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CRICKET | Page 2

Bangladesh down New Zealand to level ODI series at 1-1



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Endrick stars as Lyon dent PSG's Ligue 1 title hopes

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SPOTLIGHT

Formula One makes rule changes after drivers' criticism

Page 3

OCA President Sheikh Joaan meets with Malaysia's King and Prime Minister



Kuala Lumpur: Olympic Council of Asia and Qatar Olympic Committee President HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad al-Thani met with the King of Malaysia Sultan Ibrahim in Kuala Lumpur during his one-day working visit to Malaysia yesterday.

Sheikh Joaan also met Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Sheikh Joaan reaffirmed his support for the Olympic Movement in Malaysia, praising its leadership and encouraging the country to host future OCA events, including the Asian Games, with backing from the Malaysian government.

Olympic Council of Malaysia President Dr. Norza Zakaria facilitated the working visit by coordinating two special audiences for Sheikh Joaan.

At the conclusion of his visit to Malaysia, Sheikh Joaan departed for Sanya, China, where he is scheduled to chair the 109th OCA Executive Board meeting today and officiate the opening ceremony of the 6th Asian Beach Games Sanya 2026 on Wednesday, April 22.

As Dr. Norza will also attend the 109th OCA Executive Board meeting and the 6th Asian Beach Games, he was invited by Sheikh Joaan



to travel on his private flight. "I look forward to welcoming HE Sheikh Joaan to Malaysia again in the near future to further strengthen our collaboration in the Olympic Movement across Asia," said Dr. Norza.

"I have also extended an official invitation to Sheikh Joaan to witness the 34th SEA Games, which will be hosted by Malaysia in 2027." Also in attendance was the OCA Director General, Husain al-Musallam.

FOOTBALL

Ahli will be ready to face Ronaldo's Nassr, says Draxler

'We have nothing to lose, we are in semis so let's see what we can do'



Al Ahli midfielder Julian Draxler created the opening goal for Erik Exposito before scoring the second directly from a corner kick against Jordan's Al Hussein in the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League Two in Dubai on Sunday.

By Sports Reporter
Dubai

Julian Draxler is relishing the prospect of facing Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr Club after helping Qatari side Al Ahli defeat Al Hussein 3-1 on Sunday to reach the AFC Champions League Two West Zone semi-final.

The playmaker created the opening goal for Erik Exposito before scoring the second directly from a corner kick. Michel Vlap added the third late on as Qatar's Al Ahli set up a semi-final against Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr tomorrow.

Having previously played with Schalke 04, Paris Saint-Germain as well as the German national team, Draxler will be facing several Al Nassr players who he is acquainted with and expects a tough challenge. "Obviously it will be tough for us because they (Al Nassr) have a lot of big players. Most of whom I already know from my time in Europe. However, we have nothing to lose, we are in the semi-final so let's see what we can do," said the German.

"It was a tough game (against Al Hussein) but a big step for us. We started really well but

after that we had some struggles but all in all, we deserved to win. We have had a good campaign and now we are looking forward to the game against Al Nassr."

Al Hussein were left to rue a missed opportunity, having pulled themselves back into the tie through Yousef Qashi's 21st minute equaliser, with head coach Franco da Silva not hiding his disappointment.

"We are certainly not satisfied with the result, as we prepared well for this match and had high hopes of qualifying for the semi-finals," said da Silva. "It was a difficult match, and we conceded goals from set-pieces, but our players were determined and disciplined throughout. Al Ahli deserved the win, and now we will return to the domestic league and focus on the two remaining competitions."

Meanwhile, Al Nassr's head coach Jorge Jesus believes that his side must strive for the title after a commanding 4-0 win over Al Wasl FC in their quarter-final tie on Sunday.

Fielding his strongest XI for the first time this campaign, goals from Cristiano Ronaldo, Inigo Martinez, Abdulelah al-Amri and Sadio Mane kept Al Nassr in the hunt for a double with the side also leading the Saudi Pro League.

"The match looked easy but the opposing team is a very good team, they are very organised," said Jesus. "I like them, they are very tactically organised. Now, it's 17 consecutive wins, for this I congratulate the players and the Al Nassr fans for the victory. This competition is very important to us. Al Nassr has never won this competition, no Saudi team has ever won this competition, so we took it seriously from the start. We could have been better in some areas today but everyone played to the best they could."

There was disappointment for Rui Vitoria and his Al Wasl team after a slow start saw them having too much to chase with Al Nassr 3-0 up after just 26 minutes. The 56-year-old was able to galvanise his Emirati side into an improved second half performance but it wasn't enough to prevent them from exiting the competition.

"The game was not what we expected, result wise," said Vitoria. "We didn't start well and weren't aggressive in the first half. We let them play and their quality up front made it difficult for us. We changed in the second half and played with a different attitude and had more balance in the game. We had our opportunities but didn't capitalise."

ASIAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Saudi's Ahli sink Kobe to reach final

AFP
Jeddah

Defending champions Al Ahli struck twice in eight second-half minutes to come from behind to defeat Japan's Vissel Kobe 2-1 and seal their place in a second successive Asian Champions League Elite final.

