

To subscribe  
**GULF TIMES**  
Newspaper  
Please call  
**444 666 35**



CRICKET | Page 2

Sooryavanshi's 96 in vain as Gill ton takes Gujarat to IPL final



TENNIS | Page 3

Fonseca blasts Djokovic out of French Open after epic comeback

To advertise here,  
PLEASE CALL  
**444 666 21**

Saturday, May 30, 2026  
Dhul-Hijjah 13, 1447 AH

**GULF TIMES**

**SPORT**

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

**11 DAYS TO GO**

TRIVIA

Of the countries that have won a World Cup, which has the longest active drought since winning?  
Uruguay with a 76-year drought (last won in 1950)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# PSG crave another title after last year's breakthrough

PSG face Arsenal in the final at Puskas Arena seeking to cement their status among Europe's elite

Reuters  
Paris

Paris St Germain's hunger has not faded after last year's Champions League triumph, with captain Marquinhos and coach Luis Enrique insisting the club's historic breakthrough only sharpened their appetite for more silverware.

PSG face Arsenal in today's final at the Puskas Arena seeking to cement their status among Europe's elite after finally lifting the trophy last season.

But Marquinhos said the emotional high of their 5-0 victory over Inter Milan in last season's showpiece match had only fuelled the squad's determination to experience it again. "It's really important to have that motivation," Marquinhos told a news conference. "Last year we said it and we showed it on the pitch. Once you win the Champions League, once you taste that title and those moments, you want to relive them again."

The Brazilian defender said PSG had learned from last season's run and were now better equipped to handle the pressure and noise surrounding a Champions League final. "There are a lot of things around these matches, the expectations, the pressure," he said. "The message in the dressing room was to change nothing, to continue working the same way and keep the same hunger we had last year. Even today, I have the same sensations and the same emotions I had last season."

Luis Enrique, who guided PSG to their first Champions League title last term, said they were driven less by legacy than by the desire to remain the best team in Europe. "Once is historic, twice is legendary," a banner by PSG ultras recently read.

"But our motivation is not to make history because we already did that last year," Luis Enrique said when asked about the slogan. "Our motivation is to continue being one of the best teams in Europe and in the world."



Paris St Germain's Goncalo Ramos (centre), Nuno Mendes (left) and Marquinhos (right) train yesterday at the Puskas Arena in Budapest, Hungary, on the eve of UEFA Champions League final against Arsenal. (Reuters)



Paris Saint-Germain's Spanish head coach Luis Enrique. (AFP)

With Arsenal chasing a first Champions League title in the same way PSG were a year ago, Luis Enrique said his side now had an even greater source of motivation - the chance to win it again.

"It's powerful," he said of Arsenal's drive. "But you know how powerful it is to try to win the second Champions League. It's even bigger."

The coach praised Arsenal and Mikel Arteta, saying the Premier League side deserved to win the English title after be-

ing "the most consistent team. They score a lot of goals and we defend very well, but the path to achieve that is different," he said.

PSG forward Ousmane Dembele, who has fully recovered from a calf problem, said his individual ambitions, including Ballon d'Or speculation, were secondary to the club's collective goals.

"It hasn't changed my way of being or my way of playing," Dembele said. "I've always had the desire to win trophies with

this club, with this squad and this staff. Individual trophies come afterwards. The most important thing is winning with PSG."

The France forward added that the squad had managed to stay mentally and physically fresh despite another exhausting campaign in which they retained the Ligue 1 title. "We didn't have many holidays but the coach and the staff managed the season very well," he said. "They gave us time to disconnect from football. I feel

100% and the group is ready too."

Marquinhos also dismissed suggestions the players might subconsciously hold back ahead of next month's World Cup. "You cannot take your foot off the pedal in a match like this," he said.

"A Champions League final is not something you play every year. Some people work their whole career and never get this opportunity.

"If you don't play at 100%, it's even worse. That's when the danger comes."

SPOTLIGHT

## Arteta urges Arsenal to 'own' the final

AFP  
Budapest

Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta called on his players to "own the moment" ahead of today's Champions League final clash against holders Paris Saint-Germain.

The Gunners have never won the trophy and were beaten in their only other final appearance, against Barcelona 20 years ago. Arteta said he was convinced his team could make history by beating Luis Enrique's side in Budapest.

"It's the opportunity to own the moment, it's the second time in our history we are here," the Spanish coach told reporters.

"We have the opportunity tomorrow to write a new chapter in the history of this football club. We have to play tomorrow with such a clarity, a lot of courage and a relentless desire to win. If we have those three aspects, I'm sure we are going to be close to winning."

Arteta's side ended a 22-year wait to lift the Premier League by beating out Pep Guardiola's Manchester City. The coach said he was not worried his team would allow that success to be enough in itself, and instead it had to be a springboard for more silverware, starting at the Puskas Arena.

"(Our) ambition is bigger. We have one (trophy) and we want the second one," explained Arteta. "That's all we have been talking about - that has to be a platform to reach bigger destinations and to aim for more, and the team is capable... I want the players to be so confident that we're gonna go and do it."

