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CRICKET | Page 2

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FOOTBALL | Page 4

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**FOOTBALL**

# Lopetegui urges Qatar to embrace World Cup challenge with belief and ambition

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**Q**atar coach Julen Lopetegui has urged his players to embrace the greatest challenge in the nation's football history with courage, realism and belief as Al Annabi prepare for the FIFA World Cup 2026.

The global football showpiece will be staged across the United States, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19. Qatar are drawn in Group B, and will open their campaign against Switzerland in San Francisco on June 13 before facing Canada in Vancouver on June 18. Their final group-stage match will be against Bosnia and Herzegovina in Seattle on June 24.

Appointed in May 2025, Lopetegui guided Qatar through a tense playoff campaign against Oman and the UAE. After a goalless draw with Oman, Qatar beat the UAE 2-1 in Doha last October, with goals from Boualem Khoukhi and Pedro Miguel sealing a historic berth at the World Cup through the qualifiers for the first time in the nation's history. Qatar had made its World Cup debut in 2022, which it hosted.

Speaking in an interview with Qatar News Agency, Lopetegui acknowledged the enormity of the

challenge awaiting the two-time Asian champions but stressed that his players must approach it with confidence and determination.

"This is the reality that we have to face, and we cannot change it, so we have to accept the fact that we will play against Switzerland first, and we have to be ready to do our best against a very strong team," Lopetegui said.

"Switzerland is perhaps one of the most balanced teams in Europe over the last eight years. They have the same coach, and they have outstanding players who play in the best leagues in the world, such as the Champions League, the English Premier League, the Italian League, and the Spanish League; therefore, we have to be ready to face them."

The former Real Madrid and Spain coach warned that the challenge would not become any easier after the opening game. He described Canada as another highly competitive side featuring players competing in Europe's top leagues, while also highlighting Bosnia and Herzegovina's achievement in qualifying ahead of Italy.

"We realise that we are playing against teams of another level, and at the same time we know our reality. The competitors are better than us, but this does not mean surrendering, but rather knowing what awaits us and what it



Appointed in May 2025, Julen Lopetegui guided Qatar through to the FIFA World Cup 2026 after a tense playoff campaign against Oman and the UAE.

requires us to be ready in order to achieve our ambition and dream of being a strong contender. To be at the World Cup is an opportunity that no one gave us, but rather we obtained it with our merit, which makes us believe in our abilities," the 59-year-old said.

Qatar launched preparations immediately after the end of the domestic season, with the Spaniard praising the competitive nature of the campaign and its positive impact on the national team players. The coach admitted injuries remain his biggest con-

cern as Qatar continue preparations with an extended 34-member preliminary squad, before the final squad is selected later this month. "What concerns us now is reducing injuries as much as possible, and we hope to avoid them, as there is no time to recover in the event of any injury; therefore, we feel some concern and look forward to reaching full readiness before playing our first game," he said.

Lopetegui explained that squad management throughout the past year had been carefully planned

with the World Cup in mind, particularly regarding experienced players aged between 34 and 36.

"For this reason, the choices were different in the Arab Cup, based on the need to achieve balance in the team, as it was necessary to take care of these players and think about reaching the decisive moment, which is the World Cup, in the best possible way," he said.

"We are currently working with a group of approximately 34 players, who are usually familiar to us, and we will select a final list of players who we believe are capable

of helping us achieve our goal of competing strongly in the World Cup," Lopetegui said.

The Spaniard also reflected on the disruption caused by the cancellation of the Qatar Football Festival in March, which had included planned friendlies against world champions Argentina and Serbia. "Everyone in the region suffered during that period, and we had to cancel two very important matches that would have been a great test for us," he said.

However, Lopetegui said Qatar adapted quickly by holding an intensive 10-day training camp before finalising a series of friendlies against Sudan, Ireland and El Salvador ahead of the World Cup.

While much of the spotlight has focused on star duo Akram Afif and Almoez Ali, the coach insisted Qatar's hopes would depend on collective strength rather than individuals. "I don't like to talk about individual names, as it is about the team as a whole. Our strength does not lie in one name, but in our ability to do our best as a team," he said. Lopetegui nevertheless admitted that Almoez Ali's recovery from injury remained a concern after a difficult year disrupted by surgeries and lengthy absences. "As for Akram, he is an influential player, and fortunately he is in top form, and this is good for him and for us," he added.

**4TH GCC GAMES**

# Shooters add to Qatar's gold rush

HOSTS LEAD MEDALS TABLE WITH A TALLY OF 119 INCLUDING 43 GOLD, 44 SILVER AND 32 BRONZE

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**eam Qatar shooters delivered a historic performance at Lusail International Shooting Complex, imposing complete dominance over the competitions held yesterday after claiming seven medals in a single day – including three gold and four silver medals – in a remarkable display that confirmed Qatar shooting's supremacy on the regional stage.

Overall Qatar lead the medals tally with a total of 119 (43 gold, 44 silver, 32 bronze). Saudi Arabia with a tally of 65 (26 gold, 20 silver, 19 bronze) are in second spot. Bahrain with 61 medals (24 gold, 22 silver, 15 bronze) are in third spot.

The standout achievement yesterday came in the men's trap team event, where Team Qatar secured the gold medal and first place after delivering an exceptional performance with a total of 354 targets through the trio of Mohammed al-Rumaihi, Angelo Scalzoni, and Saeed Abu Shareb. The Qatari team finished ahead of Kuwait, who claimed silver with 344 targets, while the UAE took bronze with 341.

Team Qatar women also secured silver in the women's trap team event with a total of 310 targets through Maytha al-Buainain, Khulood al-Khalaf, and Ray Bassil, finishing behind Kuwait, who won gold with 320 targets, while Bahrain claimed bronze with 298.

