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Kohli and RCB eye second IPL crown in final against GT



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Gauff title defence ends as Sabalenka advances

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GULF TIMES

SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

11
DAYS TO GO

TRIVIA

Which nation has the lost the most World Cup matches?
Mexico with 28.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

PSG forge modern dynasty with shootout triumph

Enrique's side become only the second besides Real Madrid to win the competition in consecutive years

Reuters
Budapest

Paris St Germain held their nerve in a cagey Champions League final to retain the title by beating Arsenal 4-3 on penalties as yesterday's nail-biting showdown ended 1-1 after extra time, cementing the French side's status among Europe's modern greats.

Arsenal defender Gabriel blasted his spot kick over Matvey Safonov's crossbar at the Puskas Arena, his miss confirming PSG as the first club to retain the trophy since Real Madrid completed their three-year reign from 2016 to 2018. Long dismissed as glamorous underachievers despite vast resources, the Ligue 1 champions have now forged a dynasty under Luis Enrique, marrying attacking brilliance with resilience to establish themselves as the dominant force in European football.

"It's stronger than last year because we knew before the match just how difficult it would be to play against Arsenal," said Luis Enrique, whose side had thrashed Inter Milan 5-0 to claim Europe's elite trophy for the first time.

"As a club and a city, it's incredible to win, and I think we deserved it over the course of the season. The final was a real battle," added the Spanish coach.

The outcome left Arsenal midfielder Declan Rice devastated but proud as his side finished their European campaign without losing a match aside from the shootout defeat in the final. "It's gutting. It's devastating to lose a Champions League final on penalties," he said. "But we try to take a lot of perspective from how far we've come as a group. An incredible season. Given it absolutely everything up until this point. We took the game to penalties. It's a lottery."

Eleven days after celebrating their first Premier League title in 22 years, Arsenal looked set for a maiden triumph on Europe's biggest stage after Kai Havertz's sixth-minute opener and a first hour spent smothering PSG's vaunted attack. However, the final became chaotic once PSG's Ousmane Dembele equalised with a penalty in the 65th minute, the pace turning frantic before exhaustion took the match to a shootout.

Under Luis Enrique, PSG have won the six shootouts they have contested. The 56-year-old has now won 12 of the 13 one-off club finals he has overseen as a coach.

After brushing aside Premier League opposition on their way to the final by eliminating Chelsea and Liverpool, PSG were facing a much sterner test against an Arsenal team playing their second Champions League final after losing to Barcelona in 2006. Mikel



PSG's captain Marquinhos lifts the trophy as teammates celebrate after winning the Champions League final against Arsenal at the Puskas Arena in Budapest yesterday. (AFP)

Arteta's side took the lead when Marquinhos' clearance bounced off Arsenal's Leandro Trossard into the path of Havertz, who raced into the box and fired into the roof of the net.

He is the fourth player to score in two different European Cup or Champions League finals with two different clubs. It was the nightmare scenario for PSG - trailing so early against the best defence in the competition. Arsenal lived up to their reputation as the best team without the ball and looked perfectly content with the script, doubling up on Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and suffocating the usual danger brought by the Georgian magician on the left flank.

PSG's Fabian Ruiz was unable to impose his usual rhythm in midfield and, despite monopolising possession for long spells, Luis Enrique's side struggled to carve out clear-cut chances.

By halftime, PSG had attacked 32 times, Arsenal three times.

Arsenal, however, were flirting with the boundaries with their challenges and Cristhian Mosquera brought down Kvaratskhelia in the area, with Dembele converting the penalty to equalise with his eighth goal in the competition.

The momentum had shifted. Jurrien Timber and Viktor Gyok-

eres replaced Mosquera and Martin Odegaard and Arsenal had a more attacking mindset but were exposed to PSG's counter attacks and at the end of one of them, Kvaratskhelia sped into the box, only for his left-footed effort to crash onto the outside of David Raya's post.

After controlling the tempo in the first half, Arsenal played into PSG's hands as the pace increased significantly, giving too much space to Kvaratskhelia or Bradley Barcola, who replaced the Georgian winger with seven minutes left. In the 89th minute, PSG came close to giving the final an abrupt end as Vitinha's grazed the top of the net. Barcola also shot over the bar after a counter attack with what would have been the last kick of the game. With both teams having run out of steam, extra time was a cautious affair and when referee Daniel Siebert blew his whistle Arsenal had only managed one shot on target. Arsenal's Eberechi Eze missed his penalty before Raya saved Nuno Mendes' attempt.

Gabriel had to score to keep the Gunners' hopes alive but, facing PSG's end, he fired over. The French side were left to celebrate being European champions once again, with extra-time substitute Lucas Beraldo's goal in the shootout proving to be the winner.