Arsenal's defensive strength helped them reach the final unbeaten, conceding just six goals en route. Arteta said he had no doubts about his team deserving their place on the biggest stage, but had to prove today they deserve to be crowned champions. "We are here because



Arsenal's manager Mikel Arteta (centre) is all smiles as he speaks to captain Martin Odegaard (left) and other players during a training session at the Puskas Arena in Budapest. (AFP)

we've earned the right to be here, in the manner that we have performed in this competition - tomorrow on that field we have to earn the right to win the trophy," said the coach.

Arteta said Jurrien Timber was fit to start the final after a groin problem which has sidelined the right-back since mid-March, and Ben White was the only unavailable member of his squad.

England international Bukayo Saka returned from injury a few weeks ago and has returned at his best level after a tricky season individually. The winger, who came through Arsenal's youth academy, said he and his team-mates were rar-

ing to go and did not need extra motivation of avenging last season's semi-final defeat by PSG.

"We have enough fire going into the game tomorrow, we know the history of the club and we know that tomorrow we can write history as players and winning it for the first time," said Saka. Arsenal captain Martin Odegaard said winning the Premier League showed the squad just how satisfying it is to succeed. "It was 22 years since we last won the Premier League and now finally we did it," said the Norwegian. "So we want to make even more history and, you know, when you get the taste of winning and lifting a trophy, you know how nice it feels."

## Barcelona sign winger Gordon from Newcastle for 80mn euros

Barcelona: Barcelona confirmed the signing of **Anthony Gordon** from Newcastle United, for a fee that could rise to 80mn euros (\$93mn). Gordon will sign for "the next five seasons, until June 30, 2031," Barcelona said in a brief statement.

The 25-year-old left winger netted 17 goals for Newcastle this season, 10 of those in the Champions League, and was the club's top scorer.

Gordon, part of England's World Cup squad, bolsters a Barcelona attack losing Polish veteran striker Robert Lewandowski at the end of his contract, and possibly Marcus Rashford after his loan spell from Manchester United.

La Liga champions Barcelona still hope to strengthen further in the coming weeks, with Atletico Madrid striker Julian Alvarez linked with a switch to Catalonia, while the club have not ruled out a new move to keep Rashford.

After three years of reduced expenditure and with their partially rebuilt Camp Nou stadium reopened, Barca have more economic breathing room within La Liga's strict financial fair play rules than previously. Lewandowski departure and the end of Rashford's loan give Barca margin to spend and other players including Rooney Bardghji, Ansi Fati and



Marc-Andre ter Stegen may also leave.

Gordon's transfer is Newcastle's second largest sale in their history after Liverpool paid £125mn (\$168mn) for Alexander Isak last summer.

The Premier League side may move for Real Betis winger Ez Abde as a replacement, according to reports.

Gordon joined Newcastle from Everton for £45mn in 2023, with the Merseyside club set to receive 15 percent of profits from the winger's departure from St James's Park.

COMMENT

# McCullum urges England to 'box smart'

AFP  
London

England coach **Brendon McCullum** said his side can learn from a New Zealand side who "box smart" when they face his native country in an upcoming three-Test series.

Next week's opener against the Black Caps at Lord's will be England's first Test since January, when a woeful tour of Australia ended in a 4-1 Ashes series loss.

"They are probably a great example of where we're in scenarios where we can improve, where we can fess up and sharpen what we're trying to achieve," McCullum, a former New Zealand captain, told a press conference in London yesterday.

"They're very resourceful and they hang in games for a long period of time."

"They may not necessarily have as much knockout power as some teams around the world but they box smarter than most teams in the world and hence why they've been as successful as they have for a long period of time."

McCullum was particularly admiring of a New Zealand attack that, even without the injured Matt Henry, skittled Ireland in this week's one-off Test in Belfast that also serves as a warm-up for the England series.

"They've got one of the most exciting bowling line-ups in the world," he said. "It's going to be incredibly difficult. It's going to be a stern examination for us."

"And we're going to have to be at

our best to overcome the variation that their bowling line-up has," he added. England were criticised for persisting with an overly aggressive approach in Australia regardless of the match, with the so-called 'Bazball' style a hallmark of McCullum's five years at the helm alongside captain Ben Stokes.

They have yet to win any of their four Test series in total against heavyweights Australia and India under McCullum, with England often unable to cement promising positions in games.

"I'd like to see us become a team that people can recognise for how we play, the positivity we play with, the aggression we play with, but just recognise some of those key moments, where games can be won and lost," explained McCullum.



"And just have enough poise to be able to make the plays that you need to be able to close out some of those situations more regularly."

England have been criticised for prioritising their style of play above actual results but McCul-

lum insisted: "Winning has always been important... it's never been purely about playing entertaining cricket. Some of the messages might have been slightly mixed around that but there's always been a fierce ambition to succeed."

We want to be a team which plays brave because we feel that playing brave gives you the best opportunity."

And while there were calls for McCullum to be sacked after the Ashes debacle, he insisted he'd never faltered in his determination to see out a contract that runs until next year's home series with Australia and the subsequent 50-over World Cup in southern Africa.

"I was always very keen to try and finish the job that we started," said the 44-year-old. "That never changed. It never wavered. We've got a lot of optimism about where this cricket team can get to and we're realistic about areas where we've fallen short. It's not about reinventing the team per se, it's about sharpening what we've been doing and being a better version."

