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Gill and Rahul hit centuries as India reach 368/3 on day one



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Andreya wins first Grand Slam title at French Open

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FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

4
DAYS TO GO

TRIVIA
What is the record for most goals scored by a player in a single World Cup?
13 by Just Fontaine (France) in 1958.

FOOTBALL



Pressure no problem for Qatar, says Madibo

The two-time Asian champions feel battle ready for matches at 2026 FIFA World Cup



Assim Madibo

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Experienced midfielder Assim Madibo has said Qatar team can handle the pressure of playing against strong sides when they kick off their 2026 FIFA World Cup campaign next week.

Qatar, two-time Asian champions, take on Switzerland, Canada and Bosnia & Herzegovina in their three group stage matches across the US and Canada.

"This journey with the national team has been full of challenges (in the last few years). I am satisfied with my performance over the past years, having participated in numerous tournaments, including the last two editions of the AFC Asian Cup and other competitions," Madibo, 29, said in a video interview released by the Qatar Football Association (QFA). "The accu-



Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui with goalkeeper Meshal Barsham during training.



Qatar players during a team training session in Santa Barbara.

mulated experience of many of the current squad members, who have previously participated in continental and international tournaments, such as the AFC Asian Cup (which Qatar won in 2019 and 2023), can motivate the players to perform at their best, as they have developed the ability to handle pressure," he said.

Madibo expressed his desire to perform admirably and bring joy to the fans during the upcoming 2026 FIFA World Cup, which

will be held in the United States, Canada, and Mexico from June 11 to July 19.

He pointed out that the task at the World Cup will not be easy because of the nature of matches in such major tournaments requires intense focus and attention to detail, including managing the pressures. He noted that the players have gained sufficient experience to adapt to a tournament of the World Cup's magnitude. "Our other task as experienced play-

ers is to help the players participating for the first time overcome the hurdle of dealing with these high-stakes matches and immerse themselves in the tournament atmosphere early on. Our main goal remains to form a cohesive group of young players and experienced veterans," he added.

He emphasized that the presence of fans in the stands is a significant motivator for the players, contributing to their best possible performance. Madibo said

that their objective as players is to bring joy to the Qatari fans, to make a respectable showing in Al Annabi's second appearance at the World Cup finals, and to reflect the progress Qatar football has made in recent years. Qatar will play their first match in the 2026 World Cup, when they face Switzerland on June 13 in San Francisco, USA. In Vancouver, Qatar will face Canada on June 18, and conclude their matches by playing Bosnia & Herzegovina in Seattle, USA, on June 24.

SPOTLIGHT

Carrying nation's hopes: Fans ready to back Qatar on global stage

QNA
Doha

Qatar fans are preparing to provide strong support for the national team as it embarks on its second FIFA World Cup appearance at the 2026 tournament, which will be held in the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11 to July 19. Qatar's participation has attracted considerable attention, particularly because it comes through the qualification process this time, following the team's first World Cup appearance in 2022 as the host nation.

Qatar has been drawn in Group B and will open its campaign against Switzerland on June 13 in San Francisco. The team will then travel to Vancouver to face Canada on June 18 before concluding their group-stage matches against Bosnia and Herzegovina in Seattle on June 24.

Qatari supporters are preparing to travel to the United States and Canada after the Qatar Football

Association (QFA) announced that arrangements had been completed for 1,000 fans. Three charter flights will transport supporters from Qatar to the United States on June 9, 10, and 11.

Support for the national team at the World Cup will not be limited to the official fan delegation departing from Doha. It will also include Qatari students and other supporters residing in the United States and Canada.

The QFA has coordinated with Qatar's cultural attaché office in the United States and the Qatari Embassy in Canada to invite all Qatari students to attend the team's first three group-stage matches.

The fan delegation includes the "Maroon Stand" (Mudaraj Al Annabi) initiative, which was launched ahead of the 2023 AFC Asian Cup Qatar and received widespread praise for helping mobilize supporters and encouraging young Qataris to back the national team during the continental championship.

The initiative has since ex-



A young Qatar fan holds the national flag ahead of the team's training session in Santa Barbara, California.

panded to local and international competitions, contributing to the revival of strong fan support for the national side.

The QFA has signed a cooperation agreement with the Social and Sport Contribution Fund (DAAM) to finance the national team supporters' delegation for the 2026 World Cup.

Under the agreement, the fund will provide the financial support necessary for the association to implement a comprehensive travel program for fans traveling from Qatar to the United States and Canada. The package includes flight arrangements through Qatar Airways, the tournament's official carrier, as well as hotel accommo-



dations and ground transportation.

QFA has completed all logistical arrangements for the supporters' delegation, including air travel from San Francisco to Vancouver for the team's second match. Twelve hotels have been secured for Qatari fans: five in San Francisco, four in Vancouver and three

in Seattle, where Qatar will play Bosnia and Herzegovina in its final group-stage match.