THIS IS EVEN BIGGER, SAYS COACH ENRIQUE



PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi (centre), the club's Football Advisor Luis Campos (left) and head coach Luis Enrique pose with the medals after winning the Champions League in Budapest yesterday. (AFP)

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique described his team's second UEFA Champions League triumph as "even bigger" than their maiden European title a year ago, after the French club edged Arsenal on penalties in a tense final yesterday. "It is even bigger because we knew of the difficulties of playing against Arsenal, and for us as a team and a city it is incredible to win it," the Spaniard told broadcaster Canal Plus amid on-pitch celebrations at the Puskas Arena in Budapest. PSG won 4-3 on penalties after conceding an early goal to draw 1-1 over 90 minutes and extra time. Kai Havertz blasted English Premier League champions Arsenal into a sixth-minute lead in the Hungarian capital but PSG got a deserved equaliser when Ousmane Dembele converted a 65th-minute penalty following a foul on Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. Kvaratskhelia later had a shot deflected onto the post as Arsenal held on for extra time and then penalties. Nuno Mendes was the only Paris player out of five to fail to score during the shoot-out, while Eberechi Eze had already missed for Arsenal before Gabriel blasted over with their last attempt. "I think we have deserved it over the course of the season even if the final was really close-fought," added Luis Enrique, as PSG become the first team since Real Madrid between 2016 and 2018 to retain the Champions League trophy. Having previously led Barcelona to the title in 2015, Luis Enrique becomes just the fifth manager to win three European Cups, after Carlo

Anelotti, Bob Paisley, Zinedine Zidane and Pep Guardiola. The Qatar-backed outfit won European club football's biggest prize for the first time in their history last year with a 5-0 demolition of Inter Milan in Munich. "It is a different emotion this time, it is incredible that we have done it back to back," said captain Marquinhos, who has been at PSG since 2013. "We showed how much we wanted it. The coach said right at the start of the season that it is hard to win it, but it is even harder to win it twice. That was the objective for us and that was the mentality we showed today." The first Champions League final in a decade to go to penalties saw a team win having conceded the first goal for the first time since 2014. "It is exceptional, it's a great night. We have worked hard this season in order to do the 'back-to-back'. It is magnificent. We are so pleased and we will savour this tonight," said Dembele. "It was difficult. But the whole season has been difficult. We had to deal with a lot of things but in the end we have won another Champions League and we are all delighted," added the forward. He will now join up with the France squad for the World Cup in North America, saying that the fitness problem which forced him off at the end of normal time was only a cramp. PSG had already won the UEFA Super Cup, FIFA Intercontinental Cup and French Champions Trophy this season on penalties. They end the campaign with five trophies altogether, having also won the French Ligue 1 title.



Arsenal's Gabriel Magalhaes misses to end the penalty shootout. (AFP)

PREVIEW

Kohli and RCB eye second IPL crown in final against Gujarat

Kohli, 37, has been central to Bengaluru's efforts since their first title in the T20 tournament last year

AFP
Ahmedabad, India

Virat Kohli and Royal Challengers Bengaluru will be eyeing their second straight IPL title against an upbeat Gujarat Titans in the final at the 130,000-capacity Ahmedabad stadium today.

The 37-year-old Kohli has been central to Bengaluru's efforts since their first title in the T20 tournament last year.

Batting great Kohli will be back at the Narendra Modi Stadium, the world's biggest cricket ground and the venue of Bengaluru's triumph in 2025.

Bengaluru topped the 10-team table at the end of the league stage, and beat Gujarat in the first play-off to secure direct entry into the final.

However, Gujarat bounced back from their defeat in style.

Gujarat hammered Rajasthan Royals in the last play-off to qualify for their third final in five years, winning the title in 2022.

"In the IPL and actually in any form of cricket, you have to remain reasonably level regardless of the result," Gujarat's director of cricket Vikram Solanki said.

"If you come off the back of a defeat, you can't get too low - because, more often than not, you're preparing for the next game."

Skipper Shubman Gill, who is also India's Test and ODI captain, hit 104 in New Chandigarh on Friday.

The 26-year-old has scored 722 runs, putting him second in the batting chart behind Rajasthan's 15-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi on 776.

Gill's opening partner, Sai Sudharsan, is third with 710 runs.

The pair have laid the foundation of Gujarat's success.

"I can only imagine all of the work that Shubman has put in throughout his career to get to where he is, as far as batting is concerned," said former England batter Solanki.



RCB captain Rajat Patidar

"He's an exceptional young man. To be playing the cricket that he is, to be batting the way he is, is just phenomenal!"