In the men's individual trap competition, Team Qatar shooter Mohammed al-Rumaihi won silver following a dramatic final showdown against Kuwait's Abdulrahman al-Faihan. Both shooters finished tied on 120 targets before the contest moved to a tense



Mohammed al-Rumaihi, Angelo Scalzoni and Saeed Abu Shareb after winning the men's trap team competitions at the 4th GCC Games - Doha 2026.



Dua Habib, Aisha al-Abdullah and Salma Al Maas and Qatar team officials after winning the women's 10m air pistol team event ahead of Bahrain and the UAE.

shoot-off, which al-Faihan won to secure gold with a score of 26+23, while al-Rumaihi claimed silver with 26+22. UAE shooter Yahya al-Muhairi took bronze with 21 targets.

In the women's individual trap event, Team Qatar shooter Maytha secured silver after scoring 22 targets in the final round, finishing behind Kuwait's Shahad al-Hawal, who won gold with 23 targets, while Bahrain's Marwa Bouarki took bronze with 16.

Team Qatar's Dua Habib captured gold in the women's 10m air pistol event with a total of 231.2 points, ahead of the UAE's Ghalia al-Shuhail, who won silver with 229.6 points, while Bahrain's Aisha al-Braiki claimed bronze with 209.2 points.

Meanwhile, Team Qatar women won gold in the women's 10m air pistol team event with a total of 1,669 points through Dua Habib, Aisha al-Abdullah, and Salma al-Maas, finishing ahead of Bahrain in second with 1,646 points and the UAE in third with 1,634.

In the men's team event of the same discipline, Team Qatar shooters Khalid al-Shaiba, Nasser al-Sunaij, and Mohammed al-Yafei secured silver with 1,679 points. Saudi Arabia claimed gold with 1,693 points, while Oman took bronze with 1,664 points.

**QATAR WIN SILVER IN 15-RED TEAM SNOOKER EVENT**

Team Qatar snooker secured the silver medal in the 15-red team snooker competition at the GCC Games Doha 2026.

The Team Qatar trio of Ali al-Obaidli, Ahmed Saif, and Bashar Hussein claimed silver, while the UAE team of Mohammed Shehab, Khalid al-Kamali, and Abdulrahman al-Shamsi won gold after securing a 3-0 victory in the final.

The billiards and snooker competitions concluded yesterday, with Team Qatar winning six medals overall: gold in the 10-ball billiards doubles event, silver in the 10-ball singles event, silver in the 9-ball singles event, silver in the 6-red snooker singles event,

gold in the 15-red snooker singles event, and silver in the 15-red team snooker competition.

**QATAR PADEL TEAMS CONTINUE WINNING RUN**

Team Qatar padel team continued their winning streak at the 4th GCC Games Doha 2026 after defeating Bahrain 3-0 yesterday.

Team Qatar delivered another strong performance, with the duo of Mishari Nawaf and Rashid Nawaf winning the opening match in straight sets against Bahrain's Youssef Qaed and Omar Qaed by scores of 6-0 and 6-1.

In the second match, Khalid Saadoun and Issa Shanan defeated Bahrain's Ahmed Khalid and Hussein Diwani in three sets, 6-0, 1-6, and 6-3.

In the third match, Mohammed Saadoun and Hassan Wali secured victory over Bahrain's Ali Diwani and Rashid al-Obaidli in straight sets after winning the opening set 6-0 before Bahrain withdrew from the second set due to Rashid al-Obaidli's injury. This marked Team



Qatar's Ali al-Obaidli, Ahmed Saif and Bashar Hussein after winning silver in the 15-red team snooker competition.

Qatar's third consecutive victory after earlier defeating Saudi Arabia 3-0 and Kuwait in the second round.

**QATAR WIN VOLLEYBALL SILVER MEDAL**

Team Qatar men's volleyball team won the silver medal at the GCC Games Doha 2026 after losing to Bahrain in the final held at Aspire Women's Sports Hall amid strong attendance and major interest in the tournament. Bahrain secured

victory in the final with set scores of 25-21, 27-25, and 25-23 to claim the gold medal, while Team Qatar settled for silver.

**QATAR SUFFER FIRST DEFEAT IN HANDBALL**

Team Qatar handball team suffered their first defeat at the GCC Games after losing 24-19 to Bahrain in a strong encounter held yesterday as part of the third round of the competition.

SECOND TEST

# Spinner Taijul puts Bangladesh on brink of series win

Rizwan and Agha resist but Bangladesh on course for 2-0 sweep

AFP  
Sylhet, Bangladesh

Bangladesh are three wickets away from a famous Test series win at home after spinner Taijul Islam took 4-113 to rattle Pakistan despite a rearguard by the opposition batters yesterday.

Pakistan ended day four on 316-7, needing another 121 runs for victory in what would be a record chase of 437 on the fifth and final day in Sylhet.

Mohammad Rizwan, on 75, and Sajid Khan, on eight, were unbeaten at the close of play.

Left-arm spinner Taijul struck key blows, including Babar Azam for 47 and Salman Agha on 71, to keep Bangladesh in the hunt for their first-ever Test series win over Pakistan at home.

Bangladesh, who won the opener of the two-match series, also closed in on back-to-back Test series victories over Pakistan -- having whitewashed them 2-0 on Pakistani soil in 2024.

Pakistan slumped to 162-5 and were heading towards a tame defeat before Rizwan and Agha put on 134 runs to raise hopes of Test cricket's highest chase.

West Indies currently hold the record for the 418 they scored to beat Australia in Antigua in 2003, while Pakistan have never successfully chased more than 377.