The presence of Qatari supporters is regarded as a key factor in helping the team perform at its best and present a positive image of Qatari football on the global stage, while also reinforcing the country's broader investment in sports.

The backing of Qatari fans builds on the country's successful promotional and fan-engagement experience at major tournaments both at home and abroad, reflected in the strong attendance at national team matches.

Supporters remain committed to providing continuous encouragement to help the team achieve the best possible results and create the conditions for players to perform at their highest level.

Qatari fans hope the national team can deliver a strong showing at the upcoming tournament and that their support will help propel the side deep into a competition featuring many of the world's leading national teams.

ONE-TEST

Rahul and Gill hit slick centuries as India reach 368/3

THE HOSTS TAKE CONTROL AGAINST AFGHANISTAN ON DAY 1

Reuters
New Chandigarh

India's KL Rahul and Shubman Gill scored centuries against Afghanistan yesterday as the home side batted into a dominant position and ended the opening day of the one-off test on 368-3.

India, playing their first Test versus Afghanistan since hosting the visitors in their first-ever test in 2018, won the toss and opted to bat at the New PCA Stadium in New Chandigarh.

The match came after a quick turnaround for many of India's players from their Indian Premier League campaigns, with several members of the national team having played in last week's final, and some signs of rust were evident in the early stages.

The openers struggled for fluency in the opening session and Rahul was handed a major reprieve in the 11th over when a clear edge went unreviewed by the visitors, despite vociferous appeals from fielder Rahmanullah Gurbaz.

Replays later confirmed Rahul would have been dismissed, and the 34-year-old made the most of his lifeline, combining for a 139-run partnership with Sai Sudharsan after opener Yashasvi Jaiswal was dismissed by Mohammad Saleem for 24.

That partnership ended when Saleem took his second wicket, getting Sudharsan out for 81 with a delivery that carried through to wicketkeeper Afsar Zazai, who took a superb diving catch.

Rahul then featured in a 67-run third-wicket partnership with



India's captain Shubman Gill (left) and KL Rahul bump their fists during the first day of the only Test at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh International Cricket Stadium on the outskirts of Chandigarh yesterday. (AFP)

captain Gill, who contributed 39 runs and helped see his teammate to a 12th Test century - brought up in 165 balls. However, Rahul was dismissed off the very next ball by Ziaur Rahman after being caught at extra cover, finishing on exactly 100 runs for his third Test century in a row.

"I'm really happy that I could get some time in the middle. To make that switch from T20 to Test cricket in a matter of a couple of days was the most pleasing thing," Rahul said.

"It was extremely hot, I was

exhausted ... I had to make that switch of letting the ball go and getting used to the conditions. Training did help a lot. I did feel the urge to play a shot and I don't think it is a bad thing.

"It's something I have been telling myself as well. Sometimes you sit and over analyse. I try to not restrict my shots. I played a few more shots in the morning than I would usually do but it didn't frustrate me."

Gill (103) soldiered on alongside Rishabh Pant (50) and the pair kept their foot on the gas to

take India past the 350-run mark, before the India captain reached the 11th Test century of his career right before the end of play.

For India, the match is a chance to build some confidence ahead of series against Sri Lanka and New Zealand this year, after a difficult couple of years in Test cricket which have included losses to the Kiwis, South Africa and Australia.

BRIEF SCORES

India 368 for 3 (Gill 103*, Rahul 100, Sudharsan 81, Pant 50*, Saleem 2-67) **vs Afghanistan**

ANNOUNCEMENT

Sooryavanshi called up to India's T20 squad, Iyer named new captain



Shreyas Iyer, India's new T20 captain

Reuters
Mumbai

India have called up teenager Vaibhav Sooryavanshi for their upcoming Twenty20 international series against Ireland and England, the country's cricket board (BCCI) announced yesterday, while Shreyas Iyer has been named captain.

Sooryavanshi, 15, is fresh off a breakout campaign in the Indian Premier League in which he topped the scoring charts with 776 runs in 16 matches, while also breaking Chris Gayle's record for most sixes in a season.

His performances for the Rajasthan Royals made him the first player in IPL history to be named both the Most Valuable Player (MVP) and the Best Emerging Player, with many tipping him for a spot in the senior Twenty20 International side.

Should Sooryavanshi go on to make his debut against either Ireland or England, he would become the youngest player to represent an Indian men's senior team, bettering great Sachin Tendulkar, who made his debut aged 16.

"We've seen what he can do, towards playoffs, almost single-handedly carried Rajasthan Royals," selection panel chairman Ajit Agarkar told reporters.

"Not just this season, had a great start and to back-it up in a competition that is as competitive and high-pressure, he's a game-changer. We've got high hopes of him and he has picked himself."

Agarkar added that Iyer, who

replaces Suryakumar Yadav, had been appointed captain after guiding Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) to the Indian Premier League title in 2024, while also leading other franchises in the league.

