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**FOOTBALL**

# Qatar face challenging but balanced test at World Cup

Switzerland, Canada and Bosnia provide varied test for Qatar as they aim to reach knockout stage

By Sahar Bidappa  
Doha

Four years ago, Qatar entered the FIFA World Cup carrying the weight of a nation and the expectations that accompanied more than a decade of investment in football.

Instead of a fairy-tale home tournament, they endured a harsh reality check, becoming the first host nation in World Cup history to lose all three group-stage matches.

The disappointment of 2022 remains a defining chapter in Qatar's football story, but it is no longer the only one.

Since then, the Asian champions have quietly rebuilt their credentials. They retained the AFC Asian Cup title in 2024, confirming that their 2019 triumph was no one-off achievement, and secured qualification for the 2026 World Cup on merit rather than through automatic host status.

Drawn in Group B alongside Switzerland, Canada and Bosnia & Herzegovina, Qatar find themselves in what many regard as one of the tournament's most balanced sections. There are no overwhelming favourites, but equally no easy matches. Advancement to the knockout rounds would represent a significant milestone for Julen Lopetegui's side.

To achieve that, Qatar must overcome three opponents with very different strengths - a Swiss side renowned for consistency, a Canadian team buoyed by home support and growing confidence, and a Bosnian squad blending veteran experience with emerging talent.



Qatar will arrive at the World Cup in North America seeking to redefine themselves after a disappointing tournament in 2022 at home soil.

## RESURGENT SWISS SEEK BREAKTHROUGH WORLD CUP

Switzerland enter the tournament as the highest-ranked and most established side in Group B, carrying a reputation for reliability that has made them one of Europe's most consistent performers over the past decade.

The Swiss are appearing at their sixth consecutive World Cup and have become experts at navigating qualification campaigns and group stages. Their challenge has come afterwards. Five times in their last six World Cup appearances they have reached the round of 16 only to fall short, creating a frustrating pattern they are desperate to break.

Confidence, however, is high. Murat Yakin's side enjoyed an impressive Euro 2024 campaign and have remained unbeaten in competitive matches since late 2024. Defensively they are among the most difficult teams to break down, conceding only two goals throughout qualifying.

Captain Granit Xhaka remains the team's leader and driving force in midfield, while defender Manuel Akanji anchors a disciplined back line. In attack, Breel Embolo, Ruben Vargas, Dan Ndoye and Noah Okafor provide pace and versatility, while emerging talent Johan Manzambi adds youthful excitement.

Switzerland will likely view progression from Group B as the minimum expectation. For Qatar, opening their campaign against the Swiss in Santa Clara could prove pivotal. A positive result would immediately alter the complexion of the group, while defeat would place additional pressure on the remaining matches.

## CANADA TARGET MEMORABLE WORLD CUP ON HOME SOIL

Co-hosts Canada return to the World Cup determined to build on the momentum generated by their qualification for Qatar 2022, which ended a 36-year absence from football's biggest stage. Although they lost all three matches four years ago, the experience proved transformative for a generation of Canadian players now entering their prime.

Under American coach Jesse Marsch, Canada have become one of CONCACAF's most dynamic teams. Their run to the Copa America semi-finals in 2024 demonstrated growing maturity and suggested they are capable of competing with established football nations.

The squad boasts genuine star power.



Recurring injuries have created uncertainty around Canada's captain Alphonso Davies' availability.



Alphonso Davies remains the face of Canadian football, though recurring injuries have created uncertainty around his fitness heading into the tournament. If fully fit, the Bayern Munich defender's pace and attacking threat make him one of the most influential full-backs in world football.

Alongside him is Juventus striker Jonathan David, Canada's all-time leading scorer and primary goal threat. Winger Tajon Buchanan adds pace and creativity, having emerged as one of Canada's stand-out performers at the previous World Cup.

Playing in front of home crowds in Toronto and Vancouver provides Canada with a significant advantage. Their meeting with Qatar in Vancouver could ultimately determine which team joins Switzerland in the race for the knockout rounds.

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## BOSNIA BLEND EXPERIENCE WITH A NEW GENERATION

Bosnia & Herzegovina arrive at the World Cup as perhaps the least predictable side in the group.

Their route to North America was dramatic, overcoming Wales and Italy through playoff victories to secure only the country's second World Cup appearance after debuting in Brazil in 2014.

At the centre of their story remains veteran striker Edin Dzeko. Now 40, Bosnia's all-time leading scorer continues to defy age and remains the team's emotional and tactical focal point. One of only two survivors from the 2014 squad, Dzeko provides invaluable experience to a group increasingly shaped by younger talent.

Among the emerging stars is 18-year-old winger Kerim Alajbegovic, whose per-



After going unbeaten in qualifying, Switzerland are the heavy favourites in Group B.



Bosnia & Herzegovina arrive at the World Cup as perhaps the least predictable side.

formances during the playoffs announced him as one of Bosnia's brightest prospects. Playmaker Esmir Bajraktarevic and newly eligible midfielder Ermin Mahmic further highlight the fresh talent coming through the system.

Manager Sergej Barbarez has assembled a squad that balances veteran leadership with youthful enthusiasm. That combina-

tion makes Bosnia difficult to assess. While they lack the pedigree of Switzerland or the home advantage enjoyed by Canada, they possess enough quality to trouble any opponent in the group.

Qatar's final group match against Bosnia in Seattle could potentially become a decisive encounter, particularly if qualification remains in the balance.

