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FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

13
DAYS TO GO

TRIVIA

Who is the oldest player to ever appear in a World Cup match?

Essam El-Hadary (Egypt) in 2018 against Saudi Arabia at 45 years, 161 days old.



FRIENDLY

Ireland to go with experience against 'strong' Qatar

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Hosts Ireland will be putting all their experienced players out against Asian champions Qatar in the international friendly at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin today.

The match serves as a key preparation for either side ahead of the upcoming FIFA World Cup 2026 in USA, Canada and Mexico.

Ireland's head coach Heimir Hallgrímsson, while speaking about his team selection on eve of the match, said, "Given the time we have, more or less, this is the only day we have a proper training with everybody ready and fit. So, we will go for an experience tomorrow.

"We'll start with the ones that have been with us before. It gives us another week to prepare the younger guys for the Canada match.

"Hopefully, we can give some of them some time on the pitch tomorrow, but given this is a strong Qatar team going for the World Cup - and I know them quite well - I know we need experience when we play them tomorrow. So, we go for that."

Meanwhile, Qatar, who arrived in Dublin in the early hours of Wednesday, will also be looking to test their probabilities against Ireland and to fine-tune selec-



Ireland players during a training session, ahead of their friendly against Qatar.

tion. Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui has a provisional 28-player squad, which would be reduced to 26 players before FIFA's June 2 deadline. Following the match in Dublin, Qatar will travel to Los Angeles in the United States for their final warm-up fixture against El Salvador on June 6.

Ireland defender Seamus Coleman, 37, is also in the spotlight and joked about being in the squad. "Yeah, it's funny because the manager put up some profiles of staff and players yesterday and the date of birth beside it, and I was like, 'Oh my God!' I couldn't believe it. But I love it.

"I love getting to know them, I love trying to help them in any way. These are the lads now that are trying to help keep me young because you're still competing and you're still trying to keep up the pace with them. But it's great to see so many young faces in the squad and I'm sure that'll help us



Qatar's Akram Afif during a training session in Dublin yesterday.

a lot in the future going down the line when they get some experience with the team."

On his Ireland future, the winger said, "I think if we'd gotten to a World Cup maybe things would be different, but I spoke to the manager and he said if I can be fit and well and performing, he would like

to have me around. So as soon as the carrot of Ireland got dangled in front of me, that became a massive factor in my decisions. I'm looking forward to the two games now in the summer and having a break and kind of seeing where I go to next, or where I stand after that," the former Everton captain said.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

PSG eye greatness with back-to-back titles in sight

'HE IS A TOP-CLASS COACH. HE IS EXCEPTIONAL AND WE HOPE HE WILL STAY FOR A VERY LONG TIME'

AFP
Paris

If Paris Saint-Germain's maiden triumph last year allowed the French club to break their Champions League hoodoo, winning the title again this season would allow them to be remembered as one of Europe's all-time great teams.

Twelve months after crushing Inter Milan 5-0 in Munich to take the trophy with the biggest win in the final in European Cup history, PSG head to Budapest to face Premier League champions Arsenal.

Stopping Luis Enrique's thrilling PSG side has proven impossible for everyone over the last 18 months, from Pep Guardiola's Manchester City to Bayern Munich in their recent semi-final clash.

Arsenal tried, and failed, in last season's semis, and the Parisians are the favourites to retain their title this time.

"We understand that we are the reigning champions and we can win again," Khvicha Kvaratskhelia said in an interview with UEFA.

"Of course this will be difficult, but we've proved once more that we can beat any team as long as we play our way and give our all on the pitch," added the Georgian winger, surely the best player in this season's Champions League with seven goals and three assists in the knockout rounds.

When Luis Enrique, a Champions League winner with Barcelona in 2015, arrived in 2023, PSG were transitioning away from the era of splashing vast sums on superstar players.

Lionel Messi and Neymar left that same summer, ending underwhelming spells in the French



Paris St Germain coach Luis Enrique.

capital. Kylian Mbappe departed a year later. PSG had been completely transformed since the Qatari takeover of the club in 2011 but - one run to the final in 2020 and a semi-final in 2021 apart - they had become associated with frequent disappointment in the Champions League, and occasional humiliation.

Luis Enrique has overseen a radical change, completely alter-

ing perceptions of the club out with France. PSG were almost once seen as a little bit of a joke in Europe due to their enormous spending and lack of continental success.

Now they are taken very seriously and have won admirers for the breathtaking football played by an exciting young team, built with the transfer market nous of their "football advisor" Luis Cam-

pos and coached by Luis Enrique. "He is a top-class coach with clear ideas. He is full of energy. He is exceptional and we hope he will stay for a very long time," said Ousmane Dembele.

The France forward has been transformed from dazzling but often wasteful winger into a prolific striker.

He scored 35 times last season and won the Ballon d'Or. This sea-

son his minutes have been carefully managed amid numerous fitness scares, but he has still scored 19 goals and set up 11 more in just 24 starts.