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

# Captain Gill leads Gujarat reach final

TEEN SENSATION SOORYAVANSHI'S BLAZING 96 GOES IN VAIN

AFP  
India

Fifteen-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi's 96 was in vain as Gujarat Titans beat Rajasthan Royals by seven wickets yesterday to set up an IPL final against defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

Chasing 215 for victory after Sooryavanshi's second successive 90-plus score in the last play-off, Gujarat skipper Shubman Gill's 104 saw them chase down their target with eight balls to spare in New Chandigarh.

Gill put on 167 runs with opening partner Sai Sudharsan, who made 58, as Gujarat, who lost the first play-off to Bengaluru, reached their third final in five seasons since their title-winning debut in 2022.

Teenage sensation Sooryavanshi bowled out at the top of this season's batting chart with 776 runs after his 47-ball knock laced with eight fours and seven sixes.

Gill - India's Test and ODI captain - is behind the boy wonder with 722 runs but has a chance to move ahead of him in the final in Ahmedabad tomorrow. Gill and the left-handed Sudharsan batted with control in a classical display to ease into the chase against a bowling attack led by Jofra Archer. Sudharsan, who was dropped on 14, fell hit wicket for the second time in two matches as his bat slipped to rattle the stumps after he had guided the ball for a four.

Gill reached his first century of



Gujarat Titans' captain Shubman Gill plays a shot during the IPL Second Qualifier against Rajasthan Royals at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh International Stadium on the outskirts of Chandigarh yesterday. (AFP)

this season with a four but soon departed as Archer trapped him lbw before Jos Buttler (9) and Rahul Tewatia, with a winning six in his 17, steered the team home.

Earlier Sooryavanshi's partnership with Ravindra Jadeja, who hit an unbeaten 45, stood out in Rajasthan's 214-6.

Sooryavanshi, who hit a blistering 29-ball 97 in the eliminator, missed out on his ton for a second straight game after he

miscued a shot to deep thirdman off Kagiso Rabada. He went on to raise his fifth half-century of the season in 31 balls - his slowest IPL fifty, but held the innings together despite the regular fall of wickets.

Gujarat quicks peppered the left-handed Sooryavanshi with short balls and the teenager edged one from Rabada on to his helmet, but soon got back to business after a mandatory concussion check. He picked up the pace with

a couple of sixes and fours and put life back into the innings with a 58-run stand with Jadeja. Jadeja and Sooryavanshi put on 73 for the third wicket.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
Gujarat Titans 219 for 3 (Gill 104, Sai Sudharsan 58) beat Rajasthan Royals 214 for 6 (Sooryavanshi 96, Jadeja 45\*, Ferreira 38\*, Holder 2-27, Rabada 2-35) by seven wickets

ONE-OFF TEST

# Tickner strikes as New Zealand thrash Ireland ahead of England series

AFP  
London

Blair Tickner took his first five-wicket haul in Test cricket as New Zealand hammered Ireland by a margin of 232 in a one-off match in Belfast yesterday.

The comprehensive victory saw New Zealand win with more than a day to spare in a match that was only scheduled for four days - rather than the standard five of most Tests.

It was also a confidence-building success for the Black Caps ahead of next week's clash against England at Lord's, the first match in a three-Test series.

Ireland, dismissed for 179 in the first innings, started the third day at Stormont on 65-2.

New Zealand had declared on a commanding 490-8 featuring Tom Blundell's 186, Rachin Ravindra's 121 and debutant Dean Foxcroft's 98, with captain Tom Latham later enforcing the follow-on.

Tickner's haul, albeit against a fledgling Test nation in Ireland, was an encouraging sign for New Zealand in the absence of the injured Matt Henry and came as England coach Brendon McCullum - a former New Zealand captain - said yesterday the Black Caps possessed "one of the most exciting bowling line-ups in the world".

Ireland rarely looked like making New Zealand bat again, but they did at least manage an improved 232 in their second innings.

The 32-year-old Tickner, in his fifth Test, did the bulk of the damage with the medium-fast bowler's return of 5-76 including all of Ireland's top three.

Ireland opener Stephen Doherty - one of four top-six batsmen dismissed for a duck by paceman Nathan Smith in the first innings, a record in Test cricket - made 57 and wicketkeeper Lorcan Tucker exactly 50, with all-rounder Mark Adair 44 not out.

The match ended with Ireland nine wickets down following Reuben Wilson's dismissal as Curtis Campher had retired hurt with a hand injury before lunch.

"We had a bit of a snuff on the first morning, but once they got through...we were always playing catch-up," said Ireland captain Andrew Balbirnie.

"We were put under pressure at times, which is what you want," said Latham.

"They (New Zealand's fast bowlers) did fantastically well, bowled well with the new ball."

He added: "We wanted to come here and play our brand of cricket. To be put under pressure, to have time on our feet, it is really important and hopefully it sets us up for what lies ahead."

The Black Caps, however, were 86-4, with leading batsman Kane Williamson among those dismissed, after losing the toss before Ravindra and Blundell shared a fifth-wicket stand of 217.

"To put on more than 200, it was a fantastic partnership," said Latham.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
At Stormont, Belfast (day three of four):  
New Zealand 490-8 dec (T Latham 186, R Ravindra 121, D Foxcroft 98; M Adair 3-66) v Ireland 179 (A McBrine 73; N Smith 6-40) and 232 (S Doherty 57, L Tucker 50; B Tickner 5-76)  
Toss: Ireland  
Result: New Zealand won by an innings and 79 runs

ANNOUNCEMENT

# Pant quits as Lucknow captain after IPL flop

AFP  
New Delhi

The most expensive player of the Indian Premier League, **Rishabh Pant**, has quit as captain of Lucknow Super Giants after it finished last in the T20 tournament, the team said yesterday.

