final to Jannik Sinner, a defeat that dropped him behind the Italian to second in the world rankings. Alcaraz's announcement came

hours after Novak Djokovic also withdrew from the Madrid Open as he is still working through injury problems that forced him to miss tournaments in Miami and Monte Carlo. Djokovic yesterday said that he will not feature at Madrid Open, one of the last stops before the French Open. "Madrid, unfortunately I won't be able to compete this year. I'm continuing my recovery in order to be back soon," Djokovic, who has struggled with a shoulder issue, wrote in a post on X.

## Fils beats Musetti to reach Barcelona semis

Arthur Fils defeated second seed Lorenzo Musetti 6-3, 6-4 yesterday to reach the Barcelona Open semi-finals. Young Frenchman Fils, ranked 30th, will take on in-form Spaniard Rafael Nadal on Saturday after he downed Briton Cameron Norrie 6-3, 6-2.

Clay expert Musetti survived two break points in the eighth game of the first set, but the 21-year-old Fils took his third to claim a 5-3 lead and then served out.

Fils, who came back from an eight-month injury absence in February has been in strong form, finishing as runner-up to Carlos Alcaraz in Doha. He wrapped up the second set of the quarter-final clash with a break in the ninth game and then finished by winning to love on his serve. "I was happy with the performance today, pretty solid throughout," said Fils. "With Lorenzo, it is always very tough because he can change the rhythm."

FOCUS

# Vondrousova in trouble after shutting door on doping officer

AFP  
Prague

Marketa Vondrousova, the 2023 Wimbledon champion, said yesterday she was facing a doping investigation after failing to submit a sample during a check last December.

The world number 46 risks up to a four-year ban from tennis for refusing to let in a doping control officer ringing the bell at her Prague home.

But she said the check was not

standard as the officer from a German agency failed to identify herself.

"The recent doping control incident happened because I reached a breaking point after months of physical and mental stress," the 26-year-old injury-prone Czech said on Instagram.

She told the Sport daily that it "was stressful to see someone I didn't know asking to enter my living room without showing authorisation".

"At the moment I was thinking this could be anyone," she added, explaining why she refused to let

the officer in. Vondrousova said she had dealt with injury, pressure and "ongoing sleep issues that left me feeling exhausted and fragile" for some time.

She also mentioned the case of her compatriot and two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova, who suffered a career-threatening injury to her hand when she opened the door to a knife-wielding stranger in 2016.

Kvitova took five months to recover from cuts to her left hand.

The perpetrator was sentenced to 11 years in jail for serious battery and illegal entry into the player's

flat. "When someone rang my door late at night without properly identifying themselves or following protocol, I reacted as a person who felt scared," Vondrousova said on Instagram.

"In that moment, it was about feeling safe... after what happened to Petra, we don't take strangers at our door lightly."

Vondrousova's lawyer Jan Exner told AFP that "the doping control was simply not standard and therefore Marketa had a reason not to submit the sample".

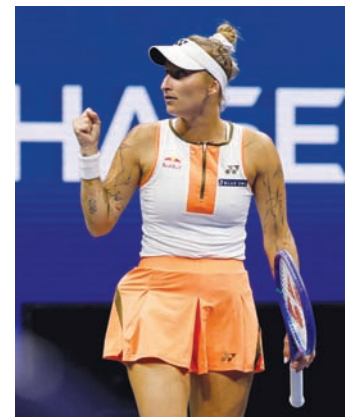
"You simply face pressure, you even get death threats for ruining

someone's bet slip. So the non-standard doping check sparked an acute stress reaction in Marketa which experts - both Czech and international - have confirmed," he added.

Exner said he would try to convince the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) that this was a valid reason for Vondrousova to decline to submit the sample.

"The proceedings are under way.

"There will either be a hearing or we will try to agree with the international bodies. We should know more by the summer."



## PREVIEW

# Atletico target rare Copa del Rey success today

'We'll only realise over time that we had and still have a football genius'



Atletico Madrid's coach Diego Simeone (left) and forward Antoine Griezmann during a press conference yesterday, on the eve of the Copa del Rey final against Real Sociedad at La Cartuja stadium in Seville. (AFP)

AFP  
Seville, Spain

No sooner had Atletico Madrid eliminated Barcelona from the Champions League than their fans turned their attention to today's Copa del Rey final against Real Sociedad.

"We'll give everything to win the cup - spirit of '96," read a banner they unfurled, harking back to Atletico's historic La Liga and Copa double 30 years ago under Radomir Antic.

Atletico coach Diego Simeone had a similar idea to the fans.

There was no time to celebrate downing the Catalans, even if Antoine Griezmann said he was craving "a cold beer".

"(The joy) was short-lived because Cholo (Simeone) cut us off a bit," explained the Frenchman, who is desperate to leave the club with a farewell trophy - or ideally two.

Griezmann, 35, Atletico's all-time top goalscorer, is leaving for MLS side Orlando City at the end

of the season, and Simeone said he would love for the forward to depart with his ambitions fulfilled.