Pakistan lost their overnight openers early before captain Shan Masood and Azam steadied the ship with a counter-attacking partnership that guided them to 101-2 at lunch.

But the afternoon session shifted the momentum back in the hosts' favour. Bangladesh removed Azam after wicket-keeper



Bangladesh's Taijul Islam celebrates after the dismissal of Pakistan's Babar Azam during the fourth day of the second Test in Sylhet yesterday. (AFP)

Liton Das took a stunning catch behind the stumps off Taijul.

Nahid Rana then cleaned up Saud Shakeel with a wide yorker for just six, and Taijul snared Masood for a determined 71, with Mahmudul Hasan Joy taking a sharp catch at short leg.

Pakistan slipped to 200-5 at tea, but it was the stubborn sixth-wicket stand between Rizwan and Agha that frustrated Bangladesh.

But Taijul then deceived Agha with a well-disguised arm ball to

rattle his stumps and Hasan Ali fell without scoring two overs later, caught by captain Najmul Hossain Shanto at first slip.

Rizwan and Sajid then batted out the remaining overs.

However, Bangladesh pace bowling coach Shaun Tait remained confident the side would get over the line on day five.

"I think we'll bowl them out. I hope," he said.

"Our guys stayed in the fight, stayed in the contest. They got on top of us for a period of time but

to take those two wickets towards the end - we went into the changing rooms fairly happy."

Pakistan batting coach Asad Shafiq said: "I have a lot of hope because of the way we responded as a batting unit today. If this partnership between Rizwan and Sajid goes long, I am very optimistic."

**BRIEF SCORES: Pakistan 232 and 316 for 7** (Rizwan 75\*, Masood 71, Agha 71, Taijul 4-113) **need another 121 runs to beat Bangladesh 278 and 390.**

SPOTLIGHT

## India rest Bumrah, Jadeja for one-off Test against Afghanistan

AFP  
New Delhi

India have rested pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah and all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja for a one-off Test against Afghanistan next month as the selectors announced the squad yesterday.

Concerns have been raised on the workload management of the 32-year-old Bumrah, who plays all three formats for India and is currently playing for Mumbai Indians in the IPL.

All-rounder Jadeja picked up a niggle in the IPL and will also not be in the squad for the match in New Chandigarh.

Shubman Gill will lead the 15-man squad with KL Rahul replacing Rishabh Pant as vice-captain for the Test, which starts on June 6.

"We want him to become the best Test player that he has always been," chief selector Ajit Agarkar said of Pant's removal as Test vice-captain.

"I don't think there is any concern with his spot in the Test team. I think he is one of our main batters in that line-up."

Left-arm spinners Manav Suthar and Harsh Dubey, as well

as Punjab pace bowler Gurnoor Brar, received maiden call-ups to the Test squad.

Veteran batter Virat Kohli, who has quit Test and T20 internationals, makes the one-day squad for the three matches against Afghanistan that follows the Test. Former captain Rohit Sharma and Hardik Pandya have also been named in the ODI squad but their selections are subject to fitness.

Pant misses out on a place in the ODI squad, also led by Gill.

The three ODIs will be played on June 14, 17 and 20.

**TEST SQUAD:** Shubman Gill (capt), Yashasvi Jaiswal, KL Rahul (vice-capt), Sai Sudharsan, Rishabh Pant, Devdutt Padikkal, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohammed Siraj, Prasidh Krishna, Manav Suthar, Gurnoor Brar, Harsh Dubey, Dhruv Jurel.

**ODI squad:** Shubman Gill (capt), Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer (vice-capt), KL Rahul, Ishan Kishan, Hardik Pandya, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Arshdeep Singh, Prasidh Krishna, Prince Yadav, Gurnoor Brar, Harsh Dubey.

## Chennai set to host Big Bash League opener in December: Reports

**NEW DELHI:** The opening game of the 2026-27 season of Australia's Big Bash League (BBL) is set to be played in Chennai in December, according to media reports yesterday.

Cricket-mad India is a lucrative market for any league and a Cricket Australia (CA) delegation was in Chennai this week for a reconnaissance of the MA Chidambaram Stadium, which serves as the home ground of Chennai Super Kings in the Indian Premier League (IPL).

"We are exploring the potential of Chennai in partnership with the Australian Government to deepen the India-Australia relationship," a CA representative was quoted as saying by the *Indian Express* newspaper.

Indian cricket board (BCCI) Secretary Devajit Saikia did not immediately reply to Reuters' request for a comment.

Brisbane Heat CEO Terry Svenson backed the move to shift the tournament opener to India.

"We've had the opportunity to discuss this with CA and are supportive of the initiative," Svenson told the Australian Associated Press. "The Brisbane Heat have been one of the competition's best performing teams off the field with a strong international following through social media, so we look forward to further discussions with CA."

T20 WORLD CUP

## England sweat on Sciver-Brunt's fitness

AFP  
London

England captain Nat Sciver-Brunt could miss next month's T20 World Cup after the all-rounder was ruled out of her side's warm-up series against New Zealand and India.

Sciver-Brunt tore her left calf while playing for the Blaze in domestic cricket earlier this month and was subsequently ruled out of the three-match one-day international series against New Zealand.

England had hoped she would be ready to return for T20 matches against New Zealand, with that series starting in Derby today, but a new scan has seen her ruled out of all three games, as well as the subsequent campaign against India.

Tournament hosts England begin their T20 World Cup against Sri Lanka at Edgbaston on June 12, leaving Sciver-Brunt in a race against time to lead the side as they go in search of a first major trophy since lifting the 2017 50-over World Cup on home soil.

In addition to her leadership skills, Sciver-Brunt has long been a key player for England,

both as the team's leading batter and a medium-pace bowler and they are a significantly weaker side without the 33-year-old.