The India Test match star has had a woeful season after being bought for \$3.21mn at the 2025 IPL auction, making him the most expensive player in the lucrative league's history.

"Rishabh approached the franchisee with his request and we have respectfully accepted it," Tom Moody, Lucknow's director of cricket, said in a statement.

"These decisions are never easy," the former Australia all-rounder added.

"We are grateful for everything Rishabh has brought to this dressing room as captain. Our focus now is on the collective - rebuilding and restructuring to reach the best standards."

Pant, 28, is the second India star to quit Lucknow captaincy after KL Rahul, who led the team from 2022 to 2024.

Pant scored just 312 runs from 14 innings at a strike rate of 138.05 this season, with his team finish-



ing last on the points table with 10 losses and just four wins.

In the last season, Lucknow finished seventh out of 10 teams under Pant's leadership.

After Lucknow lost their last league game against Punjab Kings last week, the team management has indicated wholesale changes before the start of the next season.

PREVIEW

# Pakistan and Australia build towards World Cup

AFP  
Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Under-strength Australia and Pakistan meet in the first of three one-day internationals in Rawalpindi today, aiming to build strong combinations for next year's World Cup.

Australia are without their regular skipper Pat Cummins along with his pace partners Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood and opener Travis Head - all rested to manage their workloads following their stints in India's T20 League.

Mitchell Marsh, initially appointed captain for the tour, was also ruled out with an ankle injury, leaving Josh Inglis to lead the series with the last two matches in Lahore on June 2 and 4.

Despite being depleted, Inglis termed the squad as talented enough to put up a good fight.

"Obviously, disappointing to lose Mitch and unfortunately we are missing some others but we have some exciting players



Pakistan captain Shaheen Shah Afridi and Australia skipper Josh Inglis pose with the series trophy in Rawalpindi yesterday.

in the squad," said Inglis yesterday. Australia will look to draft in 19-year-old batter Ollie Peake and pace allrounder Liam Scott while lanky pacer Billy Stanlake makes a return after a seven-year gap. Inglis said the Pakistan team will not be taken lightly.

"Pakistan is a seriously good cricket team and they are not to be taken lightly and we have to be on top of our game to come up against them," said the stand-in

skipper. Pakistan will also miss regular openers Fakhar Zaman and Saim Ayub who both miss the series with injuries while experienced wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan was dropped. Two years ago, Rizwan led Pakistan to their first ODI series win in Australia since 2002.

Experienced batter Babar Azam, pacer Naseem Shah and allrounder Shadab Khan return after missing Pakistan's 2-1 ODI

series defeat in Bangladesh two months ago.

Skipper Shaheen Shah Afridi hoped his team would show improvement and make their 1,000 ODI memorable. "I believe we are working towards that goal of the World Cup and when you are preparing the team for that event you have to give opportunity to some new players and that we are doing," said Shaheen.

"It's a special occasion of 1,000 match so we want to make it memorable," said Shaheen.

Australia (1019) and India (1075) are the two other teams to have played 1,000 ODIs.

Pakistan is going through a heat wave in the summer and to minimise the effect of stifling weather, the matches will start as late as 4:30pm (11:30 GMT).

Inglis admitted weather will be a challenge with players coming from winter in Australia. "It's been very hot and challenging, but thankfully it's a late start so it will be cool by the time we start," said Inglis, who has led Australia in one ODI two years ago.

TENNIS

# Fonseca ends Djokovic's record bid in 5-set thriller

The 19-year-old Fonseca rallied from two sets down for the second straight match to stun Djokovic

Reuters  
Paris

Novak Djokovic's latest bid to claim a record 25th Grand Slam title was left in tatters after his 4-6 4-6 6-3 7-5 7-5 third-round defeat by Brazilian teen sensation Joao Fonseca at the French Open yesterday.

Djokovic's defeat means the 39-year-old Serb's wait to go past Margaret Court's mark will continue in the twilight of his glorious career, and also further opens up the draw in Paris a day after world number one Jannik Sinner's shock exit.

Victory in an epic clash lasting seven minutes short of five hours ensured Fonseca became the first teenager to beat Djokovic in a Grand Slam match as he announced himself as another genuine contender to claim a maiden major crown.

A week after turning 39, Djokovic began strongly and played like a younger version of himself as he comfortably won five of the opening six games and put down a marker in the first set on a sun-drenched Court Philippe Chatrier.

The Serb produced a stunning lob, a couple of heavy forehand winners and two delightful drops in that spell, almost schooling his 19-year-old opponent on the art of playing on Parisian clay, and wrapped up the set after a late Fonseca comeback attempt.

Fonseca, who was still in his crib when Djokovic lifted his first Grand Slam title at the 2008 Australian Open, went toe-to-toe with his senior colleague in the next set only to drop his serve in the fifth game.

It was the opening Djokovic needed, and the third seed took full control, letting out a roar when he went up 5-3 and pumping his fists after he closed out the set with a sharp passing shot through the middle.