Brazil winger Galeno cancelled out Yoshinori Muto's first-half opener before Ivan Toney completed the comeback in front of 44,716 people at King Abdullah Sports City Stadium.

Kobe, winners of the J1 League title in 2023 and 2024, took the lead on the half hour, when the Al Ahli defence were caught napping at a free-kick.

Beating the Saudi side's high line, an unmarked Yuya Osako headed the ball across the Ahli penalty area to Muto, who slotted home past former Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy.

In first-half stoppage-time, Rayan Hamed headed a Galeno free-kick onto the Kobe upright before Toney dragged a shot wide. Ahli, who 12 months ago defeated Japan's Kawasaki Frontale in the final to capture a first continental crown, spurned another golden opportunity at the start of the second half when Brazil international

Roger Ibanez headed across goal when free.

At the other end, Daiju Sasaki struck the Ahli crossbar. However, Ahli levelled on 62 minutes. Galeno, scorer of a spectacular winner in the quarter-final win against Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim, struck another superb effort from range that flew high into the Kobe goal.

Ahli edged ahead eight minutes later, Toney making the most of goalkeeper Daiya Maekawa's failure to deal with a cross by side-footing home from the angle. The Englishman, the current top scorer in the Saudi Pro League, climbed to two goals for the tournament.

Ahli were then denied a third through Riyadh Mahrez, with the former Manchester City star's 75th-minute finish ruled out for offside following a VAR review. But it mattered little as Ahli held on for the victory.

They will now face either Japan's Machida Zelvia or 2015 runners-up Shabab Al Ahli of the UAE, who meet in the other semi-final today.

The final takes place on Saturday at King Abdullah Sports City Stadium.

For the second year running, Jeddah is staging the eight-team centralised finals series of the continent's premier football competition, rebranded last year as the Asian Champions League Elite.



Al Ahli's Brazil winger Galeno celebrates after scoring against Vissel Kobe at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah.

ATHLETICS

Korir, Lokedi dominate Boston Marathon

AFP
Boston

Defending champions John Korir and Sharon Lokedi completed a Kenyan double-double at the Boston Marathon yesterday, both delivering tactical masterpieces to clinch back-to-back victories in the 130th edition of the prestigious road race.

Korir took advantage of perfect racing conditions to claim the fourth marathon win of his career with a majestic performance to win the men's race in a new course record.

The 29-year-old defending champion bided his time before pulling away from Ethiopia's Milkesa Mengesha after 20 miles to finish in a time of 2hr 1min 52sec.

Korir's winning time obliterated the previous course record of 2hr 03min 02sec set by Geoffrey Mutai in 2011.

Tanzania's world champion Alphonse Simbu finished second in 2hr 02min 47sec, sprinting past

Kenya's Benson Kipruto down the closing straight.

Korir's second Boston victory follows his wins at the Chicago Marathon in 2024 and the Valencia Marathon in December.

Korir's serene victory was in stark contrast to last year's Boston win, when the Kenyan fell during the early stages of the race before recovering to clinch a memorable win.

"This year was a breeze for me because I had no problems at the start or at the finish," Korir said afterwards. "It felt like a race back home with all the people cheering. It was in my mind to set the course record and I thank God that he fulfilled my wishes."

'Patient' Lokedi dominates

Korir's emphatic win in the men's race was emulated by Lokedi in the women's elite event, who took the tape in 2hr 18min 51sec.

The 32-year-old collected the third major marathon victory of her career after emerging from a crowded pack of around a dozen runners over the final six miles.

Lokedi broke clear after 21.7 miles with compatriots Loice Chemnung and Irine Cheptai alongside her, and then kicked again to lead by eight seconds from Chemnung at the 23-mile mark.

Lokedi showed no sign of flagging over the final few miles and led by 33 seconds heading into the final mile before kicking for home to complete a third major marathon win after victories in New York in 2022 and Boston in 2025.

Chemnung finished 44 seconds behind in second place, with Mary Ngugi-Cooper third in 2hr 20min 07sec.

Lokedi said patience had been the key to her victory - and revealed that encouragement from a young fan had helped spur her finish.

"It just felt so good - I just kept telling myself 'Be patient, be humble, you can do this,'" Lokedi said.

"And then I saw a little girl who said 'You got this ladies!'. And it was so cute, and that was what I needed."

Lokedi also said her friend and compatriot Hellen Obiri - a Bos-



Gold medalists Kenya's John Korir and Sharon Lokedi celebrate with a trophy after winning the men's and women's elite races at the Boston Marathon yesterday. (Reuters)

ton winner in 2023 and 2024 and runner-up behind Lokedi in 2025 who missed yesterday's race - had

also offered support. "I really wish I had (Hellen) there, but she texted me yesterday and said 'I know you

can do it, I believe in you - just go out there and show them who you are,'" Lokedi said.

CRICKET

Rana takes 5-32 as Bangladesh beat New Zealand

THE THREE-MATCH ODI SERIES IS NOW LEVEL AT 1-1

AFP
Dhaka

Pace sensation Nahid Rana took 5-32 to lead Bangladesh to a comfortable six-wicket win over New Zealand in the second one-day international and level the three-match series at 1-1 yesterday.