Iyer last played a T20I in 2023. "Led a team to (IPL) title, his own performances been good. He was close to being part of the World Cup squad, in my opinion was a 'stand-out candidate'," Agarkar added. India play Ireland in two T20Is later this month, before a five-match series against England in July.

ASIAN GAMES SQUAD NAMED

The BCCI also named their squad for this year's men's cricket competition at the Asian Games in Japan, which includes veteran bowler Jasprit Bumrah.

The Asian Games men's competition will begin on September 24, with the final scheduled for October 3.

T20I Squad for Ireland and England series: Shreyas Iyer

(captain), Abhishek Sharma, Sanju Samson, Ishan Kishan, Shivam Dube, Tilak Varma, Nitish Reddy, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Varun Chakravathy, Mohammed Siraj, Arshdeep Singh, Prince Yadav, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi
Squad for Asian Games: Shreyas Iyer (captain), Tilak Varma, Abhishek Sharma, Sanju Samson, Ishan Kishan, Shivam Dube, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Varun Chakravathy, Ravi Bishnoi, Jasprit Bumrah, Harshit Rana, Arshdeep Singh, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi

SPOTLIGHT

Robinson strikes but rain hits Lord's Test

AFP
London

Ollie Robinson continued to prove a thorn in New Zealand's side, taking two quick wickets, as England moved closer to victory in the first Test during what little play was possible at Lord's yesterday.

Rain and bad light meant fewer than 10 overs were bowled on the third day of this three-match series.

But that was enough time for the 32-year-old Robinson to take two wickets for no runs in four balls as New Zealand slumped to 53-5 in their second innings.

The Black Caps added two more runs before rain, which meant there was no play before lunch, returned at 1310 GMT yesterday.

The umpires finally abandoned proceedings for the day at 1629 GMT, with a handful of spectators still braving the bad weather as the floodlights pierced the gloom in northwest London.

At 55-5, New Zealand need 199 more runs to reach a victory target of 254 in what is the 150th Test staged at Lord's - the most at any ground. On only five occasions

have the Black Caps successfully chased a higher total to win a Test. Only four sides have made more in the fourth innings to win a Test at Lord's.

Opening batsman Devon Conway was 19 not out, with wicket-keeper Tom Blundell unbeaten on two at stumps.

New Zealand were struggling at 36-3 at Friday's close after England paceman Gus Atkinson struck twice and fast bowler Josh Tongue dismissed key batsman Kane Williamson.

ENGLAND'S STRONG POSITION

England's strong position in their first Test since a 4-1 Ashes series loss in Australia owed much to debutant Emilio Gay.

The opening batsman top-scored with 57 in England's second-innings total of 226 - a valuable contribution in a low-scoring game where the pitch has favoured the fast bowlers throughout.

New Zealand were bowled out for just 113 in their first innings, with recalled seamer Robinson taking his Test-best figures of 5-39 following more than two years of England exile.

With grey skies, allied to a lively pitch, once more proving helpful to

the pacemen, he was soon back in the wickets again. Rachin Ravindra had made just eight when he was undone by a brilliant Robinson delivery that angled in and then nipped away before clean bowling the squared-up left-hander, the ball hitting the top of off stump to leave New Zealand 53-4.

In his next over, Sussex captain Robinson removed Daryl Mitchell for a duck when the batsman was given out lbw to a full-length ball that pitched on the line of middle and leg stumps.

Mitchell reviewed but replays confirmed he had been in front of his stumps playing all round an attempt to flick the ball away.

His dismissal was upheld on umpire's call, with Mitchell's exit the 22nd wicket in under three days' play to have fallen as a result of being bowled or leg before - evidence of the challenging conditions confronting batsmen on both sides.

BRIEF SCORES

New Zealand 113 (Robinson 5-39) **and 55 for 5** (Conway 19*, Blundell 2*) **need 199 more runs to beat England 140** (Brook 56, Jamieson 5-62) **and 226** (Gay 57, Smith 6-70)



England's Ollie Robinson celebrates after taking the wicket of New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra during the third day of the first Test at Lord's Cricket Ground in London yesterday. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Kohli out of Afghanistan series due to injury

AFP
Mumbai, India

Indian batting star Virat Kohli has been ruled out of the upcoming one-day international cricket series against Afghanistan due to injury, chief selector Ajit Agarkar said on Saturday.

Kohli, 37, who led Royal Challengers Bengaluru to their second straight IPL title on Sunday, will miss the three ODI matches starting on June 13 in Dharamsala.

Yashasvi Jaiswal has been named as Kohli's replacement.

Kohli only plays the 50-over format for India after quitting Test and T20 interna-

tionals. He was in prolific form during the recent IPL, scoring 675 runs at an average of 56.25, including an unbeaten 75 in the final against Gujarat Titans.

"It's just been less than a week since he (Kohli) injured himself in the (IPL) finals," Agarkar told a media briefing in Mumbai.