Fonseca raised his level to pull a set back and then broke early in the fourth, drawing thunderous applause from his fans, before levelling up the match at two sets all with some fiery ball-striking that at times left Djokovic in disbelief.

The Brazilian came from 1-3 down in the decider and showed nerves of steel to stay level after 10 games and then break for a 6-5 lead, which gave him the perfect platform to close out a famous victory with three straight aces.

SWIATEK ADVANCES

Iga Swiatek booked her place in the last 16 of the French Open yesterday.

Four-time women's champion Swiatek beat Magda Linette 6-4, 6-4 to begin play on Court Philippe Chatrier, with temperatures climbed to 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) later in the day.

Third seed Swiatek dug herself out of an early 2-0 hole against the 35th-ranked Linette, who won their most recent meeting at Miami in March.

Swiatek broke three times in the opening set to nose ahead, and then surged into a 4-1 lead in the second set.

She overcame a stumble as she tried to close it out, before sealing victory to set up an intriguing match-up with the in-form Marta Kostyuk.

"It was a good match. I played much better than Miami," said Swiatek, who moved to appoint Francisco Roig, a longtime coach of Rafael Nadal, in the wake of her loss to Linette two months ago.

Kostyuk, the 15th seed, continued her fine run with a 6-4, 6-3 win over Switzerland's Viktorija Golubic.

She is unbeaten in 15 matches on clay this season following titles in Madrid and Rouen.

"Marta is having a great season. She always had a game to play well," said Swiatek.

"So good for her. But I'm going



Brazil's Joao Fonseca celebrates winning his third-round match against Serbia's Novak Djokovic at the French Open yesterday. (Reuters)

to focus on myself, prepare tactically, as before any other match, and we'll see."

Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva swept into the last 16 with a 6-4, 6-2 victory over Czech 27th seed Marie Bouzkova.

The eighth-seeded Andreeva goes on to face either 2023 French Open runner-up Karolina Muchova or Jil Teichmann tomorrow for a place in the quarter-finals.

Andreeva's best Grand Slam run came at Roland Garros two years ago in 2024 when she reached the semi-finals.

Sinner and Djokovic's departures could also clear the way for

Alexander Zverev, who at 29 has been one of the most consistent performers on tour over the past decade but is still chasing an elusive Grand Slam.

The second seed plays Frenchman Quentin Halys in the night session. "I'm happy where I am, I'm feeling confident in my game," Zverev said after dispatching an off-colour Tomas Machac in his previous match.

Poland's Iga Swiatek plays a forehand return to Poland's Magda Linette during their singles match on day 6 of the French Open yesterday. (AFP)



CYCLING

# Kuss wins Giro stage 19 to bag Grand Tour trilogy, Vingegaard retains lead

Reuters  
Feltre, Italy

Sepp Kuss and Dane Jonas Vingegaard of Team Visma-Lease a Bike dominated the high mountains yesterday as the American claimed a historic solo victory on stage 19 of the Giro d'Italia and his teammate firmly defended his overall lead.

By winning the brutal mountain stage, Kuss became the 116th rider in cycling history to complete the Grand Tour stage victory trilogy, adding the Italian success to previous wins at the Tour de France in 2021 and Vuelta a Espana in 2019 and 2023.

"To be honest, it's something I always dreamt of, but every year it's getting harder and harder. I keep progressing, but so does everyone else, so every year that goes by, I think it's going to be even harder to win a stage in the Giro to complete all three, but I just can't believe it," Kuss said after the race.

The monstrous 151-km stage through the Dolomites packed a brutal 5,000 metres of altitude gain into a relentless roller-coaster of high-altitude climbs and technical descents, before finishing in the Veneto village of Alleghe.

Italian Lidl-Trek rider Giulio Ciccone seized his chance on the final long descent, breaking free from the chasing group to establish a one-minute lead with 10-km remaining.

However, Kuss launched a relentless pursuit as soon as the final uphill climb commenced, catching and passing Ciccone



Team Visma Lease a Bike rider Sepp Kuss of the US cycles in a lone breakaway in the final ascent to win the 19th stage of the Giro d'Italia 2026 - Tour of Italy between Feltre and Alleghe, Italy, yesterday. (AFP)

with just over two km left before riding clear. Kuss crossed the finish line alone ahead of thousands of cheering fans to secure the victory 13 seconds ahead of Canadian Derek Gee-West of Lidl-Trek. Ciccone held off the rest of the chasing pack to take third place, 36 seconds behind Kuss.

"By the bottom of the climb, there was a gap of one minute, so I thought, 'Oh, it's over,'" Kuss said of Ciccone's push.

"To be honest, I was a bit de-

motivated because I thought it was over, but I just tried to focus on doing the fastest climb possible. A nice win for me."

Austrian Felix Gall of the Decathlon team took fourth place, 39 seconds behind Kuss, just ahead of Vingegaard who crossed the line with the same time in fifth.

The result leaves Vingegaard with a commanding overall lead of four minutes and three seconds over Gall in the general classification.

Earlier yesterday, UAE Team Emirates rider Jhonatan Narvaez was forced to abandon the race due to complications from a minor incident that happened the previous day.

The team said the Ecuadorean had a small crash on Thursday during the post-stage transfer back to the team bus and the resulting discomfort was too severe to manage yesterday.

Narvaez leaves this year's edition of the Italian Grand Tour with three stage victories.