Dembele, at 29, is the fourth-oldest player in the squad, behind only Fabian Ruiz, Lucas Hernandez (both 30) and 32-year-old captain Marquinhos.

The youthful energy all over the team allows them to play with a

terrifying intensity that has blown away most opponents. Things might not be so easy against Arsenal but PSG have already reached three consecutive semi-finals under Luis Enrique. Before his arrival they had got to the semis three times in their history.

Getting to consecutive Champions League finals is incredibly hard, but retaining the title is almost impossible.

Zinedine Zidane's Real Madrid side that won three on the bounce from 2016-18 is the only side to have gone back-to-back in the modern Champions League era -- before them you have to go back to Arrigo Sacchi's AC Milan in 1989 and 1990.

Within a French context, the country had only ever produced one Champions League winner before last season, with Marseille in 1993.

This is not a fairytale story for a club backed by the wealth of Qatar and with the fourth-highest revenue in world football last year according to the Deloitte Football Money League, behind only Real, Barcelona and Bayern.

But it shows they did the right thing in abandoning the old superstar project, even if plenty of their current squad - Dembele, Kvaratskhelia, Vitinha, Achraf Hakimi - should really be considered as superstars.

The true superstar now is the coach, and Luis Enrique can become just the fifth manager to win three European Cups after Carlo Ancelotti, Bob Paisley, Zidane and Guardiola.

"When I came to the club I said my objective was to make history," he told *UEFA.com*.

"We want to keep writing history because we feel there are still things to be achieved."

CYCLING

Valgren wins Giro 17th stage, Vingegaard stays in pink

AFP
Andalo, Italy

With race leader Jonas Vingegaard having a relatively easy day in the bunch, fellow Dane Michael Valgren chose his moment perfectly to win stage 17 of the Giro d'Italia on Wednesday. The 34-year-old EF Education-EasyPost rider hung on grimly alongside Movistar's Einer Rubio in the latter stages of a hilly 202km trek from Cassano d'Adda dominated by a large breakaway. After the two leaders were joined by a small group of chasers inside the final two kilometres, Valgren showed his superior sprinting skill to go alone and cross the line three seconds ahead of Norway's Andreas Leknessund. Italian Damiano Caruso was third. "When I have good legs I'm pretty good at it," Valgren said after winning his first Grand Tour stage. His compatriot Vingegaard finished safely in the main peloton to preserve his big lead in the general classification. He will take a lead of 4:03 into

Thursday's 171-km stage from Fai della Paganella to Pieve di Soligo. It was an emotional victory for Valgren who four years ago suffered career-threatening injuries when he crashed over a guard rail into a ravine at La Route d'Occitanie. He was part of a large breakaway group of 28 riders that formed early in the stage and was never far from the front. As the group began to splinter, he and Colombia's Rubio pulled clear with Valgren close to breaking point at times. But when a group of six formed at the front near the end of the final 5km climb to the finish, Valgren took matters into his own hands and no one could stay with him. "This was missing from my resume," he said. "I think I deserved this. I think I've always said, my career has been pretty good, but I needed this Grand Tour stage win." While the GC battle took a day off, the Maglia Ciclamino (points jersey) changed hands with Ecuador's Jhonatan Narvaez (UAE Team Emirates XRG) grabbing it from France's Paul Magnier.



Danish rider Michael Valgren celebrates before crossing the finish line to win the 17th stage of the Giro d'Italia between Cassano d'Adda and Andalo yesterday. (AFP)



Jonas Vingegaard wearing the overall leader's pink jersey waves on the podium after the 17th stage of the Giro d'Italia yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

Sooryavanshi blasts rapid 97 to keep RR in IPL title hunt

Archer's three wickets seal Rajasthan Royals' progress into Qualifier 2

AFP
India

Teenage sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi lashed a staggering 12 sixes to lead Rajasthan Royals (RR) to an IPL play-off showdown against Gujarat Titans after a 47-run drubbing of Sunrisers Hyderabad (SRH) yesterday. The 15-year-old, who grabbed the Orange Cap for the most runs this season (680), destroyed Hyderabad's famed bowling with an incredible 29-ball 97, around which Rajasthan constructed an imposing 243-8 in Chandigarh. Jofra Archer then produced a furious opening burst which fetched him three wickets in three overs as Hyderabad were bowled out for 196 in the eliminator. The exciting Sooryavanshi unleashed another stunning exhibition of stroke-making as he breezed past Chris Gayle's 12-year-old record for the most sixes (59) in a single edition of the IPL.