'EXPERIENCE COUNTS'

Kohli, who has stepped away from Test cricket and T20 internationals, has scored 600 runs this season, including one century and four half-centuries, at an average of 50.00 in 15 matches.

Bengaluru's director of cricket Mo Bobat said "everybody understands what Virat Kohli brings - his intensity, his fight, his hunger!"

"Experience counts for a lot in pressure games, but I think it also speaks volumes for their personalities and character," Bobat said.

Bengaluru skipper Rajat Patidar stepped up his game in the first qualifier, hammering an unbeaten 93 off 33 balls.

His knock, after Kohli's attacking 43, paved the way for Bengaluru's mammoth total of 254 in a 92-run thrashing of Gujarat.

"Any team



RCB's Virat Kohli, along with his teammates, celebrates with the trophy after winning the IPL in 2025. (AFP)

whose captain is playing well, gets greater confidence from that," said Bobat.

"We're becoming accustomed to seeing these sorts of knocks from him now. He played some outrageous shots, but also really the aggressive intent... that's leading by example."

The final is expected to draw a crowd of more than 100,000 fans.

IT'S ONE-ALL

Gujarat Titans:
Won in their debut season in 2022

Royal Challengers Bengaluru:
Won their maiden title in 2025



Gujarat's skipper Gill banks on home advantage against Bengaluru

Gujarat Titans captain Shubman Gill yesterday said he is not burdened by expectations of home fans and will make use of familiar conditions in the IPL final against defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru in Ahmedabad.

Gujarat hammered Rajasthan Royals in the last play-off to qualify for their third final in five years, winning the title in 2022.

One of two latest teams in the T20 tournament, Gujarat won the trophy at the 130,000 Narendra Modi Stadium in their debut season and then lost the final next year in 2023 - both under Hardik Pandya. Gill, who is India's Test and ODI captain, took over as Gujarat skipper ahead of the 2024 season and now heads into his first final as leader.

"Honestly, I don't really get burdened by expectations," said the 26-year-old Gill.

"There are advantages, that's how I see it, there's familiarity when we play there, we know the wicket, we know the ground, so, we know what kind of cricket we need to play there to be able to win."

Gill, who hit 104 in the second qualifier in New Chandigarh on Friday, has amassed 722 runs, putting him second in the batting chart behind Rajasthan's 15-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi on 776.

Gill's opening partner, Sai Sudharsan, is third with 710 runs and the pair have laid the founda-

tion of Gujarat's success. Bengaluru, led by Rajat Patidar, beat Gujarat in the first play-off to secure direct entry into the final. Patidar tasted success last year when his team and star player Virat Kohli won their first IPL trophy in their 18th attempt.

'ROLLERCOASTER RIDE'

Patidar will be in elite company if he wins back-to-back titles, feat achieved by only two IPL captains including M S Dhoni (Chennai Super Kings - 2010-11) and Rohit Sharma (Mumbai Indians 2019-20).

"I've never thought about what the other captains have done before and (whether I) had to compete with somebody or not," said Patidar.

"As an individual my journey has been a rollercoaster ride. I focus on the present, without bothering too much about the past and future. I am here to prepare and give the best in the final tomorrow."

Bengaluru return to the venue they won the title last year after beating Punjab Kings in the final. But Patidar said they will play with a fresh mindset.

"You cannot keep talking about 2025 - you have to be more in the present and do whatever best you can do to win the title," said Patidar.

"As I said earlier, that we are not here with the mindset of defending champion. We have an opportunity to win one more title. It's a new season." (AFP)



Gujarat Titans' captain Shubman Gill celebrates after scoring a century during the IPL Second Qualifier against Rajasthan Royals. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Minhas makes history as Pakistan beat Australia

AFP
Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Pakistan out-spun Australia by five wickets in the first one-day international in Rawalpindi with spinner Arafat Minhas becoming the first home bowler to take five wickets on ODI debut yesterday.

Minhas finished with 5-32 as an under-strength Australia were bowled out for 200 in 44.1 overs before Pakistan chased down the target in 42.3 overs for a memorable win in their 1,000 ODI.

Babar Azam notched a 94-ball 69 while Ghazi Ghori hit an impressive 92-ball 65 as Australia's inexperienced spinners failed to match Pakistan slow bowlers on a dry spin-assisting Pindi Stadium pitch.

Azam and Ghori added 127 runs for the third wicket after Sahibzada Farhan (28) and Maaz Sadaqat (eight) fell with the score at 49.

Azam hit four boundaries and a six while Ghori's knock had eight hits to the rope before both falling to pacer Nathan Ellis, but with just 16 to win that did not hurt Pakistan.

Minhas smashed a six to complete the victory.