"I hope that God and destiny give him what he's looking for in the time he has left in the game," said the Argentine coach.

"We'll only realise over time that we had and still have a football genius."

Griezmann flirted with an early exit from Atletico in March but with the Copa del Rey and Champions League trophies still on the line, he could not bring himself to depart.

"(Playing in the Copa final) is my dream, my objective, and I hope we can do something big," said Griezmann a few weeks ago when announcing that he would stay until the end of the season.

The forward has been one of Simeone's most reliable soldiers during his long reign in the Spanish capital.

"I've been here 14 years at the club and I never stop getting emotional," said Simeone after reaching the Champions League semis.

"I told the players when the game ended - thank you, thank

you. I'm completely grateful as a coach for the way they play, for their drive, for their heart, for the belief we have, for what we do.

"And now rest, rest, because on Saturday we have a very important match."

Competing with giants Barcelona and Real is an uphill struggle but Simeone has led Atletico to La Liga titles in 2014 and 2021.

While winning the Champions League cannot be expected of Atletico, the club's lack of success in the Copa del Rey is a different issue, and one the Argentine coach can legitimately be criticised for.

Atletico have won the trophy 10 times, but only once under Simeone - in 2013 against city rivals Real Madrid, which was also the last time they reached the final.

Since then, Real Sociedad, Valencia, Real Betis and Athletic Bilbao have all won the trophy. Sevilla, Alaves, Osasuna and Mallorca have finished as runners-up.

Sociedad, their opponents at La Cartuja stadium in Seville, won the 2020 edition, which was played in 2021 without fans be-

cause of the covid pandemic.

That ended a wait of over three decades for a major trophy, but winning it in front of their fans this time would be even better.

Since American coach Pellegrino Matarazzo was appointed in December, they have rediscovered their belief and resuscitated a drab season.

"I want (the fans) with us during the whole game - before, during and after, because we want to win it with them," said La Real defender Jon Martin.

Both teams like to strike fast on the counter and it could be an intense and entertaining battle.

Ideas about Simeone's side being durable and defensive are outdated, as was shown in the thrilling European tussle with Barca, whom Atletico also eliminated in the Copa semi-final.

"Over the years we've evolved into different game approaches because of the different characteristics of our players," explained Simeone.

"We're a team that attacks better than it defends and we need to attack"

## SPOTLIGHT

## Renard sacked as Saudi Arabia coach ahead of World Cup

AFP  
Paris

Frenchman Herve Renard told AFP yesterday he has been relieved of his duties as Saudi Arabia coach, less than two months before the start of the 2026 World Cup.

Renard, 57, returned for a second spell as Saudi coach at the end of 2024, having led them at the last World Cup in Qatar, including to a famous win over eventual champions Argentina in the group stage.

"That's football... Saudi Arabia have qualified for the World Cup seven times, including twice with me," Renard told AFP via telephone.

"And there's only one coach who has led them through both the qualifiers and the World Cup; that's me, in 2022. At least there will be that sense of pride." Renard, a two-time Africa

Cup of Nations winner with Zambia and Ivory Coast, led Saudi Arabia from 2019 to 2023 before being replaced by Roberto Mancini.

He served as coach of the France women's team and reached the quarter-finals of both the 2023 Women's World Cup and 2024 Olympics.

Renard was later brought back by Saudi Arabia to succeed Mancini as the Italian left his role after an underwhelming 14-month stint.

Former Greece international Georgios Donis is reportedly being lined up as the man to take over from Renard.

A source close to the negotiations told AFP that talks are under way between the federation and Saudi club Al Khaleej, where Donis has been in charge since 2024.

Saudi Arabia will face Spain, Uruguay and Cape Verde in Group H at this year's World Cup.



### Chelsea star Caicedo signs seven-year contract extension

Chelsea midfielder Moises Caicedo has signed a lucrative seven-year contract extension that will keep him at Stamford Bridge until 2033. Caicedo has agreed improved terms that make him one of the club's top earners, rewarding his impressive form for the Blues since arriving from Brighton in 2023. The Ecuador international cost Chelsea a then-British record fee of £115m (\$156m) and has lived up to that hefty price tag. With 140 appearances in all competitions for Chelsea, Caicedo has become central to the long-term planning of the club's owners. "I am so happy to have extended my contract at Chelsea," Caicedo told Chelsea's website.

"I believe in this team, this club and I know we're going in the right direction. We've only just begun together. There is still a lot more to achieve, and I'm very hungry to keep improving every day. I want to win more trophies with Chelsea and give everything for this club and for the fans. We have enjoyed some great times together already and my dream is to become a Chelsea legend, and I will work as hard as possible to make that happen."

Caicedo's decision to commit his future to Chelsea marks the second significant contract in recent weeks after Blues captain Reece James signed a new deal in March. The 24-year-old's deal is a welcome boost for Chelsea during a troubled period. Liam Rosenior's side have slipped to sixth place in the Premier League after winning just one of their last seven top-flight matches.

They also crashed out of the Champions League against Paris Saint-Germain. Chelsea face Manchester United on Saturday in a crucial game in their bid to qualify for next season's Champions League via a top-five finish.