## GROUP B SQUADS

### CANADA

**Goalkeepers:** Maxime Crepeau (Orlando City), Owen Goodman (Crystal Palace), Dayne St Clair (Inter Miami)

**Defenders:** Moise Bombito (OGC Nice), Derek Cornelius (Olympique de Marseille), Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich), Luc de Fougerolles (Fulham), Alistair Johnston (Celtic), Alfie Jones (Middlesbrough), Richie Laryea (Toronto FC), Niko Sigur (Hajduk Split), Joel Waterman (Chicago Fire)

**Midfielders:** Ali Ahmed (Norwich City), Tajon Buchanan (Villarreal), Mathieu Choiniere (LAFC), Stephen Eustaquio (Porto), Marcelo Flores (Tigres UANL), Ismael Kone (U.S. Sassuolo Calcio), Liam Millar (Hull City), Jonathan Osorio (Toronto FC), Nathan Saliba (Anderlecht), Jacob Shaffelburg (LAFC)

**Forwards:** Jonathan David (Juventus), Promise David (Union Saint-Gilloise), Cyle Larin (Mallorca), Tani Oluwaseyi (Villarreal)

### BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

**Goalkeepers:** Nikola Vasilj (St Pauli), Martin Zlomiscic (Rijeka), Osman Hadzicic (Slaven Belupo)

**Defenders:** Sead Kolasinac (Atalanta), Amar Dedic (Benfica), Nihad Mujakic (Gaziantep), Nikola Katic (Schalke 04), Tarik Muharemovic (Sassuolo), Stjepan Radeljic (Rijeka), Dennis Hadzicadunic (Sampdoria), Nidal Celik (Lens)

**Midfielders:** Amir Hadziahmetovic (Hull City), Ivan Sunjic (Pafos), Ivan Basic (Astana), Dzenis Burnic (Karlsruher SC), Ermin Mahmic (Slovan Liberec), Benjamin Tahirovic (Brondby), Amar Memic (Viktoria Plzen), Armin Gigovic (Young Boys), Kerim Alajbegovic (RB Salzburg), Esmir Bajraktarevic (PSV Eindhoven)

**Forwards:** Ermedin Demirovic (VfB Stuttgart), Jovo Lukic (Universitatea Cluj), Samed Bazdar (Jagiellonia Bialystok), Haris Tabakovic (Borussia Moenchengladbach), Edin Dzeko (Schalke 04)

### QATAR

**Goalkeepers:** Salah Zakaria, Mahmoud Abunada, Meshaal Barsham

**Defenders:** Hashmi Hussein, Ayoub Alawi, Boualem Khoukhi, Pedro Miguel, Issa Laaye, Lucas Mendes, Sultan al-Brake, Homam al-Amin

**Midfielders:** Mohammed al-Manai, Jassem Jaber, Karim Bouafia, Ahmed Fathi, Abdulaziz Hatem, Assim Madibo

**Forwards:** Tahseen Mohammed, Edmilson Junior, Almoez Ali, Akram Afif, Mohammed Muntari, Youssef Abdullrazzaq, Ahmed Alaa, Hassan al-Haydos, Ahmed al-Janahi

### SWITZERLAND

**Goalkeepers:** Marvin Keller (Young Boys Bern), Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund), Yvon Mvogo (Lorient)

**Defenders:** Manuel Akanji (Inter Milan), Aurele Amenda (Eintracht Frankfurt), Eray Comert (Valencia), Nico Elvedi (Borussia Moenchengladbach), Luca Jaquez (VfB Stuttgart), Miro Muheim (Hamburg), Ricardo Rodriguez (Real Betis), Silvan Widmer (Mainz)

**Midfielders:** Michel Aebischer (Pisa), Christian Fassnacht (Young Boys Bern), Remo Freuler (Bologna), Ardon Jashari (AC Milan), Johan Manzambi (Freiburg), Fabian Rieder (Augsburg), Djibril Sow, Ruben Vargas (both Sevilla), Granit Xhaka (Sunderland), Denis Zakaria (Monaco)

**Forwards:** Zeki Amdouni (Burnley), Breel Embolo (Stade Rennais), Cedric Itten (Fortuna Düsseldorf), Dan Ndoye (Nottingham Forest), Noah Okafor (Leeds United).

ODI

# Pakistan upstage Australia for series win

AFP  
Lahore

**S**pearhead Shaheen Shah Afridi and Shadab Khan starred in Pakistan's four-wicket win in their decisive third and final one-day international against Australia in Lahore yesterday.

Shaheen grabbed 3-30 to bundle Australia out for 157 before Shadab added a fighting 29 not out to his two wickets, helping Pakistan to their winning target in 41.5 overs.

That gave Pakistan a 2-1 series win - their third successive ODI series victory over Australia - after they won the first match by five wickets in Rawalpindi. Australia won the second by 41 runs, also in Lahore.

Left-arm spinner Matthew Kuhnemann's career best 3-38 -- including Babar Azam's wicket for 40 - had given the visitors some hope of an unlikely win.

At 112-6, Pakistan were in a spot of bother but Shadab found an able partner in Abdul Samad as the duo added a match-winning 49 runs for the unbroken seventh wicket

stand. Shadab's second boundary sealed the win, while Samad's 18 not out included one boundary.

Shaheen praised a complete team effort.

"All bowlers executed plans well to keep Australia down to 157," said Shaheen.

"The conditions were tough for the batters but the players put in a great effort.

"I think it was a complete team effort throughout the series."

Australian captain Josh Inglis praised his team.

"I thought the bowlers and the fielding group made a great effort to put us in a position to potentially win the game, but it wasn't to be in the end," he said.