Rajasthan Royals' Vaibhav Sooryavanshi plays a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Sunrisers Hyderabad in New Chandigarh, India, yesterday. (AFP)

With 65 sixes so far, the left-handed opener has put Gujarat's bowling on notice ahead of Friday's faceoff. The winner of the second qualifier will take on holders Royal Challengers Bengaluru in Sunday's final in Ahmedabad. "I think a little, not too much," Sooryavanshi said. "Try and keep things simple. I try to play with good intent and dominate the bowlers. I want to pressurise the bowler. My focus (today) was on contributing for the team, my focus now is how to win the trophy." Sooryavanshi warmed up with a straight six off Pat Cummins in the first over, then set about the Australian captain in his next with three sixes and a four. Three more sixes in the following over, off Sakib Hussain, took him to his half-century in just 16 deliveries and he seemed on course for the fastest IPL hundred - Gayle holds that record, off 30 deliveries - when he pummelled Praful Hinge for three sixes and two fours. Hinge, however, had the last laugh, having Sooryavanshi

caught at third man to the utter disappointment of a full house. With Yashasvi Jaiswal as a silent, admiring partner, Sooryavanshi had totally dominated an opening salvo of 125, off just 49 deliveries. Dhruv Jurel kept up the charge with a 20-ball fifty, but Hyderabad fought back in the final five overs which yielded just 36 to give their explosive batting line-up a whiff of a chance. Archer put paid to those aspirations as he blasted out the prolific Abhishek Sharma off the second ball with a rapid bouncer, and even though Ishan Kishan threatened briefly, the Englishman had his number too before cleaning up Travis Head to leave the chase in tatters. When Yash Raj Punja, the leg-

spinner, trapped Heinrich Klaasen leg before off an ill-advised reverse sweep, the writing was on the wall. Nitish Kumar Reddy and Salil Arora delayed the inevitable, but Sooryavanshi and Rajasthan were not to be denied. "I like to be a perfectionist, but even today we should have got 260 right? But with the ball we were impressive, held our own," Rajasthan captain Riyan Parag said. "It was a good performance under pressure. (On talks with VS) We don't have any conversations. Just leave him alone. We give him a lot of batting practice and he does his thing," he said. SRH captain Pat Cummins lauded Sooryavanshi efforts. "He played pretty well. A very

good pitch but the margins are so small, you miss our yorker but he doesn't miss. Pretty good wicket. We are a very well rounded team. Praful and Sakib were great. "We are one of the youngest team to get into the playoffs, and the coaching team have unearthed a few gems. A few teams things have to go right to chase 245 but we lost a couple of wickets at the wrong time. One tiny bit away from being in the top two, but can't doubt the boys' efforts." Cummins said. **BRIEF SCORES: Rajasthan Royals 243 for 8** (Sooryavanshi 97, Jurel 50, Hinge 3-54) **beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 196** (Reddy 38, Arora 35, Kishan 33, Archer 3-58, Burger 2-26) **by 47 runs.**

FOCUS

Ravindra, Blundell turn tide for New Zealand against Ireland

AFP
London

Hundreds from Rachin Ravindra and Tom Blundell helped New Zealand recover from a collapse against Ireland to reach 361-5 on the opening day of a one-off Test. New Zealand, sent in to bat in Belfast yesterday, were in trouble at 86-4, with Ireland pacer Mark Adair taking three wickets and Test debutant Liam McCarthy dismissing key batsman Kane Williamson. But a mammoth fifth-wicket stand of 217 between Ravindra (121) and Blundell (142 not out) revived New Zealand's innings in a match that also serves as a warm-up fixture for their opening Test against England at Lord's next week. Adair struck with just his second delivery, removing Tom Latham when the captain played no shot to an inswinger. Devon Conway was then caught by a diving McCarthy at midwicket, with Adair also having Daryl Mitchell caught behind. McCarthy had a maiden Test wicket to remember when Williamson, struggling for timing during a 70-ball 36, was lbw. But an Ireland side featuring three debutant fast bowlers could not press home their advantage and there was a self-inflicted wound when cap-

tain Andrew Balbirnie dropped Ravindra in the slips. Left-hander Ravindra completed his fifth Test century in 175 balls faced. Blundell was slightly quicker, his hundred coming in 173 balls, including 15 fours and a six. Ravindra holed out to off-spinner Harry Tector but Blundell, in the first Test between the two countries, was unbeaten at stumps. "Batting with Tom, one of my best mates, it was cool to get it done out there," said Ravindra. "To have us four down for 80-odd made our lives quite difficult so me and Tommy's focus was on building a partnership." McCarthy, meanwhile, was proud of the start to his Test career. "There's not many better wickets to get than Kane Williamson for your first one," he said. New Zealand suffered a setback before play began at Stormont after fast bowler Matt Henry was ruled out with a minor strain in his left hamstring. He has now headed to London alongside fellow pacemen Kyle Jamieson and Will O'Rourke. The trio will look to prove their fitness ahead of the first of a three-Test series against England at Lord's starting a week on Thursday. **BRIEF SCORE: New Zealand 361-5** (T. Blundell 142 no. R. Ravindra 121; M Adair 3-66) **v Ireland.**

England expect Bethell to be fit for New Zealand opener



England said yesterday they expect Jacob Bethell to be fit for next week's first Test against New Zealand at Lord's after the top-order batsman suffered a finger injury playing in the Indian Premier League. The left ring finger injury prompted the 22-year-old to cut short his IPL campaign with the Royal Challengers Bengaluru and return to the UK after scoring 96 runs in seven matches. Bethell's fitness setback came less than a fortnight before the start of the New Zealand series, which begins on June 4. The left-hander was set to bat at number three after he struck a brilliant 154 against Australia at Sydney in January - a rare England highlight during their 4-1 Ashes series loss. But an England and Wales Cricket Board statement issued yesterday suggested Bethell, also a left-arm spinner, would be fit for the first of a three-Test campaign. "He will continue to be monitored in the lead-up to the first Test against New Zealand," said the ECB. "He is expected to be fit to play in the match."