"We don't know the timelines yet but it looks like he might be fit for that England one-day series (next month)."

The availability of Rohit Sharma, another veteran batsman, for the series remains unclear. Rohit was selected in the squad subject to fitness.

Kohli and Rohit were both expected to resume their preparation for the 2027 ODI World Cup as debate continues over their future plans.

Meanwhile, Hardik Pandya is undergoing a fitness assessment at the BCCI's Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru, and Rohit Sharma is expected to report to the facility in the coming days. Both have been included in India's squad for the ODI series against Afghanistan.

Hardik has not played an ODI since India's triumph at the Champions Trophy in March 2025, while Rohit, who last featured in India's previous ODI assignment in January, is returning from a hamstring injury that sidelined him for six IPL matches earlier this season.

Agarkar reiterated that India's priority was to keep Hardik available for the 50-over format ahead of the 2027 ODI World Cup.

SRI LANKA LOSE TALENTED SPINNER TO INJURY AHEAD OF T20 WORLD CUP

DUBAI: Injury has forced Sri Lanka to make a change in their ICC Women's T20 World Cup squad. Shashini Gimhani misses out due to a lower-back injury. Gimhani had featured in seven T20Is, and picked six wickets for an average of 21.16 and an economy of 7.05.

In her place, Chethana Vimukthi comes into the side. The right-arm seamer is yet to play T20Is but has featured in three ODIs for Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka will feature in two warm-up fixtures against Pakistan and the Netherlands before featuring in the ICC Women's T20 World Cup opener against England on 12 June at Edgbaston, Birmingham.

Updated Squad: Chamari Athapaththu (c), Hasini Perera, Vishmi Gunarathne,



Chethana Vimukthi

Harshitha Samarawickrama, Imesha Dulani, Nilakshika Silva, Kaveesha Dilhari, Hansima Karunaratne, Kaushini Nuthyangana, Sugandika Dassanayaka, Nimasha Madushani, Kawya Kavindi, Malki Madara, Mithali Ayodhya, Chethana Vimukthi.

TENNIS

Andreeva wins first Grand Slam title at French Open

Teenager Andreeva triumphs over surprise package Chwalinska to become youngest winner since 1992

AFP
Paris

Mirra Andreeva won her first Grand Slam title yesterday by downing Polish qualifier Maja Chwalinska in straight sets in the French Open final.

The 19-year-old Russian beat Chwalinska 6-3, 6-2 to become the youngest Roland Garros women's singles champion since Monica Seles, then aged 18, won her third straight title in Paris in 1992.

With her first-ever major crown, Andreeva also became the first player, man or woman, born after 2005 to win a Grand Slam.

The Coupe Suzanne Lenglen will now take centre spot in Andreeva's burgeoning trophy cabinet, which already features two WTA 1000 titles.

"I've been watching Roland Garros on TV since I was very, very young, so it's also a big dream of mine to win this tournament and I honestly cannot believe that I'm holding this trophy right now," Andreeva said on court, before thanking her team and notably her psychologist.

"Congrats to Maja for these amazing three weeks, passing through qualies, winning so many matches, beating so many great players."

Defeat at the final hurdle brought to an end an astonishing run which started in qualifying for Chwalinska, who won nine matches in the French capital to become the first qualifier to reach the final in the Open era.

"I will definitely not forget these three weeks," she said. "Paris will stay forever in my heart."

However, the world number 114's career will now be on a different stratosphere as she will

climb to 21 in the rankings and be assured of competing regularly in tennis' biggest tournaments.

"Congrats to Mirra, you're such an incredible player. You're so young and talented, it's so annoying," Chwalinska said. "Congrats to you, congrats to your team for an amazing job, and I wish you all the best in the future."

"I wish (the spectators) could see a better match today, but Mirra was just too good for me, so I guess it's her fault."

Chwalinska displayed some early nerves as she dumped two serves straight into the net on the very first point of the match.

Both players seemed to be struggling with the occasion, a situation not helped by blustery conditions on centre court, as four consecutive breaks of serve started the match.

First Chwalinska then Andreeva held as they continued to probe each other in their first meeting. The Russian dug in and moved back into the ascendancy as she showed the greater consistency of the pair to win the next three games.

Two Andreeva errors and an unplayable drop shot gave the Pole the chance to instantly wipe out that advantage but the teen showed serious mettle to pull off a battling hold and at 3-0 the writing looked on the wall for Chwalinska. Andreeva then rattled through the next two games to move to the brink. But Chwalinska refused to give in and held to make it 5-1, before breaking Andreeva as she served for the match.

However, the new world number six was not to be denied as she pounced in the very next game to claim the biggest trophy so far of her fledgling career. A backhand winner sent her crumpling to her knees as she surpassed her coach Conchita Martinez's 2000 runner-up finish at Roland Garros.