Australia are missing a host of key players including regular skipper Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood alongside opener Travis Head.

Australia, sent in to bat, saw Matthew Renshaw hitting a career best 63-ball 61 and opener



Pakistan's Arafat Minhas (right) and Pakistan's captain Shaheen Shah Afridi celebrate after the dismissal of Australia's Cameron Green during the first one-day international at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi yesterday. (AFP)

Matthew Short scoring a 76-ball 55 amidst a spin assault with eight wickets going to slow bowlers.

It was Abrar (2-44) who broke the opening stand of 34 with the wicket of Alex Carey for 19, before Minhas destroyed the batting with guile and accuracy.

Minhas had stand-in skipper Josh Inglis (13) and Marnus Labuschagne (nought) in his fourth over before getting Cameron

Green for a third ball duck in his next.

At 68-4 Australia were in a spot of bother, but Short and Renshaw fought hard through a fifth wicket stand of 55 before Minhas broke the stand, getting Short stumped.

Abrar returned for his second spell to dismiss Renshaw while Arafat completed his five-wicket haul by Nathan Ellis for eight.

Short hit six boundaries in his

fourth ODI half century while Renshaw's knock had five boundaries and a six.

The remaining two matches are in Lahore on Tuesday and Thursday.

BRIEF SCORES

Pakistan 202 for 5 (Babar 69, Ghori 65) **beat Australia 200** (Renshaw 61, Short 55, Minhas 5-32) **by five wickets**

COMMENT

Sooryavanshi, 15, 'more than ready' for India call-up: Sangakkara

AFP
India

Teenager Vaibhav Sooryavanshi has been the toast of the cricket world in a stunning IPL season for Rajasthan Royals - and coach Kumar Sangakkara says the 15-year-old is ready to represent India.

Sooryavanshi's 96 runs on Friday in the last playoff went in vain, as Rajasthan lost to Gujarat Titans by seven wickets to bow out of the T20 tournament.

But the season belonged to the left-handed Sooryavanshi, who leads the batting chart with 776 runs at an average of 48.50, with a punishing strike-rate of 237.30 in 16 matches.

He missed out on a century for the second straight time, but once again impressed with his 47-ball knock, laced with eight fours and seven sixes, in New Chandigarh.

"With everything Vaibhav's shown against some of the best bowlers in the world, I think he's more than ready to take on any challenge that you throw at him," Sangakkara said.

"I'm sure that he'll get that (India) call-up very, very soon. He's batted with a lot of maturity, he has shouldered the responsibility of that opening partnership so well for us this season."

The teenage sensation held the innings together after Rajasthan lost two quick wickets and reached his fifty in 31 balls - his slowest in the IPL.

Sooryavanshi changed gears, smashing a six off Jason Holder down the ground.

He fell to Kagiso Rabada after a mis-hit to deep third man, a dismissal similar to his previous when he struck a 29-ball 97 in the eliminator on Wednesday.

"I think we are very, very proud of the season that he's had," said Sangakkara.

"And we just want to make sure that he keeps going, keeps that intent, keeps that no-fear attitude and keeps growing. I think he's going to be even better as the years go by."

Sooryavanshi joined Rajasthan when he was 13, scoring a 35-ball century in his debut year in 2025 at age 14.

"I think we've got a good plan around him. We don't cut his mind too much," said former Sri Lanka captain Sangakkara.

"He comes to all our team meetings, he contributes, he listens. And he does a lot of homework. So we don't want to put any unnecessary thoughts into his head. I think a clear mind, batting with that courage is exactly what we want to see of him."

Sooryavanshi won praise from the opposition camp with Gujarat's director of cricket Vikram Solanki, saying the boy wonder is already among the T20 elite.

"I've not seen anyone bat like the way he bats, and I think in this format, probably he's right now one of the best batters in the world," said the former England batter. "And it's remarkable to see his biomechanics and his hand speed, and no matter what opposition he plays against... in the years to come, the opposition that he plays against is going to have a tough time against him."

TENNIS

Feisty Potapova dethrones Gauff, Parry beats Anisimova

Parry, who is a fan of PSG, was relieved to finish her third-round before the team's Champions League final

Reuters
Paris

Defending champion Coco Gauff was dramatically dethroned at the French Open by Anastasia Potapova, while world number one Aryna Sabalenka cut through the chaos to dismiss Daria Kasatkina and reach the Roland Garros fourth round yesterday.

After a brutal two days for fancied players at the claycourt Grand Slam during which Jannik Sinner and Novak Djokovic crashed out, Gauff was unable to find her best level and fell 4-6 7-6(1) 6-4 to join the scrap heap of stars.

"I don't know, I had chances," Gauff said.