MOTORSPORT

# Di Giannantonio fastest in practice, Marquez returns at Mugello



Pertamina Enduro VR46 Raging Team's Italian MotoGP rider Fabio Di Giannantonio during the second practice session ahead of the Italian Grand Prix at Mugello circuit near Florence yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Mugello, Italy

Fabio Di Giannantonio was fastest in yesterday's main practice session for the Italian MotoGP, as world champion Marc Marquez made his return to action.

Italian Di Giannantonio, who won the Catalan MotoGP last time out, clocked a top time of one minute 44.808 seconds in Mugello, 0.91sec ahead of countryman Francesco Bagnaia.

The 27-year-old rides for Ducati satellite team VR46 and was one of four Italians in the top four alongside former world champion Bagnaia, Enea Bastianini and Franco Morbidelli. He was also fastest in the morning's free practice which has no bearing today's qualifying sessions.

Di Giannantonio currently sits 26 points behind championship leader Marco Bezzecchi ahead of qualifying and the Sprint race today, and tomorrow's Grand Prix.

Marc Marquez was sixth fastest after being cleared to compete despite suffering a broken foot in a spectacular crash at the French MotoGP earlier this month.

The injury kept him out of the main race at Le Mans as well as the last race weekend in Barcelona where his brother Alex Marquez suffered a horrific crash which keeps him out of the grand prix in Italy and Hungary.

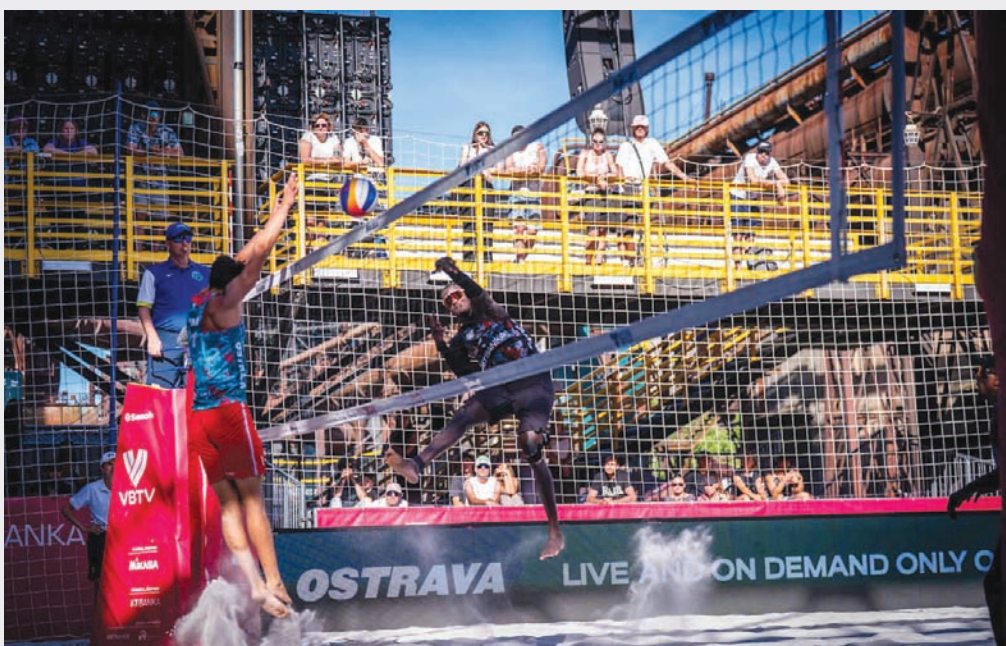
Marquez played down expectations ahead of today's action, saying he needs time to get back into top shape. After having surgery on a metatarsal fracture as well as a separate shoulder operation, the 33-year-old has been given the green light to compete this week.

"If I come back with the mentality that I can win this championship, I will be injured again," he told MotoGP before his practice. "Let's see that if in the next races I can rebuild my right arm, and from that point I know the speed will arrive. But, first of all, I need to feel well about my physical condition."

The Spaniard said his shoulder injury, which he picked up in a crash at the Indonesian Grand Prix in October last year, was his primary concern rather than his recent foot fracture.

"The foot is peanuts, the foot, nothing, I was ready to race in Catalunya. It's more the shoulder was my biggest limitation these last months," he added.

## Cherif and Tijan enter last 16 in Ostrava



Qatar's beach volleyball duo of Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan qualified for the round of 16 at the Ostrava Elite16 in Czech Republic after securing their second victory of the tournament yesterday. The Qatari pair defeated France's Elouan Chouikh and Joadel Genevieve-Gardoque in straight sets 21-15, 21-17 in their third Group Two match to continue their impressive run in the Beach Pro Tour event. Cherif and Ahmed had earlier suffered a narrow three-set defeat to American duo Taylor Crabb and Andrew Benesh in the second round after a closely fought contest that ended 21-16, 20-22, 15-11. The Qatari team had opened their campaign with a straight-sets victory over Latvia's Bedritis and Rinkevics in the first round. Cherif and Ahmed will next face Sweden's young duo Jacob Hölting Nilsson and Elmer Andersson in the round of 16.

## SPOTLIGHT

# World Cup crashes New Zealand goalkeeper's wedding plans

Reuters  
Auckland

Auckland FC goalkeeper Michael Woud has had to put his wedding plans on hold after being selected in New Zealand's squad for the World Cup, but he says taking part in soccer's biggest tournament is not a bad reason to cancel.