"We have some young and inexperienced guys so it's a great learning experience for them."

Earlier, Shaheen was ably supported by Abrar Ahmed (2-19) and Shadab (2-28) as Australia's innings folded in 42 overs after they won the toss and batted.

Spinners Abrar and Shadab built on Shaheen's early strikes as Pakistan made a strong comeback after a disappointing loss in the second game.

Inglis top-scored with a 71-ball



Pakistan players celebrate after winning the third and final ODI against Australia in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

65 which included eight boundaries and a six, with Marnus Labuschagne and Alex Carey scoring 19 each and Adam Zampa making 10.

Shaheen had Matthew Short caught off the second ball of the match before Inglis added 46 for the second wicket with Labuschagne and another 52 for the

third with Carey.

But Australia lost their last seven wickets for a meagre 38 runs with two run outs also hurting their innings.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Pakistan 161 for 6** (Babar 40, Kuhnemann 3-38) **beat Australia 157** (Inglis 65, Afridi 3-30) **by four wickets.**

LORD'S TEST

# Robinson rocks NZ after England collapse on Day 1

New Zealand's Jamieson takes five wickets as England crumble for 140

AFP  
London

**O**llie Robinson marked his first Test for more than two years with four wickets, including three in a sensational opening over, as New Zealand slumped to 61-6 before bad light cut short the first day's play at Lord's yesterday.

This is the 150th Test at Lord's and rarely in the long history of the London ground can the first day have been quite so dramatic, with 16 wickets in total falling before stumps.

Recalled Sussex seamer Robinson had remarkable figures of four wickets for 10 runs in just six overs at the close.

England led by 79 runs at stumps despite being dismissed for just 140 themselves after losing the toss.

Batsmen on both sides struggled in the overcast, bowler-friendly conditions, with even New Zealand great Kane Williamson, blessed with one of the best defensive techniques of his generation, falling for nought to Robinson.

Robinson, bowling the second over of the innings, took three wickets for no runs in four balls to leave New Zealand reeling at 2-3, with the normally reserved Lord's crowd chanting his name.

The 32-year-old had Devon Conway lbw with his third ball and then removed Williamson and Rachin Ravindra for ducks with the last two balls of his first over.

Williamson, in what could be the 35-year-old's last appearance at Lord's, was caught off bat and pad as the ball lobbed gently to short leg. Ravindra was then lbw to Robinson, after being hit on the back leg.

His review failed to overturn the decision of Australian umpire Rod Tucker, who was standing in his 100th Test. Robinson's previous 20 Tests had yielded 76 wickets at an impressive average of under 23 apiece.



England's Ollie Robinson celebrates with team-mates after taking the wicket of New Zealand's Kane Williamson on the opening day of the first Test at Lord's in London yesterday. (AFP)

But doubts about his stamina and attitude, if not his skill, meant that this was his first Test since February 2024.

Gus Atkinson then had New Zealand captain Tom Latham lbw.

Robinson struck again, bowling Daryl Mitchell for 12.

Fast bowler Josh Tongue bowled Tom Blundell to leave New Zealand reeling at 29-6 in just 13 overs.

Glenn Phillips (31 not out) and Nathan Smith prevented further collapse before bad light curtailed play despite the floodlights being switched on.

Earlier, New Zealand's Kyle Jamieson took 5-62 in 14 overs - the sixth five-wicket haul of the towering 31-year-old fast bowler's 20-Test career.

Harry Brook, with 56, was the lone England batsman to offer meaningful resistance and he was

dropped twice during an otherwise impressive New Zealand fielding display. New Zealand's pacemen made England suffer, even though Matt Henry, who was passed fit following a hamstring strain, only managed four overs before leaving the field.

Debutant opener Emilio Gay was out for eight, while Joe Root and Jamie Smith both scored just one run apiece in England's first Test since their woeful 4-1 Ashes series loss in Australia concluded in January.

Gay, who was playing in place of dropped batsman Zak Crawley, emulated England great David Gower by hitting his first ball in Test cricket for four before edging Jamieson to Mitchell in the slips.

Will O'Rourke (3-38) captured the key wicket of Root before Smith was bowled playing no shot

by a Jamieson ball that cut back and knocked out his off stump.

England captain Ben Stokes, on his 35th birthday, fell for 12 when an edge off Jamieson was superbly caught low and one-handed by Williamson, diving in front of first slip.

Brook, who was dropped early in his innings had another reprieve, on 45, when Ravindra floored a straightforward catch at midwicket.

The batsman completed a 64-ball fifty but holed out soon afterwards before a last-wicket partnership of 22 between Tongue and Shoab Bashir boosted England's total.

**BRIEF SCORES: NZ 61 for 6** (Phillips 31\*, Robinson 4-10) **trail England 140** (Brook 56, Jamieson 5-62, Smith 3-38) **by 79 runs.**

FOCUS

## Plan to merge Big Bash's Melbourne teams sparks 'anxiety' for players

AFP  
Melbourne

**M**elbourne's two Big Bash League sides - the Stars and the Renegades - are set to merge into a single Twenty20 franchise, but the move has sparked "confusion, uncertainty and anxiety" among players.

Cricket Victoria's plan unveiled Wednesday will see the Melbourne Stars retained by the state governing body but rebranded and the Melbourne Renegades sold entirely to private investors.

It follows the stalling of a Cricket Australia proposal in April to privatise partially Twenty20 league's eight teams to shore up the game's financial future, which failed to secure unanimous agreement.