Rana registered his second five-wicket ODI haul as Bangladesh bundled out New Zealand for 198, a total they overhauled with 14.3 overs to spare in Dhaka.

Opener Tanzid Hasan Tamim, who top-scored with 76, and Najmul Hossain Shanto, retired hurt on 50, steered the hosts to 199-4 in 35.3 overs, setting up a series decider on Thursday in Chattogram.

Bangladesh suffered early blows with opener Saif Hassan and Soumya Sarkar out for eight apiece, but Tanzid hit back with an aggressive counter-attack that hauled the hosts to 67 in 10 overs.

Tanzid found an able ally in Shanto and the left-handed pair put on 120 runs for the third-wicket stand to put the chase firmly in Bangladesh's control.

Left-arm spinner Jayden Lennox briefly threatened to spark a collapse, dismissing Tanzid and Litton Das in quick succession - both falling while attempting to clear the boundary.

Tanzid struck 10 fours and four sixes in his 58-ball knock. Litton made seven.

Shanto kept his calm as he raised his fifty off 71 balls, but



Bangladesh's Nahid Rana (centre) celebrates a five-wicket haul with teammates after taking the wicket of New Zealand's Jayden Lennox during the second ODI at Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. (AFP)

was forced to retire due to severe cramp. Towhid Hridoy, unbeaten on 30, and skipper Mehidy Hasan Miraz, not out on eight, saw Bangladesh home without further trouble.

Earlier, the 23-year-old Rana set up the win during New Zealand's innings after he operated across four separate spells and struck in the first over of each new burst.

Left-arm quick Shoriful Islam provided strong support, return-

ing 2-32 from his 10 overs, including the wicket of Nick Kelly (83).

Fast bowlers Soumya and Taskin Ahmed took one wicket each, as did leg-spinner Rishad Hossain.

New Zealand's innings was held together almost single-handedly by opener Kelly, who made 83 for his maiden ODI half-century.

No other visiting batter reached 20, with Muhammad Abbas the next highest scorer, on 19.

Shoriful set the platform early, delivering an incisive opening spell of six overs for just 17 runs, generating 29 dot balls to put the tourists on the back foot.

Rana tightened the stranglehold, collecting two wickets in his opening five-over spell.

BRIEF SCORES

Bangladesh 199 for 4 (Tanzid 76, Shanto 50, Lennox 2-36) **beat New Zealand 198** (Kelly 83, Rana 5-32 Shoriful 2-32) **by six wickets**

COMMENT

Olympic Games status a massive 'boost' for squash, says Crouin

AFP
Paris

European squash champion Victor Crouin believes the visibility of his sport will get a huge boost after it makes its Olympic debut at the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

Tennis, table tennis and badminton all outstrip squash in terms of licensed player participation in France but Crouin is convinced this will now change.

"The Olympics will give us notoriety," the triple European champion and world number six told AFP.

In France, there are just 22,000 licensed squash players compared to 254,000 in table tennis and over 1.2 million for tennis.

So when squash was added to the Olympic roster after the 2024 Paris Games after years of bidding for a place, Crouin was delighted.

"I couldn't believe it was true," he said.

"This is now my career objective. As a squash player, I've always felt a bit excluded (from the Olym-



pics) until now." Places for LA are limited however to 16 male and 16 female players.

"It makes for one less match to win and a better chance of a medal," said Crouin, who studied economics at Harvard.

Crouin believes his sport will make an attractive spectacle for fans.

"It's a spectacular sport. Squash is often described as a game of chess in a boxing ring," he said.

Other sports either added or back on the programme for the LA Olympics are cricket, flag football, baseball and softball.

Chakravarthy overcomes surface tension to end Kolkata's losing streak

BENGALURU: Varun Chakravarthy's return to form helped Kolkata Knight Riders snap their winless streak on Sunday, but the 34-year-old said he and his fellow spinners are struggling to make an impact due to the Indian Premier League's batting-friendly tracks. Chakravarthy was the joint highest wicket-taker at the Twenty20 World Cup, which India won earlier this year, and was expected to play a key role in Kolkata's pursuit of a fourth IPL title. However, the leg-spinner began his campaign with three wicketless outings before claiming 2-34 in a loss to Gujarat Titans on Friday. On Sunday, it was a more familiar

sight at Eden Gardens as Chakravarthy tormented batters on a slow track to claim 3-14 and set up Kolkata's four-wicket victory against Rajasthan Royals, their first win in seven matches.

Chakravarthy, who was named Player of the Match, said: "Just because I've taken three wickets today, I don't want to make a sweeping statement," he told reporters. My strength is to keep attacking the stumps. But if there is nothing in the pitch, that's when bowlers start searching, they start getting confused, they are clueless, which happens to everyone. It has happened to the best of the best. One win here, one win there we will be back on track," he said.