The winner of that duel, Mary Pierce, was present for the trophy ceremony, a fact not lost on Andreeva despite it taking place nearly seven years before her birth.

"I don't know if I should thank you, Mary, as you beat my coach here in the final," she quipped.

"But I'm joking of course, thank you so much!"

RECENT CHAMPIONS

- 2026: Mirra Andreeva (RUS)
- 2025: Coco Gauff (USA)
- 2024: Iga Swiatek (POL)
- 2023: Iga Swiatek (POL)
- 2022: Iga Swiatek (POL)
- 2021: Barbora Krejckikova (CZE)
- 2020: Iga Swiatek (POL)
- 2019: Ashleigh Barty (AUS)
- 2018: Simona Halep (ROM)
- 2017: Jelena Ostapenko (LAT)
- 2016: Garbine Muguruza (ESP)
- 2015: Serena Williams (USA)
- 2014: Maria Sharapova (RUS)
- 2013: Serena Williams (USA)
- 2012: Maria Sharapova (RUS)
- 2011: Li Na (CHN)
- 2010: Francesca Schiavone (ITA)
- 2009: Svetlana Kuznetsova (RUS)
- 2008: Ana Ivanovic (SRB)
- 2007: Justine Henin (BEL)
- 2006: Justine Henin (BEL)



Russia's Mirra Andreeva holds the trophy after winning the French Open final against Poland's Maja Chwalinska at the Roland-Garros Complex in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

FORMULA 1

Teenager Antonelli claims Monaco pole for Mercedes after 'magic lap'

AFP
Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco

Kimi Antonelli produced a "magic lap" to edge Max Verstappen in the dying seconds of yesterday's qualifying and claim pole for the Monaco Grand Prix.

The 19-year-old Italian clocked one minute and 12.051 seconds in his Ferrari for his fourth pole this year, extending Mercedes run to six out of six, and putting him in position to become the first Italian since Alberto Ascari of Ferrari in 1952 to win five consecutive F1 Grand Prix.

"It was one of those laps that we call a magic lap," said a beaming Antonelli, after hugging his father, Marco. "I was able to put it all together and it was such a close qualifying with Max. I think the first run off in Q3, there was just one millisecond between us. I knew the last lap was good, I was just hoping that it would be enough! But it was very close."

Antonelli's sensational lap came at the end of a sequence of dramatic laps in the final seconds of a classic session as, in turn, Ferrari's Charles Leclerc, Verstappen and then the precocious Italian clocked pole laps.

"I am very happy with that and massive thanks to the team because yesterday we struggled a little bit and today we were able to



Mercedes' Kimi Antonelli celebrates after winning the pole position for the Monaco Grand Prix yesterday. (AFP)

improve massively," said Antonelli, who last year finished 18th, three laps down on a triumphant Lando Norris of McLaren.

"I think this is one of the most intensive, if not the most intense qualifying of the year and it takes a massive effort - and also the practices because you just keep trying to get close to the limit."

"When it is about finding the last two tenths, it is not easy because the walls start to come closer and it is not easy to gain the confidence, but I felt great this morning and I am happy that we could finish the job today."

He said despite mounting media attention and speculation, he

had not felt any increased pressure. "For sure, I am just enjoying the driving, enjoying the car, enjoying the weekend," he said, with a customary grin. "That was a big step compared to last year, it is really nice to be able to enjoy the sessions and now I am looking forward to tomorrow!"

Seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton was third for Ferrari.

"Congrats to Kimi," said Hamilton, who had recommended the Italian as his successor before he left Mercedes for Ferrari last year.

"A mega, mega job. Having your first pole here is so special."

"We've got such a great crowd here, it's such a beautiful day."

MOTOGP

'Fresh' Marquez wins Hungarian sprint

AFP
Balatonfokaj, Hungary

Marc Marquez delivered a dominant performance to win the sprint race at the Hungarian MotoGP yesterday, converting his pole position into a commanding victory at the Balaton Park circuit.

The Spaniard, riding for Ducati, had earlier secured pole despite a dramatic qualifying session that saw him crash on his opening lap. However, he recovered quickly to top the times and carried that momentum into the sprint. From the start, Marquez was in complete control and never looked under threat. He pulled away steadily from the field, at one point building a lead of more than two seconds over his closest rival.

KTM's Pedro Acosta finished second after briefly trying to stay in touch in the early laps, while Italy's Marco Bezzecchi, who leads the world championship standings, completed the podium in third for Aprilia.

"On Friday, I was trying to conserve energy, this morning I wanted to qualify on the front row, and for the sprint race my idea was to push hard while I was still fresh and then just survive at the end," said Marquez.

"The strategy worked better than expected, but



Team Ducati Lenovo Team's Marc Marquez celebrates winning the Sprint at the Balaton Park Circuit in Balatonfokaj, Hungary, yesterday. (AFP)

tomorrow will be a longer race, so we'll see," said the 33-year-old. "I can't celebrate yet. Tomorrow will be more difficult."