"Just trying to capitalise more on these good points that I was hitting and not quite finishing... that was the difference, she was able to finish the points and I wasn't."

Gauff's premature exit leaves four-times champion Iga Swiatek and Sabalenka as the top contenders to win the Suzanne Lenglen Cup, while Potapova will be viewed as the dark horse having dished out a massive upset.

"I'm cramping a little bit, but it's OK, it's all good. I don't have any words now, I'm extremely happy," Potapova said in her on-court interview as she clutched her right arm after two hours and 37 minutes of big hitting.

"The fight we could show... Coco's such a champion and I respect her so much. I'm unbelievably proud of myself, that I stayed there, and that I was fighting until the last point."



Austria's Anastasia Potapova shakes hands with Coco Gauff of the US after winning their third-round match at the French Open in Paris yesterday. (Reuters)

Sabalenka earlier beat Kasatkina 6-0 7-5 on a sun-drenched Court Suzanne Lenglen for her 100th win as the top-ranked woman, making her only the ninth player to achieve the feat since the inception of the WTA rankings.

She joined Martina Navratilova, Steffi Graf, Chris Evert, Serena Williams, Martina Hingis, Monica Seles, Justine Henin and Swiatek in the honours list.

"I've got goosebumps," said Sabalenka, who struggled with dips in form and crippling service issues a few years ago.

"It means the world to me and I'm just happy that in the tough moments I stayed tough. I was

fighting and never gave up and that is what it has brought me."

Matteo Berrettini brought plenty of fight to his clash with Francisco Comesana, prevailing 7-6(3) 5-7 6-7(4) 6-4 7-6(15-13) in five hours and 13 minutes, to book an encounter with Sinner-slayer Juan Manuel Cerundolo.

Cerundolo came through his own epic, with a 6-4 6-7(9) 7-6(4) 6-7(4) 7-6(10-8) win over Martin Landaluce in a match that was two minutes short of six hours. But his brother Francisco went down 6-3 6-4 3-6 4-6 6-3 to Zachary Svajda.

Alejandro Tabilo ended the run of French 17-year-old Moise Ko-

uame 4-6 6-3 6-4 7-6(11-9) in another long contest, but local fans had plenty of reason to celebrate as Diane Parry battled past sixth seed Amanda Anisimova 6-3 4-6 7-6(10-3).

Potapova later rattled Gauff with powerful baseline hitting and broke to love in the opening game, before taking a 4-2 lead when the American slipped and dropped to the floor of Court Philippe Chatrier while trying to reach for the ball.

Gauff dusted herself off and won the next two games in front of a sparse centre court crowd, with the attention split between Paris St Germain's Champions League



France's Diane Parry celebrates after winning her third-round match against Amanda Anisimova of the US. (Reuters)

soccer final with Arsenal in Budapest and Kouame in action.

The 22-year-old raised her game again to take the first set, but Russian-born Potapova immediately ramped up the pressure and targeted the American's wobbly serve to grab a double break at the start of the second set.

Potapova was on the verge of levelling the match while ahead 5-2 but Gauff moved through the gears to surge ahead by claiming four games in a row, only to lose the next game and then the set in a tie-break where her serve let her down.

The pair traded breaks in a breathless decider, but world number four Gauff lost her way as

Potapova took control and won in style for a meeting with 22nd seed Anna Kalinskaya, who beat Camila Osorio 6-3 0-6 6-2.

Kalinskaya's Russian compatriot Diana Shnaider went through with a 7-5 6-1 win over Ukraine's Oleksandra Oliynykova, who criticised Russian players over their stance on Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Former world number one Naomi Osaka earlier dazzled with an all-gold outfit but had to dig deep for a hard-fought 7-6(5) 6-7(3) 6-4 victory over American teenager Iva Jovic. Italian Flavio Cobolli then sent out another young American with a 6-2 6-2 6-3 win over Learner Tien.

VERHOEVEN WANTS AN APOLOGY AS WELL AS A REMATCH WITH USYK

LONDON: Dutch former kickboxer Rico Verhoeven wants an apology, as well as a rematch, after being stopped one second before the end of the penultimate round in a WBC title bout with world heavyweight boxing champion Oleksandr Usyk last weekend. The stoppage was controversial, with Verhoeven feeling he could have continued and some replays suggesting the bell may have rung before the referee signalled the end of the fight at the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt. Scorecards published by *The Ring* magazine afterwards showed two of the three judges had the fight tied 95-95 going into the 11th of 12 rounds and the other had Verhoeven ahead 96-94.