SPOTLIGHT

Explosive Varma ton revives Mumbai's hopes with big win over Gujarat



Mumbai Indians' Tilak Varma (also inset) celebrates after reaching his century in the IPL match against Gujarat Titans in Ahmedabad yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Ahmedabad, India

Swashbuckling batter Tilak Varma hit his maiden IPL century to lead Mumbai Indians to just their second win of the campaign as they hammered Gujarat Titans by 99 runs yesterday.

Varma's unbeaten 101 off only 45 deliveries steered five-time IPL champions Mumbai to 199-5 after the heavyweights had slipped to 96-4 at Gujarat's home in Ahmedabad.

The bowlers then took over as pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah claimed his first wicket of the season on the first ball of Gujarat's chase to help bundle out the opposition for 100 in 15.5 overs.

Mumbai, who last won the IPL title in 2020, began this season with a win but four defeats in their

next four outings dented their ambitions. Their second win in six matches lifted the team from the bottom of the 10-team table to seventh place.

Skipper Hardik Pandya was an animated figure throughout the course of the match as his side got back to winning ways.

Bumrah's wicket of Sai Sudharsan for a golden duck fired up Pandya, who hugged his lead bowler, and then a later stunning catch in the deep by Naman Dhir further pleased the captain.

Pandya trapped Jos Buttler lbw for five in the second over and as impact substitute Ashwani Kumar dismissed opposition skipper Shubman Gill, Mumbai were on the front foot.

Mumbai's New Zealand spinner Mitchell Santner struck twice in three balls in the eighth over to send back Washington Sundar, courtesy of Dhir's catch, and

Glenn Phillips to further dent the chase. Medium pace bowler Ashwani was the stand-out with figures of 4-24.

But it was Varma's fireworks with the bat that stole the show for Mumbai as the middle-order batter struck eight fours and seven sixes in his blitz.

Varma punished the Gujarat pace bowlers to all parts of the ground and finally reached his hundred with a six and four on the last two balls of the innings.

He started slowly and was on 19 off 22 balls at one stage, but in his next 23 balls he smashed 82 runs to make it an evening to remember for himself and Mumbai.

BRIEF SCORES

Mumbai Indians 199 for 5 (Tilak 101*, Dhir 45, Rabada 3-33) **beat Gujarat Titans 100** (Washington 26, Ashwani 4-24, Santner 2-16, Ghazanfar 2-17) **by 99 runs**

MOTORSPORT

Formula One makes rule changes after drivers' criticism

TWEAKS TO RULES ADDRESS ENERGY MANAGEMENT ISSUES

AFP
Paris

Formula One chiefs unanimously agreed yesterday to make rule changes following severe criticism of new regulations introduced this season which led to doubts over Max Verstappen continuing in the sport.

The new rules made cars a combination of combustion and electrical power, meaning drivers had to carefully manage their battery, effectively slowing down on a qualifying lap, while the cars had boost buttons to allow them to overtake.

Four-time world champion Verstappen called the new style of racing "a joke" after the Chinese Grand Prix and hinted he would take a break from F1 in 2027 unless changes were made.

Other drivers had criticised the new rules and fans said the changes had detracted from the experience of spectators.

Following an online meeting between F1, its governing body FIA, and the sport's team principals, tweaks to the rules have been finalised and are set to come in for the Miami Grand Prix on May 3. That race will end the season's enforced five-week break following the cancellation of the Bahrain and Saudi Arabia races due to the conflict in the Middle East.

Among the changes, energy harvesting - which helps the driver charge the battery - will be reduced from eight megajoules to seven and the hybrid power unit will be in-



Four-time world champion Max Verstappen has been among the most vocal critics of the new rules introduced this season.

creased from 250kw to 350kw. The changes are designed to allow the drivers to go at full speed for longer in qualifying.

Another change has been made to the boost button, after British driver Ollie Bearman's high-speed crash at the last round in Japan, which was attributed partly to the difference in closing speeds.

The boost button will now be capped at 150kw, "limiting sudden performance differentials", the FIA said in a statement.

Further talks are set to take place after the Miami Grand Prix.

Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff cautioned against sweeping changes to the rulebook, after his drivers Kimi Antonelli and George Russell made a fast start to the season. Antonelli leads Russell by nine points in the standings after the first three races.

Speaking before the meeting, Wolff said: "The discussions that have been taking place between the drivers, the FIA, Formula One, and the teams have been constructive. And we all share the same objectives.

"It's how can we improve the product, make it out-and-out racing, and

look at what can improve in terms of safety, but act with a scalpel and not with a baseball bat.

"We are going to ratify, in order to evolve, because there has only been three races. We need to learn from the past, where decisions were sometimes made in an erratic way, and then we overshot and realised it wasn't good.

"We are custodians of the sport and we have many hundreds of thousands of fans that love F1. In order to protect this huge opportunity that the sport gives us, we shouldn't bad-mouth in public our own sport."

Antonelli performing as expected but Senna comparisons too much for Wolff

Formula One leader **Kimi Antonelli** is performing as expected in his second season, Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff said yesterday while seeking to calm some of the more excitable headlines around the 19-year-old Italian after two wins in a row.