Cricket Victoria was in favour, but governing bodies from New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia had reservations. A hybrid ownership model was suggested as a compromise and Victoria has pushed ahead, reportedly blindsiding the other states who have demanded an emergency meeting with Cricket Australia.

"Basically what we're looking to do is merge the Stars and Renegades brands, that will free up one license," Cricket Victoria chief Nick Cummins told Fox Sports on Thursday.

"And our intention is to sell that license to a private investor at 100 percent -- title ownership, change the name. And then have another team that is owned by Cricket Victoria and would represent Victorian cricket."

Cummins said there had been interest from local investors but

also from the United States, Europe and Asia with a deal potentially completed in time for the new season in December.

But the move has sparked a backlash with players and other states caught by surprise.

The Australian newspaper said the sport was on the verge of "all-out civil war".

Renegades players impacted include Nathan Lyon and Adam Zampa while the Stars' big names include Marcus Stoinis and Glenn Maxwell.

The Australian Cricketers' Association argued the merger plans were premature.

"Under the Memorandum of Understanding between CA, the states and the ACA, it is clear that agreement must be reached with the ACA for any Big Bash clubs to be privatised," chief executive Paul Marsh said in a statement.

"Whilst a potential agreement between CA and the ACA is being discussed, it is not imminent and as such, any talk of privatising any teams for the coming season is premature."

Marsh added: "Cricket Victoria's announcement about a merger between the Stars and Renegades with the introduction of a new, privately-owned club has created confusion, uncertainty and anxiety amongst players."

Cricket Australia has been vocal about the need to bring outside investment into the BBL to keep pace with a boom in other well-funded T20 leagues played in a similar time slot.

But NSW and Queensland are concerned about a loss of control for the game's local custodians and that player payments could skyrocket to unsustainable levels.

## Nepal apologise after Bhutan batter's 'timed out' dismissal

The Cricket Association of Nepal apologised after its players got a Bhutan batter 'timed out' in yesterday's ACC Women's Premier Cup match, saying the dismissal was within the laws but did not reflect the spirit of the game it wanted to uphold. Bhutan's Ritshi Choden, coming on at number three after opener Ngawang Choden was bowled out off the first ball of the innings, was not at the crease within the stipulated two minutes after the fall of the previous wicket, leading to the Nepal players appealing for dismissal.

The dismissal left Bhutan reeling at 0-2 after the first ball, chasing a target of 114 in the Twenty20 match. Bhutan could only score 62-8 in their 20 overs, as Nepal won their second straight Group D match in Mantin, Malaysia. "The incident involving the timed-out dismissal of a Bhutanese batter during today's match does not reflect the values and spirit of cricket that the Cricket Association of Nepal

(CAN) strives to uphold," the national body said in a statement. "On behalf of the Cricket Association of Nepal, we extend our sincere apologies for the actions of our women's national team in this matter."

"While the dismissal was effected within the laws of cricket, we recognise that the spirit of the game extends beyond the written laws and must remain central to our conduct at all times."

The rare 'timed out' dismissal has often been hotly debated, with some considering it against the spirit of the game to appeal for a batter's dismissal over the breach of the strict two-minute time limit mandated by the ICC. Sri Lanka's Angelo Mathews was the first batter to be 'timed out' in international cricket at the 50-over World Cup in 2023 when his helmet strap broke as he was coming on to bat against Bangladesh and asked for a replacement, which delayed him.

(Reuters)

## BALSAMO WINS AGAIN ON CROSSWIND-HIT GIRO STAGE SIX

Italian Elisa Balsamo won a bunch sprint yesterday to rack up a fourth win in six stages at the women's Giro d'Italia, as Anna Van der Breggen maintained her overall lead. Balsamo was led out by world cyclo-cross champion Lucinda Brand on the narrow streets into Brescello to add to her wins in the

three opening stages. After two days of mountains, Balsamo again proved her dominance on the flat and has an iron grip on the sprint points jersey. This final flat stage over 160km from Ala to Brescello through the Po valley and along the shores of Lake Garda was complicated by crosswinds that fractured the

peloton. Several overall contenders including race favourite Demi Vollerung and Switzerland's Marlen Reusser were caught out at one stage. Movistar's Reusser was forced into a frantic 15 kilometre-long chase to rejoin the lead peloton. Van der Breggen had prudently stayed at the head of the peloton when

blustery gusts hit. She retained the pink jersey with a one minute-lead over Vollerung. Antonia Niedermaier of Germany is third at 1min 24sec. Today's stage seven features a sole climb before two mountain stages to conclude the 2026 edition.

(AFP)

TENNIS

# Zverev meets Mensik in semi-final with eye on next step

Reuters  
Paris

Alexander Zverev will carry mounting expectations into today's French Open semi-final against dangerous Czech Jakub Mensik, as the second seed aims to close in on an elusive Grand Slam title after shock exits opened up the draw for him.

What began with defending champion Carlos Alcaraz's injury withdrawal has turned into a tournament of surprises with world number one Jannik Sinner and 24-times Grand Slam winner Novak Djokovic losing to leave Zverev as the most established title contender. Zverev, the 2020 Tokyo Olympic gold medalist and twice ATP Finals champion, has never won a Grand Slam trophy despite final appearances at the U.S. Open, French Open and Australian Open, with Paris now offering the German his clearest opportunity.

"I don't particularly care," the 29-year-old Zverev told reporters about his elevation as the overwhelming favourite for the Musketeers' Cup.

"I focus on next match, and I focus on the opponent as they cross

the net, and that's the only thing that I can control.

"If I win those matches, then that's great."