Woud got engaged a year ago when he had little inkling he would be in coach Darren Bazeley's World Cup plans and had intended to wed fiancée Zana Renton around the time of the June 11 to July 19 finals in North America.

Bazeley confirmed six-cap Woud as his third goalkeeper in the 26-man squad behind Max Crocombe and Alex Paulsen this month. And while Woud might not get to play a minute at the World Cup, he said Renton had signed off on it.

"My fiancée was really supportive about it. It's not a bad thing to cancel your wedding for - it only happens every four years," the



27-year-old keeper told New Zealand media. "We'll just do it next year."

Woud takes his place in New Zealand's squad after a mid-season wobble saw him dropped as starting goalkeeper for Auckland.

He was reinstated almost immediately when the man who replaced

him, Oliver Sail, suffered a knee injury in January and was ruled out of the rest of the A-League season as well as World Cup contention.

Woud grabbed his second chance with both hands and ended up playing a key role in Auckland winning their first A-League championship.

After making the only save in a penalty shootout in a playoff win over Melbourne City, Woud kept a clean sheet in the 1-0 Grand Final victory over Sydney FC last weekend to help Auckland become the first New Zealand team to win the Australian top flight.

Woud is comfortable with his task at the World Cup where he will more than likely be the goalkeeping equivalent of a bridesmaid. "I think my role is quite clear," he said.

"Being the number three goalkeeper and being a support for the other goalkeepers and if I was called upon, to do my best."

New Zealand, the lowest-ranked team among 48 nations at the World Cup, play Iran, Egypt and Belgium in the group stage.

## FOOTBALL

# Messi to captain Argentina at the FIFA World Cup

Star forward has been at the heart of an injury scare in recent days

AFP

Buenos Aires

Lionel Messi will captain Argentina at the World Cup, national coach Lionel Scaloni announced on Thursday as he unveiled his 26-man squad.

Messi, 38, had not previously confirmed he would play in what will be a record-breaking sixth tournament for the Argentine superstar. But it had been widely assumed the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner would again lead Argentina, four years after lifting the trophy in Qatar.

As well as confirming Messi's presence, Thursday's announcement notably excluded Real Madrid's Franco Mastantuono from the Argentina squad. Eighteen-year-old Mastantuono is considered one of the brightest prospects in Argentine football.

The largest ever World Cup, co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico, kicks off June 11. Argentina's first match will be five days later against Algeria in Kansas City.

Messi has been at the heart of an injury scare in recent days, with his club side Inter Miami this week saying medical tests diagnosed him with muscle fatigue in his left hamstring. The Major League Soccer club had provided no clear timetable for Messi's return after his abrupt exit from Miami's 6-4 victory over Philadelphia in the 73rd minute on Sunday.

But Scaloni had played down the seriousness of the injury this week.

Center-back Cristian Romero, who suffered a knee injury last month and has not played since, was also named in the squad. The Tottenham Hotspur captain was ruled out for the remainder of the Premier League season after he was shoved into his own goalkeeper by Sunderland striker Brian Brobbey.

Argentina's roster retains 17 of the 26 players who won the title in Qatar. Young players who received call-ups include 21-year-olds Nicolas Paz and Valentin Barco.

Palmeiras forward Jose Manuel Lopez, who only made his international debut last year, also features. Other notable absentees include Emiliano Buendia - currently in excellent



Lionel Messi, 38, had not previously confirmed he would play in what will be a record-breaking sixth World Cup for the Argentine superstar. (AFP)

form at Aston Villa - and Roma star Paulo Dybala. The South American giants will journey to the United States for pre-World Cup friendlies against Honduras on June 6 and Iceland on June 9. Argentina's World Cup group also contains Austria and Jordan.

Along with Messi, Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo and Mexican goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa are also expected to appear in their sixth World Cups this summer.

### SQUAD

**Goalkeepers:** Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa, ENG), Geronimo Rulli (Marseille, FRA), Juan Musso (Atletico Madrid, ESP)

**Defenders:** Gonzalo Montiel (River Plate, ARG), Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid, ESP), Lisandro Martinez (Manchester United, ENG),

Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica, POR), Leonardo Balerdi (Olympique Marseille, FRA), Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur, ENG), Facundo Medina (Marseille, FRA), Nicolas Tagliafico (Lyon, FRA).

**Midfielders:** Leandro Paredes (Boca Juniors, ARG), Rodrigo de Paul (Inter Miami, USA), Exequiel Palacios (Bayer Leverkusen, GER), Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea, ENG), Alexis MacAllister (Liverpool, ENG), Giovanni Lo Celso (Real Betis, ESP), Valentin Barco (Strasbourg).

**Attackers:** Lionel Messi (Inter Miami, USA), Nicolas Paz (Como, ITA), Thiago Almada (Atletico Madrid, ESP), Nicolas Gonzalez (Atletico Madrid, ESP), Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid, ESP), Giuliano Simeone (Atletico Madrid, ESP), Lautaro Martinez (Inter Milan, ITA), Jose Manuel Lopez (Palmeiras, BRA).