Spin-bowling all-rounder Charlie Dean is set to continue deputising as skipper in her absence.

"England captain Nat Sciver-Brunt has been ruled out of both Vitality IT20 series against New Zealand and India," said an England and Wales Cricket Board statement issued yesterday.

"Following a scan on Monday, England Women have confirmed a longer period of rehabilitation is needed to enable Sciver-Brunt to play a full part in the upcoming ICC Women's T20 World Cup."

Sciver-Brunt, speaking to Sky Sports News on Monday, said: "It has been frustrating to be left on the sidelines but hopefully soon I can get back out there. We have got a great leadership group that are in constant communication on and off the pitch. 'I have left it in good hands and I wanted Charlie to do things in her own way.'"

Another experienced campaigner, Danni Wyatt-Hodge, will also miss the three T20s against New Zealand due to the birth of her first child.

IPL

## Sooryavanshi slams 93 to edge RR closer to play-offs

AFP  
Jaipur

Fifteen-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi struck a blistering 93 to power Rajasthan Royals to a seven-wicket win over Lucknow Super Giants yesterday to boost their play-off hopes in the IPL.

T20 sensation Sooryavanshi, who was playing as an impact substitute, struck his third half-century of the season as he hammered seven fours and 10 sixes in his 38-ball knock to guide Rajasthan's chase of 221 at their home in Jaipur.

Left-handed Sooryavanshi missed out on a century before Dhruv Jurel made an unbeaten 53 as Rajasthan achieved their target with five balls to spare for their seventh win in 13 matches and move into the top four of the 10-team table.

A win in their last league match against Mumbai Indians on Sunday will book the only remaining play-off spot. Defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru, Gujarat Titans and Sunrisers Hyderabad have already made the play-offs of the tournament that will conclude on May 31 in Ahmedabad.

Sooryavanshi's batting blitz trumped Lucknow opener Mitchell Marsh's 96, a knock that steered his team to an imposing 220-5.

The T20 sensation has been in red-hot form in the 2026 IPL, and passed March's tally of Marsh 563 runs to climb to the top of the batting chart with 579

runs in 13 matches. He has hit one ton and has compiled his runs at a punishing strike-rate of 237.29. Sooryavanshi's opening partner Yashasvi Jaiswal provided the early impetus with his 23-ball 43 in a first-wicket stand of 75.

Jaiswal, a left-hander who stood in as captain in place of injured Riyan Parag, departed in the seventh over but Rajasthan kept up pace with Jurel and Sooryavanshi putting together 105 runs.

Sooryavanshi reached his fifty in 23 balls and changed gears to smack Prince Yadav for two straight sixes and another two off Mayank Yadav in a 29-run 12th over to put Lucknow on course.

He finally fell to Mohsin Khan with Abdul Samad taking a well-judged catch in the deep but the damage was done. Bottom-placed Lucknow, who are already out of the play-off race along with Mumbai, had a blazing start with Josh Inglis, who made 60 off 29 balls, adding 109 for the first wicket with fellow Australian Marsh.

Inglis and then Nicholas Pooran departed but Marsh kept up the pace alongside skipper Rishabh Pant, who made 35.

The Rajasthan bowlers pulled things back in the final few overs and Marsh missed out on his hundred after being run out on the penultimate ball.

**BRIEF SCORES: Rajasthan Royals 225 for 3** (Sooryavanshi 93, Jurel 53\*, Mohsin 1-31) **beat Lucknow Super Giants 220 for 5** (Marsh 96, Inglis 60, Punja 2-35) **by seven wickets.**



Rajasthan Royals' Vaibhav Sooryavanshi in action during the IPL match against Lucknow Super Giants at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur yesterday. (AFP)

## ECB EXPECTS 'SIGNIFICANT' FINANCIAL LOSS IN 2027 DESPITE HOME ASHES

English cricket's increasing reliance on playing home games against India has become even clearer following a warning it is prepared for a "significant loss" in 2027 despite staging an Ashes series. England and Wales Cricket Board accounts for the year ending January 31, 2026 report a £12.6mn (\$16.9mn) profit on ordinary activities and an improved year-on-year turnover of £89.4mn. They also include ring-fenced profits of £522.3mn on sales in stakes of the eight

Hundred franchises, several of which were purchased by groups with links to the lucrative Indian Premier League, for internal investment in the English game and increased cash reserves of £72.8mn. But those numbers follow England's five-match Test series at home to India last year, a thrilling contest that ended in a 2-2 draw after a maximum 25 days' play. The passion for cricket in India, the world's most populous nation, fuels money-spinning deals for overseas broadcast rights

and the ECB will hope for another boost to their finances when the Indian men's national side returns for five Twenty20 and three one-day internationals later in the 2026 English season. And, in a notable announcement, the ECB financial statement issued yesterday said the English governing body expected to lose money in 2027, even though it will be hosting a marquee five-match men's Test series against Australia, long considered its most significant sporting property. But

while it may remain the foundation stone of all Test cricket - England and Australia first met in 1877 - and the contest beloved above all others by most English fans, it now appears the Ashes can no longer rival matches involving India in pure financial terms. "Turnover in the year ended 31 January 2026 amounted to £408.9mn, an increase of £89.4 million compared to the prior year," said the ECB's financial report. "This is largely attributed to increased

broadcast and ticketing revenues due to hosting an India men's Test series in 2025. "Attention should be drawn to the fact that the ECB's revenues are inherently cyclical, reflecting the scheduling of high-value broadcast series by opposition, and while this profile is advantageous in the current year and in 2026, it is expected to result in a significant loss position in the 2027 season when the England men's team does not host a series against India."