Zverev has been in this territory before and knows that the margins only tighten from here, with composure and trust in his game likely to be decisive under intense pressure from himself. "For me it's quite simple, it's me playing well," added Zverev, who dismissed Rafael Nadal in the quarter-finals.

"I've said it before, I think I really have to trust my game, and I have to trust my tennis and trust myself. If I play well, then I think that's 99% of the work."

Standing between Zverev and a fourth major final is 26th-seeded Czech Mensik, who is also chasing a maiden Grand Slam title at a very different stage of his career, with two ATP titles to his opponent's 24.

While Zverev has cruised through the draw, dropping only one set, the 20-year-old Mensik has been pushed hard, coming through a four-setter and two five-set battles including his second-round match after which he collapsed on court in intense heat.

Djokovic-mentored Mensik's ice-cold execution was on full display as he beat Brazilian brea-



Germany's Alexander Zverev plays a backhand return to Spain's Rafael Nadal during the French Open quarter-final in Paris on Tuesday. (AFP)

kout teenager Joao Fonseca in the quarter-finals, with his big serve, flat backhand and first-strike instincts set to pose a real challenge for Zverev.

"I'm playing better and better," Mensik said, full of belief that he can overturn a recent defeat

by Zverev in Madrid. "Even that match with Sascha, it was a close one. It was best-of-three sets. Right now, it's some different situation. "Of course, the semi-finals, I would say it's a bigger match and best-of-five sets. I'm excited for the challenge."

In the second semi-final, two Italians will look to sparkle in Sinner's absence, with 10th seed Flavio Cobolli facing Matteo Arnaldi, as both players chase a rare Grand Slam opportunity in uncharted territory. Sinner and Alcaraz have largely left the new generation of

players well behind, carving up the last nine Grand Slam titles between them, and their absence has shifted the attention onto the chasing pack.

"I never put pressure on myself," said the 24-year-old Cobolli, who tamed tough winds and Felix Auger-Aliassime to reach the last four.

"I like to live the moment as if I was kid, with passion, and a big smile. That's what I'll do for the next one too.

"For sure, it'll be another derby, but I think we have to be happy for Italian tennis. Another Italian, apart from Sinner ... in the final this week.

"So we have to be happy and we have to enjoy that match."

Arnaldi advanced after compatriot Matteo Berrettini retired with a hip injury, but the short workout will be a blessing for the world number 104 who has played two five-setters and has been on court for nearly 20 hours this fortnight.

"It's crazy to think I'm in the semi-finals," Arnaldi said.

"I've been playing a lot, but at the same time I'm happy to be on court, because I miss playing. I have some energy left for the next matches."

FRENCH OPEN

# Chwalinska topples Shnaider to book final with Andreeva

Andreeva races past Kostyuk to enter her first Grand Slam final

AFP  
Paris

Maja Chwalinska made French Open history yesterday as the world number 114 became the first qualifier in the professional era to reach the Roland Garros final, where she will take on Mirra Andreeva.

The Pole downed Diana Shnaider 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 in the last four to join Russian 19-year-old Andreeva, a straight-sets winner over Marta Kostyuk, in Saturday's title-decider.

Should she best Andreeva in the final, Chwalinska will become just the second woman to come through qualifying and win a Grand Slam final in any major since the Open era began, after Emma Raducanu's title run at the US Open in 2021.

The 24-year-old said her run in the French capital was "like a dream", moments after beating 25th seed Shnaider, who a day before eliminated world number one Aryna Sabalenka.

"I don't know what's going on, I just, I dunno what to say. I'm sorry, I'm just very happy," she added to raucous applause on Court Philippe Chatrier.

Chwalinska, appearing in her first main draw in Paris, has won nine matches across a three-week campaign at Roland Garros that started with three rounds of qualifying last month. She admitted that her physical state was "not great" in the aftermath of her two-hour-10-minute semi-final win.

"I mean it's so challenging to play against the best players in the world day by day, but it's a Grand Slam so you just have to give your best day by day," she added. "But I'm not complaining at all!"

Chwalinska had only won one match in her two previous Grand Slam appearances, at Wimbledon in 2022, and only just two tour-level matches on clay before Roland Garros.

En route to the last four, Chwalinska started out by downing Olympic gold medalist Zheng Qinwen in the first round before felling 23rd seed Elise Mertens, former world number three Maria Sakkari, hometown hope Diane Parry and 22nd seed Anna Kalinskaya. Chwalinska is projected to climb to at least a career-high No. 21 in the rankings.

After edging the first set on a tie-break, the second frame was level until Shnaider requested a medical time-out for a back massage. After that stoppage, at 4-3, Chwalinska won the next three games to claim victory. "Very



Poland's Maja Chwalinska celebrates after defeating Russia's Diana Shnaider in the French Open semi-final at the Roland-Garros Complex in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

proud of myself, what I achieved here," Shnaider said of her best performance so far in a Grand Slam.

"(Chwalinska) played unreal, and she definitely deserved this win today and to be in the final."

Earlier, Andreeva raced into her first Grand Slam final as she beat an erratic Kostyuk 6-1, 6-3.

The teenager, who had twice lost to Ukrainian Kostyuk this season, including the Madrid Open final, said she was "so focused that I could see those hairs on the ball" as she romped to victory in 76 minutes on court.

"I'm super happy with the way I played and then that I got revenge for Madrid final and I'm happy that I'm in my first-ever Grand Slam final," Andreeva said.

The 15th-seeded Kostyuk went into her maiden major semi-final on a 17-match winning streak on clay but quickly unravelled on Court Philippe Chatrier, where she had four days earlier eased past four-time French Open champion Iga Swiatek.