## FOCUS

## Romero out for the season but De Zerbi backs Spurs to survive

AFP  
London

Roberto De Zerbi confirmed yesterday Cristian Romero will miss the rest of Tottenham's battle for Premier League survival, but remains optimistic that just one win can transform his side's fortunes.

Romero suffered a knee injury, that could also endanger his place in Argentina's World Cup squad, during last weekend's 1-0 defeat by Sunderland in De Zerbi's first match in charge.

"I am really sorry for him and his injury," said De Zerbi.

"Romero first of all loves Tottenham and the people have to

know he is suffering for this injury and because he cannot play any more for us this season."

Without a win in 14 league games, Spurs are two points adrift of safety with six matches of the campaign to go. But victory against De Zerbi's former club Brighton on Saturday would propel Tottenham out of the bottom three for at least 48 hours.

"I think it is crucial to win a game not just for the table. Of course one part of the table for sure, but we have to feel again what is nice to win a game and what it can do," he added.

"I have no doubts about the quality of the players."

In a bid to build team chemistry, De Zerbi took his players out

to dinner this week in London's Mayfair.

The Italian is happy to pick up the bill for more dinners in the coming weeks if he is rewarded with results on the field.

"The food was amazing and if we win, I am ready to pay every week for one dinner," said the former Marseille coach.

"I am positive, I am ready to fight and I believe to keep Premier League (status). I believe in my words that I said last week. The focus is to win one game."

Rodrigo Bentancur could make his return from a three-month injury layoff against the Seagulls.

However, first-choice goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario remains out after surgery on a hernia.

### Lille's Bentaleb out after 'minor surgery' for infection

Lille midfielder Nabil Bentaleb faces a spell on the sidelines after undergoing "minor surgery" to treat an infection, his club said yesterday.

The Algeria international will be unavailable for this weekend's home game against Nice in Ligue 1, but Lille did not reveal the nature of the infection or say how long he is expected to be out.

Bentaleb, 31, made a remarkable return to football last year after

suffering a heart attack while playing in a game with friends in June 2024.

He was allowed to resume his career after being fitted with a defibrillator.

"The most important thing is to support him and be by his side," said Lille coach Bruno Genesio. "He has reached a level that has been quite exceptional lately. It's hugely frustrating for a player to be held back like this when he's

hitting his stride. "We're going to do everything we can to help him get through this setback... and hope things get back to normal very soon."

The former Tottenham player has scored twice in 35 appearances this season for Lille, who hold a one-point lead over Marseille in the race for France's third automatic Champions League qualifying spot.

(AFP)

## COMMENT

## Slot confident Ekitike will recover from 'devastating' Achilles injury

AFP  
Liverpool

Liverpool manager Arne Slot believes Hugo Ekitike can come back even stronger from a ruptured Achilles tendon that has ended the French striker's season, and his dreams of playing in the World Cup. Ekitike suffered the injury against his former club Paris Saint-Germain on Tuesday as Liverpool bowed out of the Champions League.

The 23-year-old had scored 17 goals in his debut season in England after a £69m (\$93m) move from Eintracht Frankfurt and was almost certain to make Didier Deschamps's France squad for the World Cup. "Devastating for him," said Slot on Friday with Ekitike expected to be out for at least nine months.

"Missing out on so many special moments, but he's not the first and will not be the last player that experienced something like this in the start of his career."

"There are so many examples of players that came back even stronger and that's the challenge he has now."

"I'm 100 percent sure he will be one of those that in 10 to 15 years say, 'maybe this injury even helped me to become stronger and become even more ready to perform even at a higher level



Players care for Liverpool's striker Hugo Ekitike who lies injured during the UEFA Champions League quarter-final, second-leg match, against PSG at Anfield in Liverpool last Tuesday. (AFP)

than I did before?" The loss of Ekitike was also a huge blow to Liverpool's hopes of securing a place in the Champions League next season. Slot's men sit fifth in the Premier League, which will be enough to qualify, and enjoy a four-point lead over sixth-placed Chelsea.

But Everton can cut the gap on their local rivals to two points if they win the first ever Merseyside derby at the Hill Dickinson Stadium on Sunday. Liverpool also still have to face Chelsea, Manchester United and Aston Villa in their final six games of the campaign. Alexander Isak's return is timely for Slot given Ekitike's absence.

The Premier League's most expensive ever player made his first start since December against PSG. But the £125m signing

lasted only 45 minutes and Slot said the Swedish striker is still not ready to play a full match.

The decision to splash out over £200 million on two similar strikers has been questioned given Liverpool's struggles this season. But Slot said that the injury problems suffered by Isak and Ekitike justified the club's strategy in pursuing two number nines last summer.

"It's nice to have Alex back, although we also know that he's not ready to play 90 (minutes) yet," added Slot. "At least a good thing is that we signed two nines because there were a lot of people who were debating why we signed two nines. "We thought maybe it's smart not to be the only club in the world that only has one. Now all of a sudden that looks maybe quite good!"