"(I want) just an apology. What else can we do? I can't demand anything else," Verhoeven told the BBC yesterday, adding his

team had lodged an appeal with the WBC. "Mistakes can be made because we're all human and that's OK. But all I'm looking for actually is: 'yeah, sorry guys, this could have gone differently - this is something we have to look at and hopefully this doesn't happen in the future'." "That's it and then let's continue from there and get to the rematch." Germany's Agit Kabayel is the WBC's mandatory challenger and Usyk could have to fight him first before any rematch with Verhoeven. "Let's see what pops up next. But I have to be honest, it's got to be big. I feel like I'm the uncrowned king," said Verhoeven.

MOTOGP

Fernandez wins Italian sprint, Martin breaks Mugello speed record



Trackhouse MotoGP Team's staff celebrates with Spanish rider Raul Fernandez (centre) at the end of the sprint on the eve of the Italian Grand Prix at Mugello circuit near Florence yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Mugello, Italy

Spain's Raul Fernandez caused a major upset by speeding to a shock win in yesterday's sprint race at the Italian MotoGP, while Jorge Martin set a new speed record at Mugello as he chipped away at Marco Bezzecchi's championship lead.

The Aprilia-Trackhouse rider finished over a second ahead of former world champion and fellow Spaniard Martin at Mugello, claiming his second win in motorcycling's premier class of racing.

Fabio Di Giannantonio, who was fastest in all three practice sessions but started seventh on the grid, was over three seconds back in third.

Fernandez had to battle through the first qualifying session to have a shot at the top grid positions and he impressed again from the front row, where he was sandwiched between Bezzecchi and Martin.

Second on the grid was Fernandez's best ever starting position and he then gambled with a medium rear tyre while the rest of the riders opted for a soft on a hot day in Tuscany.

It was a gamble which paid off as he quickly tore ahead of Bezzecchi, who had qualified in pole position with a track record lap time, with only Martin able to stay anywhere near him.

"I'm super happy, I'm speechless... I've felt great since yester-

day (Friday), so I want to thank the team a lot," Fernandez said yesterday.

"I tried (the medium) and it worked, so that's great. We'll try to win again tomorrow."

Bezzecchi ended up finishing a disappointing fourth and the Aprilia rider is now 12 points in front of his teammate Martin ahead of today's Grand Prix.

Martin broke a record of his own by reaching the fastest speed ever clocked at Mugello with an astonishing 368.6 kilometres per hour (229 miles per hour), around 2 kph more than the previous quickest mark set by Brad Binder and Pol Espargaro.

"It was one of the targets that we had. It's super exciting to reach the highest speed ever," said Aprilia Racing Technical Director Fabio Di Giannantonio.

"I'm not discounting reaching 370 kph because clearly, with the right wind direction and slipstream, another 2 kph is possible!" Italian Bezzecchi finished one place ahead of reigning world champion Marc Marquez, who was returning after shoulder surgery and a broken foot suffered 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 means he will miss the GPs both in Mugello and next weekend in Hungary.

CYCLING

Vingegaard claims Giro stage 20

Reuters
Gemona Del Friuli

Overall leader Jonas Vingegaard launched an attack during the punishing final climb to clinch victory in stage 20 of the Giro d'Italia yesterday, ensuring that he will win the race provided he reaches the finish line in the final stage in Rome.

The 29-year-old from Denmark, who won the Tour de France twice before winning the Vuelta a Espana last year, is on the verge of securing his fourth Grand Tour title, as he sits five minutes and 22 seconds ahead of second-placed Felix Gall in the general classification.

Austrian Gall finished second after failing to chase down Vingegaard in the final 11 kilometres, as Australia's Jai Hindley completed the podium.

Today's final stage in Rome will be a victory parade for Giro debutant Vingegaard, with the general classification no longer in contention.

"Today everything would be decided, so we decided to go all in for the stage... to now win five stages here and have a solid lead going into tomorrow is special for me," said Vingegaard, who has led the overall leader's pink jersey since stage 14.

A group of five led by Jonas Geens broke away early, soon to be joined by two chasers, as the peloton hung back during the early



Team Visma Lease a Bike Danish rider Jonas Vingegaard wearing the overall leader's pink jersey celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win in the 20th stage of the Giro d'Italia 2026 - Tour of Italy cycling race between Gemona del Friuli and Piancavallo, Italy, yesterday. (AFP)

section of the stage that included the steep 14.5km climb to Piancavallo that the riders needed to complete twice.

Vingegaard, who was more than four minutes ahead of Gall coming into the stage, was happy to ride safely in the peloton for the first two-thirds of the stage between two Visma-Lease a Bike teammates.

With just over 100km to go, Fredrik Dversnes, who won stage 15, crashed with Tobias Bayer at a bend right next to a ditch.

Both riders continued, with Norwegian Dversnes bleeding

down the left leg.