She finished the match with 34 unforced errors, telling her press conference: "Obviously not the greatest match from me today."

However, it has been a breakthrough clay-court swing for the 23-year-old, who can console herself with a win in Rouen, as well as a first WTA 1000 title in the Spanish capital. Victory for Andreeva brought her tally of wins in 2026 to 35 - the most on tour this season.



Mirra Andreeva celebrates after her win against Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk in the French Open semi-final yesterday. (AFP)

MOTORSPORT

# Unfazed Antonelli plans to race with freedom

AFP  
Monte Carlo

Championship-leading teenager Kimi Antonelli intends to race free of worry during this weekend's Monaco Grand Prix as he bids for a record fifth consecutive victory.

As his Mercedes teammate and title rival George Russell ramped up the pressure on him by saying the "title is his to lose", the 19-year-old Italian insisted he was unfazed and will stick to driving to win, without creating any chaos.

"I know I can win (the drivers' title), but I don't want to think about that and to lose my head," he said. "The season is so long so I'll continue to drive as if I have nothing to lose - because I can't lose something I haven't achieved yet!"

Antonelli goes into the Monaco weekend with a 43-point lead over Russell having reeled off an unprecedented four wins, including his maiden F1 triumph, after his teammate triumphed in the season-opening Australian Grand Prix.

Mindful of the need to keep relations with Russell and team boss Toto Wolff in good repair, Antonelli stressed that his father Marco, a motor racing driver and GT sportscar team boss, keeps his feet on the ground.

Asked about Russell, he told

Sky Italia that they wanted to treat each other fairly.

"We don't want to cause chaos and of course we don't want to upset Toto. When we race, we race to win and we want to be the best... For sure, we race for ourselves - but also for the team."

The pair clashed in last month's Canadian Grand Prix where Antonelli complained of 'unfair' racing by Russell and called for a penalty before Wolff intervened to stop his team radio outbursts. That race saw Russell, the pre-season title-favourite, bounce back to lead their battle before he was forced to retire with electrical problems.

Russell said he would not be pressured.

"I don't think I've got anything to lose," he said.

"My mindset is to enjoy every single race, try and win every single race - the same as I've done this whole season."

"Even if he's the one who's getting the results at the moment."

Russell dismissed suggestions that Mercedes favoured Antonelli.

"One hundred per cent, I believe I am not being stuffed (by Mercedes). I am just being unfortunate - it is racing and 2,000 people's bonuses are based on the constructors' championship, not the drivers," he added.

"It's in their interests to have both cars finishing."



Mercedes' Italian driver Kimi Antonelli is seen in the garage at the Circuit de Monaco ahead of the Formula One Monaco Grand Prix in Monaco yesterday. (AFP)

## Hamilton coy on Monaco chances

Lewis Hamilton yesterday played down his and Ferrari's chances at this weekend's Monaco Grand Prix. He also warned that the high cost of karting made it "unlikely, if not impossible" for anyone to repeat his rise from an ordinary background to F1.

The seven-time champion, whose career was launched in karting by his father's enthusiasm and backing, said he believed that Ferrari would be competitive, but that Mercedes remained the team to beat. "I'd say this track is better for us than some of the others," he told reporters of Monaco's highly technical circuit.

"I don't think power is necessarily going to be an issue here. Our car is good at low speeds so I think that will make us competitive."

The 41-year-old, who is preparing for his 19th Monaco race, was more animated when talking about the prohibitive problems facing talented, but under-funded, drivers from ordinary backgrounds. Hamilton, the first black driver in Formula One, grew up on a council estate in Stevenage. "I know someone who has a kid, who is eight years old, that is spending over a million dollars a year," he explained. "When I started, my dad spent around £53,000 (\$71,000) in the first year. That was remortgaging the house and maxing out all the credit cards."

He said he felt that the pathway to F1 was no longer open to all young drivers. "It's not who has the most talent coming through, but it's the families with the most money that create more chances for their kids. "In my opinion, it's something that is going in the wrong direction, constantly, and there needs to be some way to make it accessible."



## WORLD CUP WARM-UP

# Netherlands' loss to Algeria wake-up call, says Koeman

'I absolutely hate losing; this was a match we should have won'



Algeria players celebrate after their win over the Netherlands in a friendly in Rotterdam, Netherlands on Wednesday. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Rotterdam, Netherlands

The Netherlands' 1-0 home defeat by Algeria in their World Cup warm-up on Wednesday was a wake-up call before they head to the US for next week's tournament start, coach Ronald Koeman said.

The North Africans snatched a late winner on the eve of the Dutch squad's departure for New York, where they have another friendly against World Cup debutants Uzbekistan on Monday.

"I absolutely hate losing; this was a match we should have won," a frustrated Koeman said. "We have to win these kinds of home matches; our (ranking) position demands it."

Koeman felt the eighth-ranked Dutch dominated the opening 25 minutes against fellow World Cup qualifiers Algeria and had several good chances but then let matters slip.

"Because you don't put the game to bed within those first 25 minutes, you end up playing against yourselves," Koeman said.

"If you get four or five clear chances, you have to score. And even if that doesn't happen, it shouldn't become a problem. But after that, we started making things more difficult for ourselves. At times we lacked aggression and were simply too nice."

Against the run of play a fabulous 86th minute goal from Feyenoord winger Hadj

Moussa, a curling left-footed whip into the top corner, secured victory for the Algerians in a match largely dominated by the Dutch.