Antonelli, the youngest F1 championship leader and first Italian to win twice in succession since Alberto Ascari in 1953, leads experienced teammate George Russell by nine points. "When it comes to Kimi, we've always been very clear in our objectives," Wolff told reporters on a video call.

"Our first learning year with great performances, highlights, and then other moments where it's going to be very difficult. And we've exactly seen that. And now we're in the second year and he continues to develop in a way that we have hoped to see and forecast.

"Of course in Italy everybody wants to talk about world championships and comparisons to (late Brazilian triple champion Ayrton) Senna come up, which is something which I don't enjoy to read because he's a 19-year-old."

Wolff praised Antonelli's handling of the pressure. "He copes very well," he said. "I think in the team there's times where we put our arm around him. Other times, we exercise more pressure. But overall everything is coming together as expected." Wolff said Russell, who started the season as title favourite and team leader on track, had been unlucky after winning the opener in Australia. The Briton started and finished second in China after a problem hit his qualifying and he then had to fight back after an early safety car period left him second in the queue for fresh tyres at Mercedes. In Japan Russell was fourth after the safety car was deployed just after he had pitted while leading Antonelli, who had yet to come in for fresh tyres and did so while staying ahead.

"I haven't seen many mistakes that George has done until now, but I have seen races going against him that he could have won in safety cars or being stuck in traffic," said Wolff. "He's driving on such a high level, he's instrumental to the team's success. He's a great character. He's a Mercedes driver and we can see that."



LAUREUS AWARDS

Sabalenka and Alcaraz sweep top honours, PSG adjudged best team

Reuters
Madrid

Tennis ruled the red carpet in Madrid on Monday as Aryna Sabalenka and Carlos Alcaraz were crowned Sportswoman and Sportsman of the Year at the Laureus Awards.

The pair were honoured after glittering 2025 campaigns that saw them finish atop the women's and men's tennis rankings respectively.

Spaniard Alcaraz, 22, reclaimed the year-end world number one spot after capturing two Grand Slam titles at the French Open and U.S. Open, underlining his supremacy across surfaces. Belarusian Sabalenka, 27, meanwhile, stood alongside him in the winners' circle in New York and also reached the final in Australia and France, capping a season of relentless consistency.

With her triumph, Sabalenka joins a roll call of Laureus Sports-woman of the Year recipients from her sport including Serena Williams, Jennifer Capriati, Justine Henin and Naomi Osaka.

In a first for the awards, the ceremony was hosted by two athletes - both former Laureus winners - Novak Djokovic and Eileen Gu. Last year's top honours went to gymnast Simone Biles and pole-vaulter Mondo Duplantis.

Elsewhere, Rory McIlroy claimed the World Comeback of the Year Award after ending an 11-year wait to complete the career Grand Slam with a playoff victory at the 2025 Masters, a title he defended in 2026.



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz poses with the Sportsman of the Year Award during the 27th Laureus World Sports Awards gala in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

Formula One's Lando Norris was named World Breakthrough of the Year, while Paris St Germain took World Team of the Year after a trophy haul in 2025 that included the French league and Cup plus their first Champions League crown.

The Laureus World Sports Awards nominees are selected by the global media, while the winners are determined by the 69 members of the Laureus World Sports Academy. The awards have been presented annually since 2000.

THE WINNERS
World Sportsman of the Year:

Carlos Alcaraz
World Sportswoman of the Year: Aryna Sabalenka
World Team of the Year: PSG
World Breakthrough of the Year: Lando Norris
World Comeback of the Year: Rory McIlroy
World Sportsman of the Year with a Disability: Gabriel Araujo
World Action Sportsman of the Year: Chloe Kim
World Young Sportsman of the Year: Lamine Yamal
Laureus Sporting Inspiration: Toni Kroos
Laureus Lifetime Achievement: Nadia Comaneci, Laureus Sport for Good: Futbol Mas.

Crowd-puller Kyrgios confirms Halle participation

Former Wimbledon finalist Nick Kyrgios, who has not played a competitive singles match since January, will take part in this year's Halle grasscourt tournament in June, organisers said yesterday. The 30-year-old, who has struggled for years with a series of wrist and knee injuries, is a major crowd-puller but does not have a singles ranking at the moment.

The Halle tournament is a traditional warm-up event for Wimbledon. The Australian's only singles match of the year was a straight sets first round loss to American Aleksandar Kovacevic in Brisbane in January.

Kyrgios, who reached the Wimbledon final in 2022, has played just seven singles matches between Janu-

ary 2023 and April 2026. "Nick Kyrgios has been one of the most dazzling personalities in world tennis for years," Halle tournament organisers said in a statement. "The Australian is known for his exceptional playing style, characterised by one of the best serves on the tour, spectacular winners, and great creativity." "At the same time, his emotional personality and charisma attract considerable attention far beyond the sport."

Kyrgios had said earlier this year he would compete in several grasscourt events, skipping the clay season that precedes them. The Halle tournament will be held between June 13 to 21. Wimbledon, the third Grand Slam of the year, starts on June 29.