FURY INDICATES HIS NEXT FIGHT WILL BE IN DUBLIN IN AUGUST

Tyson Fury has indicated his next fight will be in Dublin on August 1, before a heavyweight clash with fellow-Briton Anthony Joshua in November. The opponent for the 'warm-up' is as yet unnamed but promoter Frank Warren said he hoped to make an announcement later this week. Former world champion Joshua is due to fight

Albanian Kristian Prenga in Riyadh on July 25 in the Briton's first fight since he was in a car accident last December that killed two close friends. Fury, also a former champion, posted a video on Instagram on Tuesday showing him back in training in Thailand. The caption was "let's go August 1, Dublin, Ireland."

Warren said Fury would be facing a good opponent and could not afford to slip up. "Joshua's got to come through that (fight with Prenga). Tyson has to come through his, and then the big one will be in November," he told Sky Sports television. Fury's last fight was a comprehensive points win over Russia's Arslanbek Makhmudov on April 11.

FRENCH OPEN

Djokovic battles past Royer, Rybakina crashes out

'I HOPE I WON'T PLAY ANY MORE FRENCH PLAYERS FOR THE REST OF THE TOURNAMENT'

AFP
Paris

Novak Djokovic extended his latest bid for a record-breaking 25th Grand Slam title with a four-set victory over Valentin Royer in the French Open second round on Wednesday, but women's second seed Elena Rybakina crashed out of the tournament.

Elsewhere, four-time champion Iga Swiatek and Elina Svitolina both eased into the last 32 with straight-sets wins.

Djokovic had to come from a set down in his opening match against Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard and was pushed hard again by another Frenchman in Royer, before finally sealing a 6-3, 6-2, 6-7 (7/9), 6-3 win after three and three-quarter hours on Court Philippe Chatrier. "I hope I won't play any more French players for the rest of the tournament," said the third seed, who has been tied on 24 Grand Slam titles with Margaret Court since winning the 2023 US Open, with a wry smile.

Djokovic, who beat world number one Jannik Sinner in the Australian Open last four earlier this year, cannot meet the red-hot title favourite until the final at Roland Garros. Djokovic powered through the first two sets, although world number 74 Royer, born just 5km from Roland Garros, showed much more resistance in the third before extending the match in a brilliant tie-break.

The Serb, who twice failed to consolidate breaks of serve in the third set, made no such mistake in the fourth as he belatedly booked his place in the next round on his fifth match point.

Czech Jakub Mensik, the only player other than Djokovic to beat Sinner this year, needed eight match points before eventually downing Mariano Navone 6-3, 2-6, 6-4, 1-6, 7-6 (13/11). Rising Spanish star Rafael Jodar reached the third round of a Grand Slam for the first time, seeing off James Duckworth 6-1, 6-7 (5/7), 6-4, 7-5.

Australian Open champion Rybakina blew a one-set lead to exit in dramatic fashion, slumping to a 3-6, 6-1, 7-6 (10/4) loss to Ukraine's Yuliia Starodubtseva. It is Rybakina's earliest departure from any tour-level tournament since the 2025 Miami Open and first defeat in the opening two rounds of a major since the 2024 Australian Open.

"I couldn't find the balance. I couldn't find the right shot, and it was clearly just too many mistakes," said the Kazakh world



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates his victory over France's Valentin Royer in Paris. (AFP)

number two.

Starodubtseva will face China's Wang Xiyu for a place in the last 16. She has already matched her previous best run at a Grand Slam event, when she lost to Jasmine Paolini in the French Open third round as a lucky loser 12 months ago.

"Honestly, hard to describe, I'm super happy," said world number 55 Starodubtseva after beating a top-10 opponent for the first time in her career. "I'm super proud of myself that I was able to do this today. It was a tricky third set but I got it done in the end."

SWIATEK, SVITOLINA THROUGH

Swiatek, looking to regain the title she last won in 2024, saw off battling Czech youngster Sara Bejlek 6-2, 6-3 on Court Philippe Chatrier.

The third-seeded Pole will next face compatriot Magda Linette, who beat former winner Jelena Ostapenko in three sets, as she bids to preserve her record of having always reached the second week at Roland Garros. "Usually the weather is



Ukraine's Yuliia Starodubtseva celebrates after her stunning win over Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina at the French Open in Paris. (Reuters)

quite different here, but it doesn't matter," said Swiatek after spending 93 minutes on court on another boiling hot day in Paris.