VINGEGAARD LAUNCHES DECISIVE ATTACK

Visma-Lease a Bike riders were at the front of the peloton during the first climb to Piancavallo, with the breakaway group, now down to five, more than three minutes ahead.

The gap had shrunk to a minute and 23 seconds by the time the leaders reached the top.

Giulio Ciccone sped to the front of the peloton to be the sixth rider to reach the top, as the 31-year-old Italian consolidated his lead in the

mountains classification, making sure he will win the Giro d'Italia's blue jersey for the second time by finishing the race on Sunday.

During the second and final ascent to Piancavallo, Vingegaard launched a decisive attack with just over 11km to go, and surged to the front of the race as Gall chased him.

But Vingegaard comfortably secured the win, finishing a minute and 15 seconds before Gall.

"The plan was to go later on in the climb, but we had to change the plans a bit... tomorrow we will enjoy the day," Vingegaard added.

QATAR TEAM LEAVES FOR USA TO TAKE PART IN FIFA WORLD CUP



Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui and the 26-member squad pose in front of a Qatar Airways plane with FIFA World Cup livery in Dublin, Ireland, yesterday. Qatar left for Los Angeles to take part in the 2026 FIFA World Cup. **RIGHT:** Qatar's football heroes Akram Afif (centre) and Hasan al-Haydos posed inside the cockpit area of the Qatar Airways plane on way to Los Angeles, the United States, yesterday. Qatar have a final warm-up fixture against El Salvador on June 6. The 2026 FIFA World Cup will take place across the United States, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19.

FOOTBALL

Liverpool sack Slot, Iraola in line to take over

Dutchman has been sacked by Liverpool after two seasons in charge

AFP
Liverpool

Liverpool sacked manager Arne Slot yesterday, saying the club were seeking a "change of direction", after a disastrous defence of their Premier League title.

The Reds finished fifth in the table, 25 points behind champions Arsenal, despite spending a Premier League record of nearly £450 million (\$605 million) on new players in one transfer window last year. Outgoing Bournemouth boss Andoni Iraola is reportedly set to take over at Anfield after leading the Cherries into Europe for the first time in the club's history.

Just over a year ago Slot was heralded as a hero after taking on the daunting role of succeeding Jurgen Klopp and leading Liverpool to a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title in his first season in charge.

But fans turned on the Dutchman this season after a series of lacklustre performances and poor results. Liverpool lost 19 times in all competitions and a return of 60 Premier League points was their lowest since the 2015/16 season.

There was also sign of dressing room disharmony, most notably from Mohamed Salah on his way out of the club. In an explosive social media post earlier this month, Salah called for a return to "heavy metal football", referring to Klopp's high energy style of play, in a perceived dig at Slot's more cautious approach.

That post was liked by multiple members of the Liverpool squad. "I'm not surprised," former Liv-



Liverpool manager Arne Slot departs after disappointing title defence. (AFP)

erpool captain Steven Gerrard told TNT Sports. "I'm gutted for Arne Slot because in his first year, he did an incredible job.

"Taking the reins from the great Jurgen Klopp, that was a tough task and big shoes to fill. I think he did it seamlessly. It's very difficult to win the Premier League, and I know that more than most."

Despite their troubles, it had been reported that Slot would be handed a stay of execution after securing Champions League qualification. However, the club's owners, the American-based Fenway Sports Group, have succumbed to fan pressure to axe the former Feyenoord boss. "The conclusion we have come to is built on a belief that the team's trajectory

is best addressed through a change of direction," the club said in a statement. "That does not diminish the work Arne has done here, or the respect we have for him. Nor is it a reflection of his talents. Rather, it is indicative of the need for a different approach.

"Arne leaves with our gratitude, with a Premier League title to his name, and with the knowledge that he and his family will always be welcomed back at Anfield." Liverpool added that "the process to appoint a successor is under way".

Many fans were keen for the return of Xabi Alonso to Anfield, but the club's former midfielder will instead take charge of Chelsea next season. Iraola's stock is high after an 18-game unbeaten

league run to finish the campaign in sixth, just three points behind Liverpool despite vastly inferior resources. The Spaniard also worked together with Liverpool sporting director Richard Hughes, who previously held a similar role at Bournemouth. Slot ultimately paid for failing to get a return on Liverpool's huge investment last summer.

British transfer record signing Alexander Isak was beset by fitness problems, while Florian Wirtz struggled with the transition to the Premier League after a £100 million move from Bayer Leverkusen. Slot, though, also had to deal with emotional turmoil caused by the death of forward Diogo Jota in a car accident in July.