## INTERVIEW

# Australian Arnold hopes resilient Iraq can upset World Cup odds

AFP

Paris

Iraq's veteran Australian coach Graham Arnold is hoping his team can pull off a shock on their return to the World Cup stage after a remarkable and gruelling journey to this year's tournament in North America.

"The year I've been in charge has been crazy and very, very stressful for the players," Arnold told by phone from Baghdad, shortly before heading to Spain for a pre-tournament training camp. "Every game basically since I've been here has been a game of life and death."

That might sound extreme, but Iraq were not just left battling to secure qualification right up until the latest possible moment - their prospects of reaching the finals were also seriously compromised by the war in neighbouring Iran.

Arnold, 62, was appointed in May last year to succeed Spaniard Jesus Casas. At that point, the Lions of Mesopotamia were pushing for direct qualification in Asian Group B behind South Korea and Jordan.

But on Arnold's debut, 10-man Iraq lost to the Koreans. They eventually had to win a two-legged play-off against the United Arab Emirates - courtesy of a decisive Amir al-Ammari penalty in the 17th minute of injury time - to progress to an intercontinental play-off in Mexico in March.

However, at that time, the US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran left many Iraqi players and staff stranded and scrambling to make the long trip.

### CHANGING MENTALITIES

"The airspace was shut down in Iraq. I couldn't get back into Iraq to get my coaching equipment. The players couldn't get out of Iraq," Arnold recalls, detailing the 26-hour bus trip they took from Baghdad to Amman in Jordan.

"And they got stuck in Jordan for 28 hours because of bombs going off around them and they shut down the airspace. When the boys actually got there, it took 68 hours. One of the first meetings and discussions I had with the players was, OK, with everything that's going on in the Middle East, are you going to use that as an excuse or motivation?"

Iraq defeated Bolivia 2-1 in Monterrey, securing a first World Cup appearance since 1986 after

an interminable 21-match qualifying campaign. "The players went through a hell of a lot of stress and a lot of pressure on their shoulders from 46 million people in Iraq to qualify for a World Cup for the first time in 40 years," said Arnold. "Every one of those games was heartbreak or we survived."

Arnold, who has been splitting his time between Australia and Iraq, insists his team does not lack ability but that his biggest job has been changing mentalities. "What I've felt in my time here, is that Iraq is a very negative country, because of all the shit that's gone on with the wars over the last 30 years - there's a bit of a negative mentality here, no one likes us, everyone hates us," he says, referring to the Gulf Wars of 1991 and 2003.

### 'SHOCK THE WORLD'

This may only be Iraq's second World Cup, but the country has a footballing pedigree - they won the Asian Cup in 2007 and were semi-finalists in 2015. "I've never seen a country so obsessed with football. They have public holidays when Barcelona play Real Madrid," says the coach.

Arnold took his native Australia to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, leading them to the last 16 where they pushed eventual winners Argentina close. Despite the adulation he has received from Iraqis, he says he felt far greater pressure as coach of the Socceroos.

"I have the greatest respect for people like Didier Deschamps that has stayed and coached his nation for so long. The pressure of coaching your own nation is crazy because you don't want to let them down. I feel like I'm more of a football coach now with Iraq than with Australia."

Iraq are in a daunting group at this World Cup, starting against Norway in Boston on June 16 before also playing France and Senegal. So what can they realistically achieve?

"We qualified last. If you went through every individual player and every team, and the transfer price of all the players, we would probably be the lowest-ranked at the World Cup," says Arnold, whose contract expires on July 31.

"But it's a World Cup. Anything can happen. And our boys have a great fighting mentality. It's 11 versus 11. And if we win our one-versus-one battles, we can shock the world."

## FOCUS

# Deschamps guards against over-confidence

AFP

Clairefontaine-en-Yvelines, France

France coach Didier Deschamps warned against being over confident ahead of his side's bid to win a second World Cup in three editions. Deschamps' team have reached the final of the last two tournaments, lifting the trophy in 2018 before losing on penalties to Argentina four years ago.

Led by star forward Kylian Mbappe, they are one of the favourites for victory in North America for the World Cup from June 11 to July 19. "It's a major event. Some people think we're already at July 19, I don't much like that, in fact not at all," Deschamps told reporters at France's Clairefontaine base near Paris.

"Yes, we're one of the best teams, but I know all too well that there are some important



steps to take before thinking about the those heights. We'll do everything to get there."

To start with, France must come through a group which includes Senegal, Iraq and Norway. Back in 2002, when France were the defending champions for the first time, they lost to former colony Senegal and crashed out at the first hurdle after finishing bottom of their group.

Deschamps, 57, is bidding to bow out in style after 14 years at the France helm. He guided

France to the World Cup quarter-finals in his first tournament as head coach, and two years later they reached the Euros final on home soil.

Since then, France have reached two World Cup finals and a Euros semi-final, making Deschamps one of the most successful coaches in the national team's history.

He was without eight members of his World Cup squad for training on Friday as six players will play in Saturday's Champions League final between Paris Saint-Germain and Arsenal, while two more lined up for Crystal Palace in their Europa Conference League success on Wednesday.

France will play two friendly internationals before the World Cup, against Ivory Coast in Nantes on June 4 and at home to Northern Ireland in Lille four days later. They begin their Group 1 campaign against Senegal on June 16 in East Rutherford.



Graham Arnold was appointed as Iraq's coach in May last year to succeed Spaniard Jesus Casas. (AFP)