SPOTLIGHT

India 'extremely high' doping risk, says Athletics Integrity Unit chair

AFP
New Delhi

India has been elevated to a list of nations including Russia where there is an "extremely high" risk of doping, the Athletics Integrity Unit said yesterday.

The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) joins the likes of Russia, Belarus, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Ukraine in the AIU's highest rating of Category A after being moved up from Category B. Category A means India's athletes must now comply with more stringent anti-doping requirements. The world's most populous country ranked in the top two for the most anti-doping

violations in athletics between 2022 and 2025, the AIU said.

"The doping situation in India has been high-risk for a long time and, unfortunately, the quality of the domestic anti-doping programme is simply not proportionate to the doping risk," AIU chair David Howman said.

"While the AFI has advocated for anti-doping reforms within India, not enough has changed.

"The AIU will now work with the AFI to achieve reforms to safeguard the integrity of the sport of athletics, as we have done with other Category A member federations."

The AIU is an independent body tasked with fighting corruption and wrongdoing, including doping, in athletics. India is

set to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games, seen as a stepping stone for its ambition of staging the 2036 Olympics.

In the latest doping case in Indian athletics, Asian Games gold medalist archer Prathamesh Jawkar has been banned for two years. He accepted the punishment for a whereabouts failure and will miss the Asian Games in September-October in Japan.

World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) chief Witold Banka was in New Delhi last week and said India is the biggest producer of performance-enhancing drugs.

However he noted that India consistently leading the list of drug cheats will not hamper its chances of hosting prestigious global sporting events.

TENNIS

French Open sensation Boisson returns to action after 'most difficult' spell

AFP
Madrid

Lois Boisson, the French player who lit up Roland Garros last year with her stunning run to the French Open semi-finals, told AFP she cannot wait to return to action today at the Madrid Open after months out injured.

Ranked 361st in the world before the 2025 edition of Roland Garros, Boisson created a sensation by reaching the last four of the Grand Slam tournament, beating top 10 players Jessica Pegula and Mirra Andreeva in the process. The 22-year-old backed up her maiden major appearance by winning a first tour-level title on clay in Hamburg in July and breaking into the world's top 50, but has subsequently been plagued by injuries.

"The last few months have been very difficult - the most difficult since I started playing tennis," Boisson said. "I didn't handle them very well mentally, let's say."

The world number 46, however, added that she had "learnt some lessons" from her period



on the sidelines, which "will help me in the future".

"I'm convinced I have what it takes to achieve great things in tennis," she insisted. "I'm happy today to have come out of it stronger and to have come to terms with it all a bit."

Boisson has not played competitively since September, when she withdrew from the third round of the WTA 1000 event in Beijing, due to a series of injuries and, what she labelled, "medical mistakes".

She added that the extra attention following her exploits at her home Grand Slam may have contributed to the stresses on her body. "Perhaps without realising it, it added a kind of stress, a sense of pressure - something I simply wasn't used to dealing

with - all that attention surrounding me," she said.

Untimely leg niggles then an arm injury halted Boisson's star just when it appeared to be firmly on the rise. "The two minor injuries I had to my leg weren't serious," she explained. "It was mainly this arm injury that was unexpected, to be honest, and difficult to manage.

"There were quite a few mistakes on the medical side. Each time, I was given timings that weren't realistic... That's also why there were so many false starts," such as at last week's WTA event in Rouen from which Boisson withdrew shortly before the start of the tournament.

But now Boisson is back, and she will be playing on her favoured surface, clay, at the Madrid Open, which runs from Tuesday to May 3. "There's a really good vibe here," Boisson said. "Being back on the circuit, at a tournament, I feel it's giving me something I haven't had for a while. It's also helping me to continue with this process of healing." Boisson opens her debut campaign in Madrid against American 43rd-ranked player Peyton Stearns.

COMMENT

Real Madrid coach Arbeloa launches stout defence of Mbappe

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa mounted a strong defence of French superstar **Kylian Mbappe**, who was criticised for what some perceived as ignoring his defensive responsibilities in last week's Champions League defeat by Bayern Munich.

Arbeloa, who himself is under fire with Real all but certain to finish without a trophy this term, said Mbappe had nothing to reproach himself about and that

aside from scoring in both legs of the quarter-final he had "given his all in defence".

Real lost 4-3 in a thrilling second-leg tussle with Bayern Munich - who progressed 6-4 on aggregate - with the Spanish side reduced to 10 men after Eduardo Camavinga was sent off in the 86th minute.

Bayern scored twice after the Frenchman's dismissal, which sparked the criticism of Mbappe.

Arbeloa, though, was having none of this at his eve-of-match press conference yesterday.

"I have nothing to reproach Kylian about," said Arbeloa, whose

side host Alaves today. "He was at the top of his game, he scored in both legs and was a constant threat to their defence.

"He gave his all in defence, he worked really hard.

"I was thoroughly satisfied with his performance in that match," added the 43-year-old.

Mbappe, who has scored 40 goals in all competitions in his second season in Spain, will have to wait another year to realise "his dream" of winning the Champions League.

It was the reason why he joined Madrid from French giants Paris Saint-Germain (PSG),

who promptly rubbed salt into his wounds by winning European club football's most prized trophy last term.