FOCUS

Neymar fit for 'first or second' World Cup match: Ancelotti

AFP
Teresopolis, Brazil

Brazil star Neymar is on course to shake off a calf strain and could even be ready for their opening match of the World Cup, coach Carlo Ancelotti said yesterday.

After reports the 34-year-old forward could be out for three weeks, Ancelotti instead insisted Neymar was working well towards fitness for the June 13 match against Morocco in New Jersey.

"We believe he'll be back very soon and if he doesn't make it for the opener, he'll be there for the second game," said Italian Ancelotti.

Former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain star Neymar, now at Brazilian club Santos, will miss Brazil's two pre-World Cup friendlies against Panama and Egypt.

Brazil play Panama Sunday



at the Maracana stadium before setting up camp in New Jersey on Monday and playing a final warm-up against Egypt on June 6 in Cleveland.

Neymar's inclusion in Ancelotti's 26-man squad for the World Cup was something of a surprise as he had not been picked for the national team in almost three years due to a mixture of injuries and poor form.

However, Neymar is Brazil's all-time leading goalscorer with 79 goals in 128 appearances for the Selecao. This will be his fourth World Cup.

SPOTLIGHT

Ream to captain World Cup co-hosts USA

AFP
Los Angeles

Veteran defender Tim Ream will captain the United States at the World Cup, as the co-hosts seek to make a deep run at the tournament which kicks off in less than two weeks, coach Mauricio Pochettino said yesterday.

Center-back Ream, 38, who spent over a decade playing for English clubs Fulham and Bolton Wanderers, was the obvious choice given his experience and leadership among a young squad, said Pochettino. "He was my first captain when we arrived... I am so grateful that he's with us," said Pochettino, who took over in September 2024.

"It's so lucky to have a player like him, with his personality and his character involved, and helping the young players."

Ream has captained the US in 16 of the 23 matches since Pochettino became coach, becoming a trusted voice of experience and link to the locker room for his manager. Bournemouth midfielder Tyler Adams, 27, had captained the US at the last World Cup, and is also in the current squad.

Pochettino was quick to note that the captaincy does not mean Ream - who would be the oldest player ever to represent the US at a World Cup - is guaranteed to make the starting 11.

Ream said captaining his nation at a World Cup was "more than a dream come true," and the "highest honor."

The US take on Paraguay in their first game, in Los Angeles on June 12. Group D also contains Australia and Turkey.

The co-hosts will play every game on home soil, and are favorites to progress from a competitive and evenly matched group. Pochettino has previously spoken of his ambition to win the World Cup, which would be

a monumental upset given the strength of favorites such as France, Spain and his native Argentina.

Yesterday, Pochettino said the US national team's structure had been designed to help the team "win the World Cup, or maybe be there for sure in the top."

The coach, whose US national team contract expires after the World Cup, was not asked about rumored talks with Italian giants AC Milan at yesterday's press conference. The US will tune up for the tournament with a friendly against Senegal in Charlotte, North Carolina, on Sunday, followed by a match against Germany in Chicago next weekend.

Of the 26-man squad named by Pochettino on Tuesday, the only injury doubt was Crystal Palace's Chris Richards.

The defender was on the bench for Crystal Palace's UEFA Conference League final win, as he recovers from an ankle injury, and will not travel to Charlotte with the rest of the squad.

"I think he needs to keep doing his rehab, and I think it's much better to stay here and plan to train and reevaluate next week," said Pochettino, speaking at the national team's new Atlanta base.

"It's too early. We need to see. The next few days are going to be key to see the possibilities to be ready or not on the World Cup," added the coach.

Teams must submit their official rosters to FIFA by Monday, but can replace players who are injured up to 24 hours before their first game, said a team spokesman. Pochettino described this weekend's opposition, Senegal, as "one of the contenders" for the World Cup, but made it clear that winning the friendly would not be his top priority. "The objective is to compete well, but not taking risk, and of course being safe here Sunday night to start to train Monday," he said.

YOUNOUSSE-TIJAN ADVANCE TO OSTRAVA SEMIS



Qatar's beach volleyball stars Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan advanced to the semi-finals of the Ostrava Elite16 in the Czech Republic after recording two impressive victories yesterday. The Tokyo Olympic bronze medalists first defeated Sweden's Jacob Holting Nilsson and Elmer Andersson 21-19, 21-18 in the Round of 16 before overcoming Argentina's Nicolas Capogrosso and Tomas Capogrosso in a hard-fought quarter-final. After dropping the opening set 19-21, the Qatari duo bounced back to win the next two sets 21-15, 21-19 and secure their place in the last four. Younousse and Tijan will face Sweden's Olympic champions David Ahman and Jonatan Hellvig in today's semi-final as they bid to reach the final of the prestigious Beach Pro Tour Elite16 event.