Swiatek is playing at a first Grand Slam tournament since linking up with Rafael Nadal's former coach Francisco Roig.

Svitolina, who beat Swiatek en route to the Rome title, beat world number 126 Kaitlin Quevedo 6-0, 6-4. The Ukrainian seventh seed ended an eight-year wait for her fifth WTA 1000 trophy at the Italian Open to underline her credentials as a

Second round Results

(x denotes seeding):

Men: Alex de Minaur (AUS x8) bt Alexander Blockx (BEL) - walkover; Jakub Mensik (CZE x26) bt Mariano Navone (ARG) 6-3, 2-6, 6-4, 1-6, 7-6 (13/11); Nuno Borges (POR) bt Miomir Kecmanovic (SRB) 3-6, 6-2, 6-1, 6-2; Andrey Rublev (RUS x11) bt Camilo Ugo Carabelli (ARG) 6-1, 1-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/5); Novak Djokovic (SRB x3) bt Valentin Royer (FRA) 6-3, 6-2, 6-7 (7/9), 6-3; Rafael Jodar (ESP x27) bt James Duckworth (AUS) 6-1, 6-7 (5/7), 6-4, 7-5; Thiago Agustin Tirante (ARG) bt Alejandro Davidovich Fokina (ESP x21) 4-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-1, 6-3; Pablo Carreno Busta (ESP) bt Thanasi Kokkinakis (AUS) 7-5, 4-6, 1-0 - retired; Karen Khachanov (RUS x13) bt Marco Trungelliti (ARG) 7-6 (7/5), 5-7, 6-1, 7-6 (7/4); Jesper de Jong (NED) bt Federico Cina (ITA) 6-3, 6-1, 6-3; Quentin Halys (FRA) bt Ugo Humbert (FRA x32) 6-4, 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (10/8)

Women: Elina Svitolina (UKR x7) bt Kaitlin Quevedo (ESP) 6-0, 6-4; Tamara Korpatsch (GER) bt Wang Xinyu (CHN x32) 6-2, 2-6, 6-3; Peyton Stearns (USA) bt Daria Snigur (UKR) 6-4, 6-0; Belinda Bencic (SUI x11) bt Caty McNally (USA) 6-4, 6-0; Marta Kostyuk (UKR x15) bt Katie Volynets (USA) 6-7 (4/7), 6-3, 6-3; Viktorija Golubic (SUI) bt Alycia Parks (USA) 6-2, 6-2; Magda Linette (POL) bt Jelena Ostapenko (LAT x29) 6-2, 2-6, 6-2; Iga Swiatek (POL x3) bt Sara Bejlek (CZE) 6-2, 6-3; Marie Bouzkova (CZE x27) bt Francesca Jones (GBR) 6-0, 7-6 (7/3); Wang Xiyu (CHN) bt Hailey Baptiste (USA x26) 5-4 - retired; Yuliia Starodubtseva (UKR) bt Elena Rybakina (KAZ x2) 3-6, 6-1, 7-6 (10/4)

She struggled through her first-round tie, edging out Hungary's Anna Bondar in a deciding-set tie-break on Monday, before watching her husband Gael Monfils' final French Open match in the night session. But Svitolina raced out of the blocks this time, quickly taking control against Quevedo. The Spaniard competed better in the second set until a break in the ninth game helped Svitolina wrap up victory. Svitolina, who reached her fourth career Slam semi-final earlier this year at the Australian Open, will next play Germany's Tamara Korpatsch.

SPOTLIGHT

Fokina left stunned as coach quits by text message

Reuters
Paris

Alejandro Davidovich Fokina found himself without a coach at the French Open after his mentor Mariano Puerta abruptly quit via text message and flew to Miami without warning, leaving the Spanish 21st seed to fend for himself at Roland Garros.

The bizarre coaching breakup occurred after Davidovich Fokina's gruelling five-set victory over Bosnian Damir Dzumhur in the first round, following what was reportedly a heated discussion between player and coach.

"After the match against Dzumhur, we had lunch and after that I went to cool down a little bit. He said he was feeling bad, he was going to the hotel," Davidovich Fokina explained to reporters.

"In the afternoon, like two-three hours later, he texted me a message (saying) that he will not continue... He didn't say anything to anybody to the team, he just took the flight and flew to Miami without saying a word to us. I heard he did this a couple of times before with other players, so it seems normal for him. I will

not go behind him if he decides to leave and not continue till the end of the tournament. Not my problem, he's an adult (who) made his own choices."

The former Argentine player previously coached Christian Garin and Brandon Nakashima. Without his coach's guidance, which Davidovich Fokina said "probably affected me subconsciously", he went on to lose his second-round match to unseeded Argentine Thiago Agustin Tirante in four sets yesterday.

The Spanish player revealed that Puerta had even blocked his and his wife's phone numbers, despite insisting there was no tension between them and that there was no fight that had led to the coach's mysterious exit.