(AFP)

TENNIS

# Two-time champ Alcaraz withdraws from Wimbledon

AFP  
Madrid

**C**arlos Alcaraz's hopes of regaining his Wimbledon title have been dashed with the two-time champion announcing yesterday he is withdrawing as he recovers from a wrist injury.

"My recovery is going well and I'm feeling much better, but unfortunately I'm still not ready to play, I am obliged to withdraw from both Queen's and Wimbledon," said Spaniard Alcaraz, who lost to Jannik Sinner in last year's final in the All England Club.

"These are two really special tournaments for me and I'll miss them a lot. We'll keep working to come back as soon as possible."

Alcaraz sustained the injury during the first round of the Barcelona Open last month and subsequently pulled out of tournaments in Madrid and Rome and then Roland Garros, where he is the reigning two-time champion.

The world number two became the youngest man to complete the career Grand Slam in January with his triumph at the Australian Open. The 23-year-old holds a 22-3 record this season and also won a title in Doha.

Wimbledon will be only the third Grand Slam that Alcaraz has missed since making his main draw debut at the 2021 Australian Open. The Spaniard withdrew from the 2023 edition in Melbourne with a hamstring injury.

Alcaraz's wrist injury has stopped him continuing his ex-

citing rivalry with Italian world number one Sinner, 24, who is firm favourite to triumph in Paris and London. He lost top spot following his defeat by Sinner in the Monte Carlo Masters final on April 12.

The seven-time Grand Slam winner triumphed at Roland Garros in 2024 and 2025. He saved three championship points against Sinner last year in the longest French Open final in history.

The Italian, who has never won the French Open, may be able to capitalise on Alcaraz's absence. This year's tournament runs from May 24 to June 7.

Alcaraz won his first Wimbledon trophy in 2023, defeating seven-time champion Novak Djokovic in the final and successfully defended his title against the Serb the following year. This year's

Wimbledon championship runs from June 29 to July 12.

"It's sad news for all of us, me being a competitor you want to play against the best players in the world and he's definitely the best player on this surface," Sinner had said after Alcaraz's withdrawal from the French Open.

"Being that young, like he is and like I am, we need to look at our bodies first before worse things (happen)."

Last month, Alcaraz insisted that he would not risk a premature return. "I'd rather come back maybe a bit later, but in great shape, than come back quickly and risk making this injury worse," he explained. "I have a long career ahead of me, so I'm not afraid to miss what I have to miss in order to recover as well as possible."



FOOTBALL

# Ronaldo, 41, leads Portugal into his sixth World Cup

'THEY'RE PREPARED FOR THE DEMANDS OF A WORLD CUP'

AFP  
Lisbon

**V**eteran Portugal striker Cristiano Ronaldo will lead his country into the 2026 World Cup this summer after coach Roberto Martinez named the 41-year-old in his squad yesterday.

The former Real Madrid and Manchester United star, now at Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr, is set to appear at a record sixth World Cup.

Portugal and Ronaldo, the all-time leading men's international goalscorer with 143 goals, have never won the competition.

Ronaldo could face former Barcelona rival Lionel Messi, who is also set to play at a sixth World Cup after leading Argentina to glory four years ago in Qatar.



The Portuguese forward avoided a three-match ban despite being sent off against the Republic of Ireland in their last qualifying match for an elbow. Spanish coach Martinez selected a 26-man squad with no major surprises, including Ronaldo's Al Nassr team-mate Joao Felix, and also named goalkeeper Ricardo Velho as an extra player in the group.

Paris Saint-Germain stars Vitinha, Joao Neves, Nuno Mendes and Goncalo Ramos are also included in a strong squad, along with Manchester United playmaker Bruno Fernandes and a contingent from Manchester City, including Bernardo Silva.

Martinez said he would not need to manage five-time Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo in a special way because of his age.

"In my experience, at a World Cup, a player doesn't follow the pattern of club form, age-related performance or anything like that," Martinez told reporters.

"The focus is our group. All of them are focussed, they're prepared for the demands of a World Cup and we just need to manage day by day."

Ronaldo said last year that this World Cup would be his last.

He was left in tears last weekend after defeat by Gamba Osaka in the AFC Champions League Two final, but Martinez said an emotionally draining season would not affect him this summer. "I think that coming into the national team set-up brings new energy and allows you to completely switch off from what happened during the season," said the coach.

Martinez confirmed Velho was the fourth goalkeeper and he would only be involved if another stopper was injured and could be replaced in the squad. The coach

also said late striker Diogo Jota, who died in a car crash in July 2025, was with the squad in spirit.

"The spirit, strength and example of Diogo Jota is our plus one," Martinez added.

In the run-up to the tournament Portugal will face Chile and Nigeria in friendlies, before their World Cup campaign begins against DR Congo on June 17. Portugal will also face Uzbekistan and Colombia in Group K on June 23 and 27, respectively.

Semedo (Fenerbahce/TUR), Joao Cancelo (Barcelona/ESP), Nuno Mendes (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Goncalo Inacio (Sporting Lisbon), Renato Veiga (Villarreal/ESP), Tomas Araujo (Benfica)

**MIDFIELDERS:** Ruben Neves (Al Hilal/KSA), Samu Costa (Mallorca/ESP), Joao Neves, Vitinha (both Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United/ENG), Bernardo Silva (Manchester City/ENG)

**ATTACKERS:** Cristiano Ronaldo, Joao Felix (both Al Nassr/KSA), Francisco Trincao (Sporting Lisbon), Francisco Conceicao (Juventus/ITA), Pedro Neto (Chelsea/ENG), Rafael Leao (AC Milan/ITA), Goncalo Guedes (Real Sociedad/ESP), Goncalo Ramos (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA)

FOCUS

# Neymar back in Brazil squad for 4th World Cup

AFP  
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

**B**razil superstar Neymar was handed a dramatic recall to the country's World Cup squad on Monday, returning to the national team after a near three-year absence.