The Dutch had been repeatedly denied by the Fennecs' goalkeeper Luca Zidane, son of former France great Zinedine Zidane, as he produced a string of impressive saves.

The 28-year-old, who plays for Granada in Spain's second division, boosted his chances of making the final cut after the Algeria named four 'keepers in a provisional list, but will only take three to the World Cup in North America, which runs from 11 June to 19 July.

Asked if it was better to suffer a defeat in the build-up rather than at the World Cup, Koeman replied, "No".

"Winning always gives you a certain feeling. Losing is simply bad. We certainly don't need to panic now, but we do need to dot the t's and cross the t's again. You could call it a wake-up call," he said.

The Netherlands face Japan, Sweden and Tunisia in group F at the finals.

## SOUTH KOREA EDGE EL SALVADOR 1-0 IN FINAL WORLD CUP WARM-UP

South Korea kept up their momentum ahead of the World Cup with a 1-0 win over El Salvador on Wednesday in their final friendly in Provo, United States, before the tournament begins next week.

Lee Dong-gyeong scored 10 minutes into the

second half at their training base in Utah to give South Korea their second straight friendly win following a 5-0 victory over Trinidad and Tobago last week.

"We had some difficulties offensively early in the match but I think this match will be of huge help for us," said coach Hong Myung-bo.

"I think our players must have learned a great deal today by playing this type of team."

South Korea will face the Czech Republic, South Africa and co-hosts Mexico in Group A and begin their campaign against the Czechs in Guadalajara on June 11. Captain Son Heung-min started on the bench and came on five minutes after Lee had given South Korea the lead with a curling, left-footed free-kick.

The 33-year-old Son, who has faced growing questions about his faltering form after scoring only twice for his club Los Angeles FC this season, scored twice against Trinidad and Tobago.

It took his international tally to 56 goals in 144 games, two short of Cha Bum-kun's South Korea record.

Defender Cho Wi-je made his debut as a second-half substitute. Cho, who was playing in South Korea's second division until the start of this year, was called into the World Cup squad when Cho Yu-min was ruled out with an injury earlier this week.

"I think he played well stepping in for an injured player," Hong said. "He helped the team tremendously."

## PREMIER LEAGUE

## Liverpool appoint Iraola as new boss

AFP  
Liverpool

Liverpool named **Andoni Iraola** as their new manager yesterday after sacking Arne Slot following a calamitous Premier League title defence.

Iraola quickly emerged as Liverpool's top target to replace Slot, whose two-year reign came to a shock end when he was dismissed last Saturday. Liverpool gave no indication as to the length of the 43-year-old Spaniard's contract but British media have reported that he has signed a two-year deal.

"Really excited, really excited, because obviously you know about Liverpool, you know that it's a big club, a massive club, one of the biggest in the world," Iraola, who called time on his impressive spell with Bournemouth at the end of this season, said on Liverpool's official website.

"But feeling inside and understanding a little bit more of this club, I always thought it's a special club. You don't need a lot of things to get attracted by Liverpool. Liverpool is Liverpool."

After criticism of Liverpool's lacklustre performances in Slot's second season at Anfield, Iraola is expected to deliver a more urgent, aggressive style of football, which characterised the team under beloved former manager Jurgen Klopp.

Iraola earned rave reviews for Bournemouth's sixth-place finish in the Premier League this season, which secured the club's first qualification for Europe, in the Europa League.

He arrived at the south coast club from Raya Vallecana in 2023, having previously managed Mirandes and AEK Larnaca in Cyprus. Bournemouth improved each year under Iraola, finishing 12th, ninth and sixth.

The former defender was praised for his astute tactics and

development of youngsters including Eli Junior Kroupi and Alex Scott.

Prior to leaving Liverpool at the end of the season, Egypt star Mohamed Salah recently called for a return to the "heavy metal football" that led to so much success under Klopp, heaping pressure on the beleaguered Slot.

Iraola has previously talked about his desire for his teams to play with an attacking, high-pressing style, in contrast to Slot's more controlled approach. Born in Spain's Basque Country, Iraola played more than 500 games for Athletic Bilbao before a stint in Major League Soccer with New York City, where he teamed up with Frank Lampard and Andrea Pirlo. He will arrive on Merseyside with Liverpool at a crossroads after Slot's failure to maintain the club's position at the summit of English football.

Slot had the tough task of replacing Klopp, who left in 2024 after winning the Premier League and Champions League during a golden nine-year spell at Anfield. The former Feyenoord boss made a strong start, leading Liverpool to a record-equalling 20th English league title in his debut season, spearheaded by Salah's 29 goals.

But Slot was unable to halt Liverpool's slide in the 2025/26 season as the Reds collapsed from late September, finishing a turbulent season without a trophy. The death of Liverpool forward Diogo Jota in a car crash last July had an immeasurable impact on the squad, while the club's £450mn (\$605mn) splurge on new signings failed to pay off.

Slot's relationship with Salah also deteriorated, while Liverpool fans turned on the manager due to his team's lifeless displays and poor results. The club limped to a fifth-place finish, 25 points behind champions Arsenal, which at least guaranteed qualification for next season's Champions League.



## Benfica say Real Madrid must pay 15m euros to sign Mourinho

**Lisbon:** Portuguese giants Benfica confirmed that Real Madrid would have to pay 15mn euros to prise away their coach Jose Mourinho.

Real president Florentino Perez has vowed to bring back Mourinho to the Bernabeu, 13 years after he left the club in 2013, as he seeks re-election this weekend.

Benfica released a statement saying that Perez had told them of his "firm intention to recruit" Mourinho, while stipulating that the Portuguese boss's release clause was worth 15mn euros (\$17.4mn).