"The thing is we didn't fight, everything was normal. In the match, everything was normal. We were very communicative during the match against Dzumhur," he added. "I don't know what to say because it was strange. But nothing can surprise me anymore. I have (seen) a lot of things through my career, so this is another thing. I thought that he was a very good person and after that I discovered he did this a couple times before with other players."



Spain's Alejandro Davidovich Fokina lost his second-round match to unseeded Argentine Thiago Agustin Tirante in four sets yesterday. (AFP)

FOOTBALL

Nuno to stay on at West Ham after relegation



AFP
London

Nuno Espirito Santo will remain as head coach of West Ham following the club's relegation from the Premier League, the London side announced. Talks between the Portuguese boss and the club were held on Monday, a day after West Ham beat Leeds 3-0 on the final day of the Premier League season only to be relegated after capital rivals Tottenham Hotspur defeated Everton.

There had been speculation that Nuno might leave the London Stadium despite overseeing an upturn in form between January and April, with the Hammers taking 22 points from 13 matches.

But three defeats in the final four league games proved costly as Spurs stayed up at their

expense. "We held meetings with head coach Nuno Espirito Santo early this week and are pleased to confirm that he has expressed his continued commitment to the club -- as we have to him," said a West Ham statement.

"Nuno made it very clear that he is highly motivated for the challenge of guiding West Ham United back to the top flight at the first time of asking. That must be the unquestionable goal for next season.

Nuno has spent one previous year in the EFL Championship (the second tier of English football) and it was an outstanding success as he secured 99 points to win the title with Wolverhampton Wanderers in 2018.

"While the ultimate outcome on Sunday was a painful one, the board of directors believe that there have been broader signs of improvement and progress in recent months, and we want Nuno to continue developing that progress."

Young talents shine at Horwitz Bishop Rapid Chess Tournament



The Horwitz Bishop Rapid chess tournament was held at Palestinian School in Abu Hamour, with young talents showcasing their skills across multiple age categories. In the Under-8 category, Rithik Lineesh emerged champion ahead of Ayan Biddappa and Hanvika Srithagna, who finished second and third respectively. Shlok Nirav Bavisi and Adinad Anand completed the top five standings. Mohamed Azam clinched the Under-10 title followed by Neavin Raghunathan in second place and Aadhavan Rajasekar in third. Dhruv Jibin and Dakshit Karthikeyan secured fourth and fifth positions respectively. In the Under-12 section, Chidambaram Chockalingam took top honours ahead of Rehaan Kannan and Edwin Idiculla Sanju. Rohan Sai Suresh finished fourth, while Swarit Tejas Mehta claimed fifth place. The tournament was conducted by Horwitz Bishop Chess Academy in a seven-round Swiss-System format under the supervision of Chief Arbitrer Jaise Joseph and Deputy Chief Arbitrer Rayan Joseph Jaise. The arbiting panel also included Ismath, Sreekanth, Jibin, Tijo, Sanju, Sanika and Vikas.

SPOTLIGHT

Depay has to prove fitness before World Cup, says Koeman

The 32-year-old was named by Koeman in the 26-man Dutch squad

Reuters
Amsterdam

Selecting Memphis Depay for the Netherlands' World Cup squad was always on the cards, but the country's top scorer must now prove himself over the next few weeks before the tournament kicks off, coach Ronald Koeman said.

The 32-year-old Depay, whose 55 goals in 108 appearances make him the most successful striker for the Dutch national team, was named by Koeman in the 26-man squad for the finals despite only two substitute appearances for his Brazilian club Corinthians over the past two months.

Half of those minutes came for struggling Corinthians over the weekend, but Koeman said Depay had told him he would be starting Copa Libertadores tie at home to Platense of Argentina. "I would have preferred him to have played minutes earlier. But in April, I didn't know when he would be able to play minutes again. He can be an asset, just like Jurrien Timber," the Dutch coach told a press conference after his squad was released.

"I selected Memphis because of who he still is. I don't see anyone else in that position who can do it. I believe he can be an asset, but he does have to get through the coming period well," the coach added.

"We have two friendly matches. If he were where I think he needs to be, then he can start. If he is not, then he won't start. I know he can fill the role of backup as well."

Arsenal defender Timber is another who will need game time after a groin injury kept him out since March. "We have Ian Maatzen and Lutsharel Geertruida on the standby list for Timber. The situation with him is that he was supposed to train with Arsenal



Coach Ronald Koeman announces Dutch team for the FIFA World Cup 2026 during a press conference in Zeist yesterday. (AFP)

today, to assess for the weekend. They have the Champions League final on Saturday. It remains to be seen whether he will be fit for that match," Koeman said.

Justin Kluivert has also been given a vote of confidence despite knee surgery in January and only two substitute appearances for Bournemouth since completing his rehabilitation.

Kluivert was among the first players to report for training at the Dutch camp in Zeist on Monday, along with Noa Lang who has recovered from a bizarre finger injury suffered playing in the Champions League for Galatasaray against Liverpool in March and was also picked.