The inclusion of Neymar, Brazil's all-time leading goalscorer with 79 goals in 128 appearances, was the biggest surprise in the 26-man squad named by coach Carlo Ancelotti. Ancelotti announced Neymar's selection at a gala ceremony in Rio de Janeiro, with loud cheers ringing out as the veteran attacker's call-up was confirmed.

Speculation has raged for months over whether the 34-year-old former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain attacker would force his way back into the national team set-up.

The forward, a veteran of the 2014, 2018 and 2022 World Cups, had not played for Brazil since suffering knee injury during a World Cup qualifying game against Uruguay in 2023.

A mixture of injuries and poor form had left him outside the national team set-up, with Ancelotti citing concerns over his fitness after leaving him out of Brazil's squad for March friendlies against France and Croatia.

However Neymar, who rejoined boyhood club Santos in January after an injury-ravaged stint in Saudi Arabia, has now earned Ancelotti's stamp of approval for the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"We monitored Neymar throughout the year and observed that, in recent times, he has been playing consistently and his physical condition has improved," Ancelotti said. "We believe he is an important player."

Injuries have restricted Neymar to just 15 appearances in 31 matches since his return to Santos in 2026.

Brazil, who are chasing a record sixth World Cup crown, open their World Cup campaign against Morocco on June 13 before playing Haiti and Scotland in Group C.

Neymar joins a potent line-up of attackers that includes Barcelona striker Raphinha and Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior. Ancelotti meanwhile said he believed the World Cup would be won by the most "resilient" team.

"The World Cup won't be won by a perfect team - because a perfect team doesn't exist," he said. "It will be won by the most resilient team."

**SQUAD:**  
**Goalkeepers:** Alisson (Liverpool/ENG), Ederson (Fenerbahce/TUR), Weverton (Gremio/BRA)  
**Defenders:** Alex Sandro (Flamengo/BRA), Danilo (Flamengo/BRA), Leo Pereira (Flamengo/BRA), Bremer (Juventus/ITA), Douglas Santos (Zenit St Petersburg/RUS), Gabriel Magalhães (Arsenal/ENG), Ibanez (Al-Ahli/KSA), Marquinhos (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Wesley (Roma/ITA)  
**Midfielders:** Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle/ENG), Casemiro (Manchester United/ENG), Danilo (Botafogo), Fabinho (Al-Ittihad/KSA), Lucas Paqueta (Flamengo/BRA)  
**Forwards:** Endrick (Lyon/FRA), Gabriel Martinelli (Arsenal/ENG), Igor Thiago (Brentford/ENG), Luiz Henrique (Zenit/RUS), Matheus Cunha (Manchester United/ENG), Neymar (Santos/BRA), Raphinha (Barcelona/ESP), Rayan (Bournemouth/ENG), Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid/ESP)



## Ganna claims Giro stage 10 time trial, Vingegaard fails to take pink

Italian Filippo Ganna sailed to an easy victory in stage 10's individual time trial at the Giro d'Italia yesterday, and pre-race favourite Jonas Vingegaard failed in his bid to take the overall lead as Afonso Eulalio battled hard to hold on to the pink jersey.

Two-time world time trial champion Ganna was the hot favourite to triumph in the 42 km ride from Viareggio to Massa, and while the Italian lived up to the expectations, Vingegaard was forced to wait to take the leader's jersey.

Ganna had little to worry about while waiting for confirmation of his eighth Giro stage win - seven of those have come in time trials - with his Netcompany-Ineos teammate Thymen Arensman coming second, one minute 54 seconds behind.

"We have done an amazing job last winter to prepare for time trials," Ganna said.

"And it can be seen also with the GC riders of the team, look at Thymen Arensman in second place."

The Dutchman had five seconds to spare over Frenchman Remi Cavagna (Groupama-FDJ United) who finished third and Vingegaard (Visma-Lease a Bike) was three minutes down on Ganna in 13th place.

Surprise leader Portugal's Eulalio (Bahrain Victorious), who took the pink jersey after



stage five and began the day two minutes and 24 seconds ahead of Vingegaard, dug deep to limit the damage and still holds a 27-second overall lead.

In the only time trial of this year's race, Vingegaard was expected to seize control, and while he is now within touching distance of Eulalio, the Portuguese rider defied the odds.

"I'm not expecting a good time trial," Eulalio had said before the stage.

"This time trial is totally flat, maximum speed, it's the worst possible type of stage for a lightweight climber like me. It's going to be suffering."

Suffer he did, but with the finish in sight, Eulalio found an extra gear to power to the line.

Arensman was the big mover in the general classification, up from sixth spot to third overall, and is one and a half minutes behind Vingegaard, while Felix Gall slipped from 35 seconds off the Dane to almost two minutes adrift.

Gall had been Vingegaard's main rival on the recent summit finishes, where the favourite won two stages, and the Austrian will now need to push hard once more to recoup his losses.

Today's stage 11 is a 195 km ride from Porcari to Chiavari.

## MARQUEZ, ZARCO DISCHARGED FROM HOSPITAL AFTER CATALAN GP CRASHES

Alex Marquez and Johann Zarco have been discharged from hospital after both riders sustained injuries in separate crashes that caused Sunday's Catalan Grand Prix to be red-flagged twice.

Gresini Racing's Marquez slammed into the back of Pedro Acosta's bike and careered towards a wall before cartwheeling through the air as he lost control on the gravel.

Marquez was rushed to hospital where scans confirmed he had a marginal fracture on the vertebra near his neck as well as a fracture on his right collarbone.