It was a third sprint victory for the seven-time MotoGP world champion in a patchy season. He has not won a Sunday Grand Prix since the Misano GP in September last season.

Marquez's commanding display at the 4.08km Balaton Park circuit sends a strong signal as the MotoGP season continues, with the reigning champion looking firmly back in control ahead of Sunday's main race.

PREVIEW

Unfulfilled talent Zverev on brink of Grand Slam breakthrough

AFP
Paris

Alexander Zverev has been trying for over a decade to win a Grand Slam and has overcome an array of challenges to put himself on the brink of a breakthrough at the French Open.

The 6ft 6ins (1.98m) German has been destined for the top from a young age, hailing from a tennis family where his mother and father both played the sport to a high level in the former Soviet Union.

"For me, my family is everything and I owe them a lot for helping me to become the tennis player that I am today," the 29-year-old, often seen as the sport's most unfulfilled talent, said.

"They both worked extremely hard and taught my brother (Mischa) and me everything we know," added Zverev, who faces Flavio Cobolli in Sunday's final in Paris.

He has been through the grinder on his way to the top, living with diabetes, dealing with a serious ankle injury and having allegations that he assaulted an ex-girlfriend splashed across the world's newspapers.

The court case was dropped in 2024 after a settlement was agreed hours before he was due to play in the French Open semi-finals. He strenuously denied the allegations.

Known by his nickname "Sascha", Zverev's greatest achievement so far was winning gold at the Covid-hit Tokyo Olympics.

It was the first time a German had clinched the men's singles title, stunning heavy favourite Novak Djokovic before taking down Karen Khachanov in the final.

"There is nothing better than this," he said at the time -- except perhaps winning a Grand Slam crown.

Born in Hamburg in 1997 to Russian parents, Zverev was exposed to tennis from an early age through his mother Irina and father Alexander, who remains his coach.

They moved to Germany after the collapse of the Soviet Union, where they began training their son.

His talent quickly became evident, winning the boys' singles tournament at the 2014 Australian Open and becoming junior world number one.

He broke into the senior ranks and was named the 2015 ATP Newcomer of the Year. By the



This combination of file pictures shows (top) Italy's Flavio Cobolli and Germany's Alexander Zverev in action during their French Open matches at the Roland-Garros Complex in Paris. Cobolli, the 24-year-old 10th seed, will meet Zverev in today's final, which will produce a new major champion. (AFP)

time he was 20, he was in the world's top three.

Zverev, who idolised Roger Federer growing up, made his first Grand Slam final in 2020 at the US Open, agonisingly losing in five sets to Dominic Thiem after being 2-0 up.

"That was exactly the time when I had real struggles with my serve and my second serve," he said of that match.

"I knew that my serve could break down at any moment. That's one difference that I do feel now, luckily for me."

His seemingly unstoppable rise was temporarily halted when he tore ankle ligaments while playing Rafael Nadal in the Roland Garros semis two years later and he underwent surgery.

Returning in January 2023, Zverev captured a 20th career title in Hamburg before the best season of his career in 2024, powering into the French Open final and surging to world number two, dispelling concerns that he was mentally frail.

"In the life of a professional athlete you will have the highest highs and the lowest lows," said Zverev.

"Getting caught up in the lows is the biggest mistake that you can make."

"You shouldn't try to evaluate everything when times are tough, you should try to find ways to get better when you're on a high."

A third Grand Slam final defeat followed at the 2025 Australian Open, in straight sets by Jannik Sinner.

Doubts about whether or not he would break his Grand Slam duck resurfaced as Sinner and Alcaraz dominated men's tennis by winning nine consecutive majors between them.

However, Zverev is on the brink of finally getting over the line after taking advantage of Alcaraz's injury absence at Roland Garros and Sinner's shock second-round exit.

Zverev has suffered from diabetes since he was four and created the Alexander Zverev Foundation in 2022 to support children with the condition and provide medication for those in developing countries.

An avid football and basketball fan, his older brother Mischa also played on the ATP Tour.



COMMENT

Tough conditions no 'excuse' for England, Tuchel

'It will be a lot of travelling, it will be a lot of adversity from the heat'

AFP
West Palm Beach, United States

Coach Thomas Tuchel yesterday said World Cup hopefuls England will not use scorching heat and vast travel distances between venues as excuses as they target a "long" tournament campaign.

England face New Zealand in a pre-tournament friendly in Tampa Bay, Florida, on Saturday, and have been preparing with training sessions in hot and humid West Palm Beach.

"We don't want it to be an excuse. It will be tough. It will be hopefully a long World Cup," Tuchel told a press conference.

"It will be a lot of travelling, it will be a lot of adversity from the heat, from humidity."

Tuchel admitted he was "a little bit worried and concerned" by photographs of the recently relaid Tampa Bay grass pitch for Saturday's friendly, but said poor conditions would likely not affect his team selection. England plan to make 11 substitutions at half-time, he confirmed.