West Ham United's Krychowiak, Sunderland goalkeeper Robin Roefs are both

uncapped while there was a surprise return for midfielder Marten de Roon, who won the last of his 42 caps two years ago.

But there was no place for veteran centre back Stefan de Vrij, after a thigh injury suffered in Inter Milan's last game of the Serie A season at Bologna on Saturday, or Liverpool full back Jeremie Frimpong. The Dutch warm up for the World Cup, hosted by Canada, Mexico, and the United States, against Algeria and Uzbekistan before their opening Group F match against Japan in Dallas on June 14.

Squad

Goalkeepers: Mark Flekken (Bayer Leverkusen), Robin Roefs (Sunderland), Bart Verbruggen (Brighton & Hove Albion)
Defenders: Nathan Ake (Manches-

ter City), Denzel Dumfries (Inter Milan), Jorrel Hato (Chelsea), Jurrien Timber (Arsenal), Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur), Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool), Jan Paul van Hecke (Brighton & Hove Albion)
Midfielders: Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona), Marten de Roon (Atalanta), Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool), Justin Kluivert (Bournemouth), Teun Koopmeiners (Juventus), Tijjani Reijnders (Manchester City), Guus Til (PSV Eindhoven), Quinten Timber (Olympique de Marseille), Mats Wieffer (Brighton & Hove Albion)

Forwards: Brian Brobbey (Sunderland), Memphis Depay (Corinthians), Cody Gakpo (Liverpool), Noa Lang (Galatasaray), Donyell Malen (AS Roma), Krychowiak (West Ham United), Wout Weghorst (Ajax Amsterdam).

FOCUS

Argentina's Scaloni encouraged by news on Messi injury

AFP
Buenos Aires

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni said the initial news regarding superstar Lionel Messi's fitness "is not that bad" and hopes further examinations will confirm that diagnosis with the World Cup just a fortnight away.

Messi has been diagnosed with muscle fatigue in his left hamstring by his Major League Soccer club Inter Miami after he made an abrupt exit from Miami's 6-4 victory over Philadelphia in the 73rd minute on Sunday.

Even at 38 and eyeing a sixth World Cup finals appearance, Messi remains the side's talisman for the defence of the title they won in Qatar four years ago.

"Obviously we would have preferred that nothing had happened," Scaloni said on Tuesday.

"Now one has to wait and see how it evolves and above all the new tests they are going to conduct in order to see if it confirms their original diagnosis."

Scaloni, who is due to name his squad next week, added he had watched the match on TV at the federation's headquarters and been relieved that Messi had asked to come off. Inter manager Guillermo Hoyos explained after the match Messi was tired, the pitch was heavy and no-one

wanted to take a risk with his fitness.

Inter Miami issued a statement on Monday saying: "The timeline for his return to physical activity will depend on his clinical and functional progress."

That gave little indication about the status of the eight-time Ballon D'Or winner. Argentina are set to begin their World Cup campaign on June 16 against Algeria in Kansas City.

They then play Austria on June 22 and round off their Group J campaign against Jordan on June 28.

Messi has managed his workload since joining Inter Miami in 2023, with team staff regularly excusing him from matches in congested fixture periods. MLS has started a break in its season for the World Cup, which is co-hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Messi has not formally confirmed he plans to play in the World Cup, but is widely expected to return for what would be a record-matching sixth appearance at the finals.

His great Portuguese rival Cristiano Ronaldo and potential Mexican goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa would also be making a sixth appearance. Argentina are set to play two pre-World Cup friendlies against Honduras on June 6 and Iceland on June 9, both in the United States.



Lionel Messi has been diagnosed with muscle fatigue in his left hamstring by his Major League Soccer club Inter Miami after he made an abrupt exit from Miami's 6-4 victory over Philadelphia. (AFP)

ROUND-UP

Sarri terminates Lazio contract ahead of move to Atalanta

Maurizio Sarri left Lazio after coming to an agreement to terminate his contract ahead of his expected switch to Atalanta. "S.S. Lazio announces that a mutual agreement has been reached to terminate the contracts of Head Coach Maurizio Sarri and his coaching staff," said Lazio in a statement.

Sarri, 67, leaves Lazio for the second time in just over two years after a disastrous season in which the Rome-based club finished ninth and lost in the Italian Cup final. The campaign has been marked by a mass boycott of matches by supporters who want long-time owner Claudio Lotito to sell the club.

They have been crowned Italian champions twice, but the last time they won the Serie A title dates back to 2000. Gennaro Gattuso is reported to be the favourite to replace Sarri at Lazio, his first job since stepping down as Italy coach following the Azzurri's failure to qualify for the World Cup.

Sarri is widely reported to be heading to Atalanta who are yet to dismiss their current coach Raffaele Palladino.

AMORIM AXE COSTS MAN UNITED £16.7MN

Manchester United's decision to sack head coach Ruben Amorim and his staff with 18 months left on the Portuguese's contract cost the Premier League giants £16.7mn (\$22.5mn), according to a club financial statement published.