Whether Arbeloa, who replaced Xabi Alonso earlier this season, is the man still in charge next term is in doubt - arch-rivals Barcelona lead Real by nine points in the race for the La Liga crown with seven matches remaining.

However, he refused to comment on his future, aside from saying it was not in his hands, but remarked that there was no need for a "huge revolution" at Real in order to turn things round next campaign.



FOCUS

Endrick stars as Lyon dent PSG's Ligue 1 title hopes

'YOU WANT A MORE CLOSE-FOUGHT LEAGUE AND YOU HAVE IT'

AFP
Paris

Brazilian prodigy Endrick scored one goal and set up another as Lyon won 2-1 away to Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) on Sunday, denting the reigning European champions' bid for another Ligue 1 title.

Endrick gave Lyon an early lead at the Parc des Princes and then released Afonso Moreira to double their advantage.

PSG rested several stars from the side that beat Liverpool away in midweek to reach the Champions League semi-finals and were far from their best, with Goncalo Ramos having a penalty saved before Khvicha Kvaratskhelia grabbed a late consolation.

It was a fifth defeat in Ligue 1 this season for Luis Enrique's side, who are one point ahead of nearest challengers Lens with a game in hand - a win at home to Nantes in a rearranged fixture in midweek will leave them four points clear with five to play. PSG must still travel next month to Lens, who beat Toulouse 3-2 on Friday, and remain on course for a fifth straight domestic title, but this remains a setback for a side preparing to face Bayern Munich in the Champions League semi-finals.

"You want a more close-fought league and you have it. Lens keep winning and it will be difficult until the end," said Luis Enrique.

"That's football and now we just need to prepare for the upcoming games. We are going to be playing every three days now and we need to cope with that."

Meanwhile, Lyon's win is a huge boost in their quest to return to the Champions League after an absence of six years from Europe's elite club competition -- since they lost to Bayern in the 2020 semis.

Paulo Fonseca's side are joint-third on 54 points with Lille, who drew 0-0 with Nice on Saturday.

"Endrick was decisive but I am



Paris Saint-Germain's Achraf Hakimi (left) vying for the ball with Lyon's Endrick during the Ligue match at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris. (AFP)

especially happy with how hard he worked defensively," said Fonseca.

Rennes are a point behind Lyon and Lille in fifth after a 3-0 victory at Strasbourg, while Marseille are another point back in sixth following a 2-0 loss at Lorient on Saturday.

Monaco are two points further adrift in seventh after having to come from behind to draw 2-2 with Auxerre.

The top three qualify directly for next season's Champions League, with fourth entering in the third qualifying round. Fifth goes into the Europa League and sixth into the Conference League.

Endrick opened the scoring in the seventh minute, beating home goalkeeper Matvey Safonov at his near post - he has now scored seven goals for Lyon since arriving on loan from Real Madrid in January.

The teenager then turned provider as the visitors doubled their

lead on 18 minutes, supplying the outstanding Moreira to run through and make it 2-0.

PSG won a penalty before the break when Lucas Hernandez was brought down in the area by Ainsley Maitland-Niles, but Ramos's spot-kick was saved.

Viitnha then went off injured, while Ousmane Dembele came on in the second half and hit the bar. Fellow substitute Kvaratskhelia then grabbed a consolation goal in stoppage time with a superb strike.

Earlier, USA star Folarin Balogun scored in an eighth consecutive Ligue 1 game for Monaco but could not stop his side dropping more points in their quest for European qualification.

The former Arsenal striker, who is set to lead the United States attack for the co-hosts at the World Cup, scored from the penalty spot just before the hour mark in a 2-2

draw with relegation-threatened Auxerre.

The visitors had been two goals ahead through strikes by Kevin Danois and Lassine Sinayoko, but Ansu Fati pulled a goal back on 56 minutes for Monaco and Balogun equalised a few minutes later.

Balogun has scored 18 goals this season including 10 in his last 10 games between league and Champions League.

Rennes were comfortable winners away to a Strasbourg side clearly fatigued after winning through to the Conference League semi-finals on Thursday.

Esteban Lepaul is now Ligue 1's leading scorer after putting Rennes in front with his 17th this season, before Brel Embolo and Mousa Al-Tamari also netted.

Metz and Nantes edged closer to relegation with a 3-1 home loss to Paris FC and a 1-1 draw against Brest respectively.

SPOTLIGHT

Chelsea owners supportive despite slump: Rosenior

AFP
London

Liam Rosenior said yesterday that Chelsea's owners had been "magnificent" in their support despite an alarming slump that has left their Champions League qualification hopes hanging by a thread.

The Blues are seven points behind fifth-placed Liverpool after four straight Premier League defeats and their chances of finishing in the top five look bleak.

Boos greeted the full-time whistle following Saturday's 1-0 defeat to Manchester United at Stamford Bridge after some supporters staged a street protest against owners BlueCo ahead of kick-off.

Chelsea co-owner Behdad Eghbali last week said the club were still behind Rosenior and remained optimistic about long-term success under his management.