"Alex Marquez successfully underwent surgery last night for a fracture of his right clavicle, which was stabilized with the insertion of a plate," Gresini Racing said in a statement on Monday, adding that he had been cleared to leave hospital

later in the day. After the race was restarted, LCR Honda's Zarco was involved in a crash with Ducati's Francesco Bagnaia and Honda's Luca Marini.

Zarco tumbled across the gravel with his leg caught on Bagnaia's bike and the team confirmed the Frenchman had suffered knee ligament injuries as well as a small fracture in the ankle.

"After the crash in Barcelona during Sunday's race, Johann Zarco left Hospital Universitari General de Catalunya on Monday afternoon and travelled to France," LCR Honda said in a statement.

"Later, he will visit the renowned knee specialist Dr. Bertrand Sonnerly-Cottet in Lyon for a further evaluation of his condition and to determine the next steps in his recovery."

(Reuters)

## PREMIER LEAGUE

# Arsenal win title after Man City held by Bournemouth

Guardiola's men had to win to take the title fight to the final day

AFP

Bournemouth

**A**rsenal ended their 22-year wait to be crowned Premier League champions last night after Manchester City were held 1-1 by Bournemouth.

City had to win to take the title fight to the final day, but the Cherries extended their unbeaten streak to 17 league games, a run which has secured European football for the first time in the club's history.

After finishing second for the past three seasons, Mikel Arteta's Gunners have finally made it over the line to end a six-year trophy drought. Arsenal edged to the brink of the title with an unconvincing 1-0 win over already relegated Burnley on Monday, which took them five points clear of City.

The Gunners, who have set the pace for most of the season, have bounced back impressively since losing to City last month, winning four straight league matches without conceding a goal.

On Monday, just 48 hours after completing a domestic cup double with victory over Chelsea in the FA Cup final, City were rocked by widespread reports that manager Pep Guardiola will depart after a decade in charge at the end of the season.

Victory at Wembley on Saturday secured a 20th trophy of Guardiola's glorious reign. But he cannot add to his six Premier League titles when Aston Villa visit the Etihad on Sunday for what is expected to be his final match in charge. Guardiola had warned that fatigue could cost City against a highly motivated Bournemouth, who still have Champions League qualification in their sights for next season. As it stands, Bournemouth will be in the Europa League after ensuring they will finish no lower than seventh.

Sixth could be good enough for a place in the Champions League if Aston Villa finish fifth and win Wednesday's Europa League final. City fans forlornly chanted "One more year, Guardiola" in the early stages at the Vitality Stadium in a bid to convince their decorated coach to see out the final season of his contract.

But if the travelling fans hoped City's players would be inspired to give Guardiola a glorious goodbye, they were left sorely disappointed. Antoine Semenyo had the ball in the net on his return to Bournemouth but was flagged offside in City's best moment of a flat first half.

The home side suddenly sprang to life to open the scoring in the 39th minute.

Eli Junior Kroupi curled a brilliant strike into the top corner to set a new record of 13 goals in a debut Premier League season for a teenager. Nico O'Reilly wasted City's best chance of a lifeline when he was denied by Djordje Petrovic just seconds into the second half.

Guardiola watched on pensively as his side's title challenge fizzled out with a whimper. After winning what was billed a title decider against Arsenal last month, City put the destiny of the title back in their rivals' hands by drawing 3-3 at Everton.

Guardiola looks set to depart having failed to win the league for two consecutive seasons for the first time in his coaching career. Rayan and David Brooks hit the post as Bournemouth should have secured victory in Andoni Iraola's final home game in charge.



After finishing second for the past three seasons, Mikel Arteta's Gunners have finally made it over the line to end a six-year trophy drought and first league title in 22 years.



Manchester City's Erling Haaland (centre), Bernardo Silva (left) and Ruben Dias look dejected after Arsenal are confirmed as Premier League champions. (Reuters)

Erling Haaland's equaliser deep into stoppage time came too little, too late to save City's title challenge. But it was a big goal for Liverpool, who now have a three-point cushion

over Bournemouth and a goal difference advantage of six heading into the final day battle to secure a top-five finish and Champions League football.

## Barshim clears 2.23m to win gold at Asian Jumps Championships



Qatar's high jump icon Mutaz Essa Barshim claimed his first gold at the international stage since returning from injury yesterday as he cleared 2.23m at the 1st Asian Jumps Championships in Chongqing, China. A few days ago, Barshim had shared gold with Oman's Fatih Abdulghafour Beit Jaaboub at the 4th GCC Games - Doha 2026 after both athletes cleared 2.16m, recreating the spirit of sportsmanship just like at the Tokyo Olympics when Barshim had famously shared Olympic gold with Italy's Gianmarco Tamberi.

## FOOTBALL

## Qatar drawn with UAE, Bahrain and Yemen for 27th Gulf Cup

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**Q**atar have been drawn in Group B alongside the UAE, Bahrain and Yemen for the 27th Arabian Gulf Cup football tournament following the draw ceremony held in Jeddah on Tuesday. Group A features hosts Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman and Kuwait in the tournament, which will be staged in Jeddah from September 23 to October 6.

The draw ceremony was attended by HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, Minister of Sports and Youth and President of the Arabian Gulf Cup Football Federation, along with representatives of the eight participating nations and several former Gulf football stars.

Gulf 27 will be the fifth edition organised under the umbrella of the Arabian Gulf Cup Football Federation. Saudi Arabia will host the tournament for the fifth time after previously staging the event in 1972, 1988, 2002 and 2014.

Ahead of the draw, hosts Saudi Arabia were placed at the top of Group A, while the UAE headed Group B based on the latest FIFA rankings released on April 1. The remaining teams were divided into pots according to the rankings, with Qatar and Iraq in Pot 1, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Pot 2, Bahrain and Oman in Pot 3, and Kuwait and Yemen in Pot 4.