Amorim was dismissed in January but his replacement Michael Carrick oversaw an upturn in form which led to United finishing third in the Premier League and securing Champions League qualification for next season.

The departure of Amorim is the latest expensive managerial exit from Old Trafford, with figures



published in February 2025 showing it had cost United £14.5mn to sack Erik ten Hag and his staff.

But the appointment of Carrick, confirmed last week as United's new permanent manager on a two-year contract, appears to have benefited the Red Devils after Amorim led United to a 15th-place finish in 2025, their worst since they were relegated from the top-flight of English football back in 1974.

SCHMEICHEL HANGS UP GLOVES DUE TO INJURY

Former Leicester City goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel announced his retirement due to a serious shoulder injury. The 39-year-old Dane, the son of goalkeeping great Peter Schmeichel, injured his shoulder during a Europa League match for Celtic against Stuttgart in February.

The following month he underwent surgery to try to save his career, but to no avail. Schmeichel has enjoyed a remarkable career, representing his country 120 times - putting him fourth on the all-time appearance list for Danish internationals, nine caps and two places below his father.

After coming through the youth ranks at Manchester City, Schmeichel spent the bulk of his career at Leicester, where he was part of the team that stunned the football world by winning the

Premier League in 2016.

He also won the FA Cup with Leicester five years later and after a short spell at French club Nice, he wound down his career in Scotland, winning the league in back-to-back seasons at Celtic.

His father was widely regarded as one of the greatest goalkeepers of all-time and helped Denmark win the Euros in 1992. He also captained Manchester United to Champions League glory in 1999 and won the Premier League five times with the Red Devils.

LAMPARD LANDS MANAGER OF THE YEAR AWARD

Frank Lampard has been named England's Manager of the Year by his peers after leading Coventry City back to the Premier League after a gap of a quarter of a century. Coventry finished top of the second tier Championship by 11 points to return to the top flight, all while playing an attractive brand of attacking football.

Former England midfielder Lampard edged out seven other coaches, including Arsenal's Mikel Arteta, to take the Sir Alex Ferguson Trophy at the League Managers Association (LMA) awards on Tuesday.

Spaniard Arteta was named Premier League manager of the Year at the awards after guiding Arsenal to their first league title in 22 years.

CONFIDENT

Arteta says English title can inspire Arsenal to Champions League glory

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta is "fully convinced" Arsenal can be crowned champions of Europe for the first time this weekend after ending their 22-year wait for a Premier League title.

The Gunners face reigning European kings Paris Saint-Germain in Saturday's Champions League final in Budapest after wrapping up their first Premier League title since 2004. A star-studded Paris Saint-Germain, who thrashed Inter Milan 5-0 in last season's final, are widely regarded as favourites to lift the European Cup once again. But Arsenal manager Arteta believes the confidence gained by winning the Premier League will inspire the Gunners to upset the odds.

"You could sense the energy, you can sense the positivity and the confidence in the players and everybody around the club," he said. "We have an amazing opportunity to write new history in our football club, and we are convinced that we're going to do it."



We will fly to Budapest on Thursday fully convinced that in a few days' time we can be champions of Europe."

The 44-year-old Spaniard was speaking at the League Managers Association's annual awards dinner in central London on Tuesday, where he was named Premier League manager of the year. "First of all, thank you so much for giving me this award," said former Everton and Arsenal midfielder Arteta.

"It's an immense honour. You're related to some of the great managers and all the colleagues that are in this room. It's

been a fascinating journey for a few years. We've been knocking on the door, we've been trying, we fell short a few times, and to actually win it made it so special."

Arteta thanked several people upon receiving the award, including Everton boss David Moyes for introducing him to English football when he signed him in 2005.

He also praised his "instrumental" coaching team, saying: "They've been an inspiration, they've been extremely supportive with me. They made me enjoy this profession in a way that probably I could not imagine."

'Frustrated' Spurs owners promise improvement

London: The majority owners of Tottenham Hotspur have vowed to restore the club's fortunes after narrowly avoiding relegation from the Premier League in successive seasons.

Sunday's 1-0 win at home to Everton on the final day of the campaign enabled Spurs to finish in 17th position - one place above the relegation zone - for the second straight season as they beat the drop by two points.

But a 2025/26 season of struggle where they appointed three

managers was met with fury by fans of the north London club. Supporters have often directed their anger at majority owners ENIC, which are run by the Lewis family, along with chief executive Vinai Venkatesham.

In September, long-serving chairman Daniel Levy was invited to step down, having been the key decision-maker at Spurs for almost 25 years.

In a letter to Tottenham supporters released on Wednesday, the Lewis family acknowledged

that they were "bitterly disappointed" but promised that a rebuild had started under current boss Roberto De Zerbi.

Venkatesham joined Spurs from arch-rivals Arsenal, who rubbed salt in Tottenham's wounds by winning this season's Premier League.

Tottenham, by contrast, were last crowned champions of England back in the 1960/61 season - when the club also won the FA Cup to complete a celebrated 'Double' success.