Previous media reports had suggested that it could cost the Spanish giants as little as three million euros. Mourinho has already appeared in a video on Perez's Instagram account affirming that he was ready to return to the club he first joined in 2010.

During his tenure, he won one La Liga title, a Copa del Rey and a Spanish Super Cup. Appointing the divisive Mourinho would be a gamble on the part of Perez after Los Blancos finished without a major trophy for a second consecutive season.

But Perez sees Mourinho as the man to bring some discipline to a divided dressing room in which player power is rumoured to have got out of control. Mourinho joined Benfica in September 2025 and led them to an unbeaten league season, although they only finished third. He has one year left on his contract.

## MOURINHO TAKES TURKEY TO TOP EUROPE RIGHTS COURT OVER SANCTIONS

Meanwhile, Mourinho has filed suit at Europe's top rights court on grounds his right to freedom of expression was violated while managing Turkish football club Fenerbahce. The lawsuit at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) was filed in March 2025, nearly six months before he was fired by the Super Lig club after it failed to qualify for the Champions League.

Court documents show the Portuguese coach filed suit over the "disciplinary sanctions" imposed on him by the Turkish Football Federation for "unsportsmanlike conduct".

At issue were remarks he made about supporters of a rival team and about Turkish referees in November 2024, which resulted in a match ban and two fines of some \$21,000.

Under Article 6 of the European Convention "the applicant complains that the dispute in question had not been determined by an independent and impartial tribunal," said an ECHR document dated May 13.

The court accepted the complaint and laid out a series of questions for the Turkish authorities. When Mourinho arrived in Istanbul in June 2024, he received a rockstar's welcome from fans.

But he failed to make good on his dream of ending the title drought that has plagued the club since 2014 and was shown the door 14 months later.

## SHOWJUMPING

## Younis, al-Hadi star at Al Shaqab League Finals

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Al Shaqab Showjumping League Finals began at the Longines Indoor Arena yesterday, bringing together riders from across the region for the decisive three-day conclusion to the season.

In Al Shaqab Champions 140cm class, Canada's Rami Younis claimed victory aboard Mauran S with a faultless round in 72.62 seconds. Qatar's Sultan Salem al-Naemi finished second on Gannan de La Luce in 76.09 seconds, while Abdulrahman Mohammed al-Saaq secured third place riding Curt Lele in 77.74 seconds. Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Alasaker placed fourth aboard Casiano II with four faults in 68.09 seconds, while Qatar's Ibrahim Yousef Almahmoud completed the top five on Qatara van het Texelhof with four faults in 73.70 seconds.

Ahmed Khaled al-Hemaidi, Legacy and Heritage Specialist at Al Shaqab, presented the awards to the podium winners.

The Youth Champions 130cm class was won by Saudi Arabia's Khaled al-Hadi aboard Capoen, who stopped the clock at 53.78 seconds without penalties. Kuwait's Madhy Alkhamees astride Caheelahde Beaufour was second in 55.04 seconds, narrowly ahead of Qatar's Ibrahim Yousef Almahmoud and Perle Van Dorperheidein 55.34 seconds. Al-Hadi also took fourth place on Carlton de Sauvageonn in 55.91 seconds, while Sultan Salem al-Naemi finished fifth aboard Cethys de Vernay in 59.46 seconds.

Khalid Sanad al-Nuaimi, Event Director of the Al Shaqab League awarded the winners.

The Introductory 140cm class included 39 participants, with Ali Mohammed Alawi taking victory on Currabawn Shadow after finishing closest to the optimum time with a score of 0/-0.06. Lujain Ibrahim and Coco Chanel SB placed second on 0/0.11, while Salma Khalifa al-Sarami and Zorro Z were third on 0/0.25. Abdullah Ahmad al-Naser riding Vegas finished fourth on 0/-0.36, followed by Hamza Moham-



In the Al Shaqab Champions 140cm class, Canada's Rami Younis claimed victory aboard Mauran S with a faultless round in 72.62 seconds.

med al-Attayah and Violet in fifth on 0/-0.44.

Ahmed Khaled al-Hemaidi, Legacy and Heritage Specialist at Al Shaqab, honoured the winners.

Qatari riders swept the top five places in the Introductory 80cm class, with Ahmad Khalid al-Muraikhi emerging victorious aboard Anyway II finishing closest to the optimum time with a score of 0/-0.02. Salman Faisal al-Marri and Soul Rebel placed second on 0/-0.06, while Ghanim Thamer al-Maadadi and Kroaat Van Orchild's were third on 0/-0.08. Abdulla Saoud al-Khater riding Senna Lafont secured fourth place on 0/-0.11, with Rouda Ali al-Naama and Kon-



Khalid Sanad al-Nuaimi, Event Director of the Al Shaqab League, awarded the top six finishers of the Youth Champions 130cm class.

cordia VE rounding out the top five on 0/-0.21. Competition resumes on Friday with the 60cm introductory class, the Amateur class (100cm) with QR15,000 in prize money, the Future Champions class (110cm) with QR20,000 at stake and the Junior Champions class (120cm) with QR35,000.

The final day on Saturday will feature the Youth Champions class (135cm) for QR45,000, alongside the Amateur (105cm), Future Champions (115cm) and Junior Champions (125cm) divisions before the season concludes with the Al Shaqab Champions class (145cm), which will again offer QR70,000 in prize money.

Organised by Al Shaqab, a member of Qatar Foundation, the league has become a leading platform for the development of showjumping in Qatar and the wider region