"Let's decide when we are there. If there are any issues we can always react to it," said Tuchel. Hoping to end 60 years of hurt, England enter the tournament - co-hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada - among a group of favorites led by the likes of France, Spain and defending champions Argentina.

Following their New Zealand tune-up, and a friendly against Costa Rica in Orlando on Wednesday, England will head to their training camp in Kansas City, where temperatures above 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees F) and



England Manager Thomas Tuchel talks to the players during a training session in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

thunderstorms are forecast in the coming days.

The Three Lions will kick off their tournament on June 17 against Croatia in Dallas, where the mercury is set to hit 35 degrees C (95F) next week.

If England progress beyond their group, they could face a testing trip to Mexico City for a high-altitude last-16 clash, with Miami a possible quarter-final venue too.

"That's also the task for us, and that's also what you want to achieve - that atmosphere where you stay calm, where we stay patient, and where we adapt to the circumstances," said Tuchel.

"That's just what it takes to go through the tournament."

And despite the heat expected during the tournament, the manager

made it clear that he would not abandon his hard-pressing tactical systems.

"There's a value in recovering the ball high, even if it brings risk, even if it is highly intense," said Tuchel.

England, who reached the final of the past two European Championships, are in Group L, which also contains Ghana, Panama and Croatia.

An experienced Croatia beat a young England side in the semi-finals of the 2018 World Cup.

This time, Tuchel said he was delighted by the amount of tournament-winning experience in his squad, which contains around a dozen players who won a trophy this year.

"We're very, very happy that we

have a lot of winners... it just lets your confidence grow in a genuine way, so it's not artificial," said Tuchel.

"Players know that they can handle the pressure. Players know that they performed in finals."

The manager said he had a "clear idea of 14-15 starters that can start for us and should start for us and can carry this team" against Croatia.

Ezri Konsa is fighting for a starting role at center-back, along with the likes of Marc Guehi and John Stones. Speaking before Tuchel at Friday's press conference, Konsa admitted that "most of our players are not used to playing in this kind of heat."

"But we've got to get used to it very quickly."

SPOTLIGHT

Co-hosts Canada held by Ireland ahead of World Cup

AFP
Montreal

World Cup co-hosts Canada were held to a frustrating 1-1 draw with Ireland on Friday despite dominating their final warm-up friendly before the tournament kicks off next week.

Canada have never won a World Cup game but have shot up the FIFA rankings in recent years and, with home advantage and stars like Alphonso Davies, will be looking to make a real impact this year. But despite controlling the game in Montreal, and the gift of a first-half Ireland own goal, the Canadians could not secure the win.

They conceded an equalizer on the hour mark to Chiedozie Ogbene, who pounced on the rebound from Troy Parrott's well-saved penalty.

Playing against an Irish team that will not feature at the World Cup, it was a disappointing result for Canada, especially after a promising 2-0 win over Uzbekistan earlier this week.

"Obviously, we wish we could have gotten more goals and gotten the win, but I think the energy from the start, the way to go after the game, the ideas in the game, (were) really good," said Canada coach Jesse Marsch.

"We let one counter really get away from us in the second half but, look, overall it is a good performance."

"Goals make a difference, and so do mistakes, so we've just got to clean some things up."

Canada had utterly dominated the first half, creating a flurry of chances before Stephen Eustaquio's corner deflected off two

Ireland players - Parrott and then Jake O'Brien - and into the net.

Liam Millar had a shot well-blocked by O'Brien, Ismael Kone's effort was deflected wide, and Juventus striker Jonathan David had a penalty claim ignored.

But Ireland's goal against the run of play, along with a string of substitutions, took the wind out of Canada's sails.

Ireland's Tottenham Hotspur teenager Mason Melia was barely denied an unlikely winner off the bench late on.

Canada has been drawn in Group B alongside Bosnia-Herzegovina, Qatar and Switzerland. Though the Swiss are favored to top the group, it has been seen as a kind draw for Canada, who automatically qualified as co-hosts.

Canada's campaign begins against Bosnia in Toronto on June 12, before shifting to Vancouver for clashes with Qatar and Switzerland.

In two previous appearances at the World Cup - the 1986 finals in Mexico and the 2022 tournament in Qatar - Canada have a perfect record of six defeats in six matches.

But the Canadians surprised many by reaching the semi-finals of the Copa America in 2024, where they only narrowly lost on penalties to Uruguay in the third-place playoff.

Marsch has described his roster as "our best group of 26 players that this country has ever assembled at any one time."

But Bayern Munich defender and Canada talisman Davies has a hamstring injury and did not feature on Friday.

He faces a race to get back to fitness, and is not expected to start the opener against Bosnia.