Under the tournament format, teams in each group will compete in a single round-robin stage, with the top two sides from each group advancing to the semi-finals. The winners of Group A will face the

GULF CUP - SAUDI ARABIA 2026	
GROUP (B)	
1	UAE
2	QATAR
3	BAHRAIN
4	YEMEN

The tournament will be staged in Jeddah from September 23 to October 6.

runners-up of Group B, while the winners of Group B will take on the runners-up of Group A.

Bahrain are the defending champions after defeating Oman 2-1 in the final of the previous edition, which was held in Kuwait.

Kuwait remain the most successful nation in the history of the tournament with 10 titles, the latest coming in Yemen in 2010. Iraq are second with four titles, most recently winning Gulf on home soil in Basra in 2023.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have each won the title three times, while the UAE, Oman and Bahrain have lifted the trophy twice apiece. Yemen are yet to win the competition in 10 appearances.

First held in Bahrain in 1970, the Arabian Gulf Cup has enjoyed a special status among football fans across the region for more than five decades, combining sporting rivalry with the shared cultural and social bonds of the Gulf nations.

## Southampton expelled from EFL playoff final after spying breach

**London:** Southampton have been kicked out of the Championship play-offs after being found guilty of spying on semi-final opponents Middlesbrough, the English Football League said on Tuesday.

Middlesbrough, who lost 2-1 to Southampton in the two-legged semi-final, have been re-instated and will now face Hull City on Saturday in what is dubbed the world's richest football match. Promotion to the Premier League is estimated to be worth in the region of 200mn over three seasons. Southampton, who admitted the charges, were also found guilty of filming training sessions involving Oxford United in December and Ipswich Town in April during the regular season. They have also been deducted four points for the start of next season in England's second tier.

"An Independent Disciplinary Commission has today expelled Southampton from the Championship play-offs after the club admitted multiple breaches of EFL regulations related to the unauthorised filming of other clubs' training," the EFL said.

"Southampton admitted breaches of Regulations requiring Clubs to act with the utmost good faith and prohibiting the observation of another Club's training session within 72 hours

of a scheduled match. The effect of today's order is that Middlesbrough are reinstated into the 2026 play-offs and will proceed to the play-off final against Hull City. The final remains scheduled for Saturday 23 May, with the kickoff time to be confirmed."

The EFL confirmed that Southampton could appeal against the decision and that "parties are working to try and resolve any appeal on May 20. "Subject to the outcome, it could result in a further change to Saturday's fixture," the statement said.

Middlesbrough had called for Southampton's expulsion after having a training session filmed ahead of the first leg of their playoff semi-final with Southampton which ended 0-0.

The club said it welcomed the decision. "We believe this sends out a clear message for the future of our game regarding sporting integrity and conduct," Middlesbrough said in a statement. "As a club, we are now focused on our game against Hull City at Wembley on Saturday."

Southampton were relegated from the Premier League last season and were struggling in the early part of this campaign until a storming finish in which they went unbeaten in 19 league games to finish fourth and enter the playoffs.

## EUROPA LEAGUE

## Emery focused on Aston Villa glory

AFP

Istanbul

**A**ston Villa manager **Unai Emery** has insisted he is not the "king" of the Europa League despite bidding to win the competition for a fifth time when his side face Freiburg in today's final in Istanbul.

Emery has overseen a revival in the 1982 European champions' fortunes, guiding the Premier League club to the Conference League semi-finals in 2024 and the quarter-finals of last season's Champions League.

Villa are now just one game away from lifting their first major trophy since winning the 1996 League Cup. Spanish boss Emery is considered something of a Europa League specialist after winning the competition three times with Sevilla and once while in charge of Villarreal.

He also finished as a Europa League runner-up during his spell as Arsenal boss. "I am not a king in this competition," Emery said at his pre-match press conference.

"I need to win tomorrow with the players we have now, with Aston Villa now, with the opponent we face tomorrow. So it's a new way, a new moment and hopefully a new era. I don't want to speak a lot about the things we did before. Now, this year, and the matches we played before in the



Conference League or in the Champions League, and they are showing the capacity to play at a high level."

Emery has been a transformative figure at Villa since succeeding Steven Gerrard as manager in 2022. He has turned a relegation-threatened side into one that has now qualified for the Champions League in two of the last three seasons.

Emery urged his side to use Wednesday's final as an opportunity to underline how far the club has progressed in recent years. "This is a process. A process (for) how we could achieve, building the team and our structure," he said. "Now it's a new experience we will have tomorrow. It's very important how we manage our emotions and

we've done it for a lot of matches and there are a lot of emotions."

Freiburg have never won a trophy in their history or qualified for the Champions League, but a win in Istanbul would achieve both targets. Freiburg boss Julian Schuster conceded the German side are heavy underdogs in their first European final, and was quick to praise Emery's men.

"It's just incredible how they work together and look harmonious. They have a clear plan in any individual phase in the match and have many players, a good mix of experience and young talented boys," he said. "There are many things where you can copy and learn things. It will be a huge and great challenge tomorrow."

Schuster is a big fan of the meticulous Emery and sought out the Spaniard for a chat at the Besiktas Stadium in between their teams' training sessions. "If you can look at him, you can learn a lot from what he expects and the energy he has on the pitch every time," the 41-year-old said. "All these coaches with big experiences, for every young coach it is important to listen to them. Of course every moment I have the option to ask such coaches, I will."

Insisting Freiburg have a chance to upset the odds despite his admiration for Emery, Schuster added: "I have to speak believing in trust and have confidence. The focus is on our own strength, but accept the quality of the opponent."