Asked yesterday if he felt that support, Blues head coach Rosenior, who replaced Enzo Maresca in January, said: "One hundred percent.

"They have been supportive of me in our daily conversations, the sporting directors involved, they have been magnificent in their support of me and the team. "We are aligned and we know we need to win games of football in the now. That doesn't go against what we are trying to do, which is give consistent success to the club long term."

Chelsea, with just one victory in their past eight league games, face a must-win game at ninth-placed Brighton today.

With just three points separating the Blues and Fulham in 12th, Rosenior's side are in danger of missing out on European football altogether.

"We've made it very difficult for ourselves, we have to be honest and realistic with that, but what we can't do is give up, we have to keep fighting," he said.

"We have to make sure we go to Brighton with similar attributes to what I saw against Manchester United in terms of our energy and our intensity and engagement to the game, which was good.

"But what we didn't do is keep a clean sheet in the moment and we didn't take advantage of the chances, so we need to be more clinical and more ruthless in both boxes."

Rosenior admitted he had made errors in the early months of his tenure after replacing Maresca, who led Chelsea to the UEFA Conference League and World Club Cup titles last season.

"If you're not honest and you don't hold your hand up to mistakes, you're never going to improve," said the former Strasbourg coach.

"I have made mistakes, I'm going to make more mistakes, every coach does. But with the guys here, how they support me, because we all want success for the club, we can be open and honest about that."



Liam Rosenior's Chelsea, with just one victory in their past eight league games, face ninth-placed Brighton a must-win game today.

OPINION

Cafu backs Brazil as World Cup favourites

AFP
Madrid

Brazil's two-time World Cup winner Cafu said yesterday he believes this year's tournament is the perfect time for the five-time champions to take back the crown for the first time for 24 years.

Cafu was captain when Brazil won their fifth World Cup, beating Germany 2-0 in the 2002 final in Yokohama.

He was also part of the side that beat Italy on penalties to win in 1994 in Pasadena.

"Twenty-four years after the last title win, I think it's the perfect moment for Brazil," Cafu told reporters in Madrid, where he is attending the Laureus Awards.

"We've also brought in a serial winner of a coach, Carlo Ancelotti, who will add to the greatness of

the Brazilian national team."

Cafu, who was a right-back, said Brazil already had strength in midfield and attack, so Ancelotti had focused on strengthening the defence for this year's tournament to be held in the US, Mexico and Canada.

"Because if Brazil doesn't concede goals in a World Cup, they're sure to score a goal per game," Cafu said.

He said he hoped Real Madrid forward Vinicius Junior, a player often embroiled in controversy, would have a strong tournament, saying: "The World Cup is the best way to overcome any kind of controversy.

"In those eight matches (if they reach the final), Vinicius Junior has the potential to show the whole world his worth and what he can do in terms of football."

Vinicius produced an assist in the 3-1 victory over Croatia in Or-

lando on April 1, which helped dispel doubts after the defeat against France in another friendly.

Endrick, 19, also shone in the Croatia win.

"I think it's a good time for him," said Cafu, who believes Real Madrid's decision to loan the forward to French club Lyon last year had been a positive move for the teenager.

"It did him a lot of good. It helped him grow, play, make his mark, and become a key player. It's obvious that at Real Madrid, with so many stars, it's difficult for a young player to become a key player.

"He's a young player who can contribute a lot to Brazil, and I'm sure Ancelotti is looking at him favourably," added Cafu.

Bookmakers have placed Brazil among the top five favourites, with reigning European champions Spain currently leading the way.



Former Brazilian footballer Cafu poses on the red carpet ahead of the Laureus World Sports Awards gala in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

ROSE TO TAKE CHARGE AT BOURNEMOUTH AFTER IRAOLA EXIT

Bournemouth announced yesterday that German manager Marco Rose will take charge of the Premier League club next season, succeeding the departing Andoni Iraola. The highly-rated Iraola revealed last week he will leave the club after three years on England's south coast at the end of the current campaign. Former Borussia Dortmund and RB Leipzig coach Rose has signed a three-year deal. "AFC Bournemouth is delighted to confirm the appointment of Marco Rose as the club's new head coach on a three-year contract, which will begin following the conclusion of the 2025-26 season," the club said in a statement.

The Cherries are eighth in the Premier League, with five games to go this season, chasing European qualification for the first time in their history. Iraola has been linked with a number of Premier League jobs and a return to Athletic Bilbao, where he spent the vast majority of his playing career. Rose has been out of the game since being sacked by Leipzig in March 2025. But the 49-year-old deploys a similar high-pressing style to the one Iraola has successfully implemented and has a track record of improving young players. Rose has worked with the likes of Erling Haaland, Jude Bellingham and Dominik Szoboszlai during his career in Germany and Austria and has vast experience of European football. After winning two Austrian league titles with Red Bull Salzburg, Rose led Borussia Monchengladbach into the Champions League to earn his big move to Dortmund in 2021. However, he lasted just one season with the German giants after finishing second in the Bundesliga to Bayern Munich. Rose then had a two-and-a-half year spell at Leipzig, where he won the German Cup in 2023.