Chiedozie Ogbene of Ireland celebrates his goal with team-mates in the friendly match against Canada in Montreal. (AFP)

More minutes for Lukaku as Belgium thump Tunisia in final World Cup warm-up

Striker Romelu Lukaku continued his comeback for Belgium with 25 minutes off the bench as they enjoyed a 5-0 victory over 10-man Tunisia yesterday, a final warm-up fixture for both teams before they head to the United States for the World Cup.

Leandro Trossard, Charles De Ketelaere, Kevin De Bruyne, Dodi Lukebakio and Nicolas Raskin scored the goals as Lukaku grabbed an assist, making his second international appearance in a year having netted against Croatia on his return on Tuesday.

Lukaku did not make a single start for Napoli in Serie A this season.

The form of winger Jeremy Doku, who was superb on the left wing, underlined why he may be a star of the World Cup.

Doku's trickery laid on two goals, including a tap-in for Trossard, before De Ketelaere headed in from close range via Youri Tielemans' cross. Tunisia midfielder Ismael Gharbi received a second booking in the 62nd minute for a lunge on Doku such as the North Africans' difficulty in containing the winger.

Three minutes later Doku set up De Bruyne to make it 3-0 with a shot from outside the box, before Lukebakio scrambled the ball home from Lukaku's touch and Raskin added the fifth. Belgium open their World Cup Group G campaign on June 15 against Egypt in Seattle. They also have Iran and New Zealand in their section after a favourable draw.

Tunisia are in Group F with Sweden, Japan and Netherlands.



Belgium's Romelu Lukaku walks around the stadium with his children after the friendly football match against Tunisia at the King Baudouin Stadium in Brussels yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Champions crowned as Al Shaqab Showjumping League concludes

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Al Shaqab Showjumping League Finals came to a spectacular conclusion at the Longines Indoor Arena at Al Shaqab yesterday, bringing the curtain down on another successful season with the crowning of overall champions across nine categories.

Organised by Al Shaqab, the league has established itself as one of the region's premier platforms for showjumping development, providing riders across multiple age groups and performance levels with a professional environment to hone their skills, nurture emerging talent and strengthen equestrian culture while preparing the next generation of champions.

After a closely contested campaign decided through a cumulative points system, Mohammed Alasaker emerged as the Al Shaqab Champions overall winner with 100 points. Saudi's Khalid al-Hadi claimed the Youth Champions title with 107 points, while Khalid Jassim al-Suwaidi secured the Junior Champions crown with 103 points.

In the remaining categories, Abdulla Faisal al-Mana won the



Overall winners of the Al Shaqab Showjumping League pose with Rashid Nasser al-Kaabi, a member of the Al Shaqab Board of Directors.

Future Champions title with 99 points, Hayfa Hamad al-Thani topped the Amateur Class with 93 points, Salha Khalid al-Obaidli claimed the Intro 3 (80cm) category with 64 points, Mashael Mohammed al-Thani won Intro 2 (60cm) with 62.5 points, and Ab-

dullah Ahmad al-Naser finished first in Intro 1 (40cm) with 54 points. Aftreen Team were crowned team champions after accumulating 102.5 points.

The winners were crowned by Rashid Nasser al-Kaabi, a member of the Al Shaqab Board of Di-

rectors and Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin, Director of Equestrian Education at Al Shaqab.

The final day featured the Youth Champions (135cm), Amateur (105cm), Future Champions (115cm) and Junior Champions (125cm) classes before culminat-

ing with the prestigious Al Shaqab Champions (145cm), which offered a prize purse of QR70,000.

In the feature Al Shaqab Champions 145cm class, Ibrahim Yousef Almahmoud riding Qataro van het Texelhof delivered two faultless rounds to take victory in 58.85

seconds. Sultan Salem al-Naemi aboard Gannan de La Luce finished second, while Saudi Arabia's Bader Alfarid riding Murdock claimed third place.

The Junior Champions 125cm class saw Ahmad Jassim al-Suwaidi dominate the podium, winning aboard Power Girl Jmg while also securing second place with Mona Lansia M Sharida Nasser al-Kaabi and Extra Pam completed the top three.

In the Youth Champions 135cm competition, Saad Ahmed al-Saad partnered Fashion des Douits to victory after a fast jump-off, edging Khaled al-Hadi on Carlton de Sauvageonn into second, with Abdullaziz Khalid Albukhari and Ganges Loca finishing third.

The Future Champions 115cm on the day was won by Abdulla Ahmad al-Musafri riding Gringo, ahead of Sharida Nasser al-Kaabi on Graffiti de Lully CH, while newly crowned overall champion Abdulla Faisal al-Mana and Kontiki Dice placed third.

In the Amateur 105cm class, Nasser Hamad al-Thani riding Equinoxe de l'Aulne claimed first place, narrowly ahead of overall Amateur champion Hayfa Hamad al-Thani aboard Take Me Home Z, with Iraq's Mariam Abdulkarim Abed and Sandro Girl finishing third.