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CRICKET | Page 2

Bangladesh thrash Australia in rain-hit first ODI



MOTORSPORT | Page 3

Team Qatar to make Le Mans 24 Hours debut with big ambitions

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SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

1 DAY TO GO

TRIVIA

What is the farthest an Asian country has gone in the FIFA World Cup?
Semi-finals, South Korea in 2002.

FOOTBALL

World Cup nears kickoff after chaotic buildup

Soaring ticket prices and political tensions have cast a shadow over football's showpiece

AFP
Mexico City

The World Cup kicks off tomorrow with FIFA betting that the enduring appeal of the greatest footballing show on earth can rise above anger at soaring ticket prices, an uneasy political climate in Donald Trump's America and the shadow of conflict in the Middle East.

A record 48 teams and millions of fans are set to descend on the United States, Canada and Mexico for the first ever World Cup co-hosted by three nations, the largest and most logistically complex edition of the tournament ever staged.

The action gets under way at Mexico City's iconic Estadio Azteca tomorrow, with co-hosts Mexico taking on South Africa at 3pm local time (10pm Qatar time), launching a sprawling, nearly six-week-long spectacle that will culminate in the final at New Jersey's 82,500-seat MetLife Stadium on July 19.

Can Lionel Messi, at the age of 38, settle any lingering debate about his status as the greatest player of all time by leading Argentina to a second consecutive World Cup title? Or can Messi's great rival, the 41-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo, defy father time by inspiring a talented Portugal team to its maiden World Cup win? Or will England, led by Harry Kane, finally end the country's 60-year wait for a second major international championship following their lone 1966 World Cup victory?

Those questions and more will be answered over the course of a tournament that Gianni Infantino, the president of world football's governing FIFA, has bullishly hyped as "the greatest show that the planet has ever seen."

TICKET FURY

Yet Infantino's breezy optimism has run into hurricane-force headwinds of scepticism during a build-up dogged by concerns over affordability, politics and conflict.

The skyrocketing cost of tickets to the tournament has triggered a global backlash which has left FIFA and Infantino struggling to mount a convincing public relations defense. The most expensive ticket for the 2022 World Cup final cost around \$1,600 at face value; in 2026 the most expensive face value ticket being sold by FIFA is an eye-watering \$32,970. That kind of inflation has been prevalent across the tournament's 104 matches, where seats for many games remain available on secondary re-sale markets despite huge demand.

Even Infantino's staunch ally, Trump, has balked at the cost, reacting with surprise when told of the \$1,000 price tag for tickets to the USA's opening game with Paraguay in Los Angeles on Friday - the first game on



The World Cup gets under way at Mexico City's iconic Estadio Azteca tomorrow, with co-hosts Mexico taking on South Africa. (AFP)

US soil. "I wouldn't pay it either, to be honest with you," the US president said.

While fans absorb the expense of travel to the tournament, other critics have questioned whether the World Cup party will be soured by the political climate in the United States. Human Rights Watch says Trump's crackdowns on immigration, demonstrations and press freedom could lead to a World Cup defined by "exclusion and fear."

Those fears were fueled on Monday when FIFA dropped a Somali referee from the World Cup after he was denied entry to the United States.

Omar Artan was set to be the first match official from Somalia to referee at a global final, but he was turned back when he arrived at Miami International Airport on Saturday. FIFA said it was powerless to influence the decision and announced it had omitted Artan from its 52-strong referees roster.

The US-Israel military strikes launched against Iran in February have also loomed large over the tournament, where Iran are due to play three group games in the United States, starting with their opener against New Zealand on June 15.

Trump initially suggested Iran should withdraw from the tournament for their own "life and safety" before walking back his rhetoric.

Iran meanwhile have switched their base camp from Tucson, Arizona to the Mexican city of Tijuana, where they touched down early Sunday. While Iran's players are free to travel in and out of the United States, some 15 administrative and management staff have been denied visas by US authorities in a move Iranian authorities have condemned as "deliberate and discriminatory treatment."

EXPANDED FIELD

On the field, the decision to expand the tournament to 48 teams - up from 32 in 2022 - is likely to strip the group stage of any sense of jeopardy. A total of 72 first-round matches will be needed to eliminate just 12 teams, with 32 advancing to the knockout rounds - the top two finishers in each of the 12 first ground groups along with the eight best third-place finishers.

The tournament will see a range of other innovations. For the first time in World Cup history, every game will feature cooling breaks in the middle of each half, a measure designed to mitigate the effects of searing heat and humidity expected at many of the tournament's 16 venues.

Players and referees will need to adjust to several new rules being rolled out at the World Cup, including teams being required to make substitutions inside 10 seconds to



FIFA chief Gianni Infantino has bullishly hyped the World Cup as "the greatest show that the planet has ever seen."

prevent time-wasting.

A crackdown on racist abuse will see players risk a red card for covering their mouth with a hand, arm or shirt during a confrontation with an opponent.

Next month's final, meanwhile, could well be the longest on record due to the decision to stage a Super Bowl-style halftime show, headlined by Madonna, Shakira and BTS. The show means the half-time interval will be stretched from the traditional 15 minutes to around 25 minutes.

Real Madrid's 150mn euros bid for Atletico's Alvarez rejected

Madrid: Real Madrid said that Atletico Madrid had rejected the club's offer of 150mn euros (\$173mn) for Argentine forward Julian Alvarez. "After reviewing and evaluating the offer, Club Atletico de Madrid has expressed its gratitude for the proposal... and has rejected it," Real Madrid said in a statement.

A World Cup winner with Argentina in 2022 and formerly of Manchester City, the 26-year-old Alvarez joined Atletico in 2024. He is under contract until June 2030, with a release clause estimated at 500mn euros. Included in Argentina's squad for the 2026 World Cup, Alvarez scored eight goals last season in La Liga and 10 in the Champions League, where Atletico were eliminated in the semi-finals by Arsenal.

"After studying and evaluating it, Atletico de Madrid thanked the club for the offer made, in keeping with the good relations between our two clubs, but rejected it," Real Madrid said. Atletico Madrid scoffed at the Real statement. "You may have confused politeness with gratitude, but to be clear: we don't thank you for anything. We neither studied nor considered any offer for Julian. You make us laugh even more than Barcelona do," Atletico said in reply to Real in a social media post.

Re-elected on Sunday as Real Madrid president, Florentino Perez had promised during his election campaign that he would make a big-name signing.

Spanish media had reported that the target was Bayern Munich winger Michael Olise. But the German club said they would not be selling their French international. "If Florentino Perez wants to send us an offer, which has not happened so far, he can save himself the trouble," said Bayern president Herbert Hainer.

REAL CONFIRM ARBELLOA'S DEPARTURE

Meanwhile, Real Madrid confirmed that coach Alvaro Arbeloa was leaving the club, paving the way for the return of Jose Mourinho. "Real Madrid and Alvaro Arbeloa have reached an agreement to end his tenure as the first-team coach," a statement on the 15-time European champions' website read.

Arbeloa, who arrived in January to replace Xabi Alonso, had himself announced on May 22, just prior to the end of the La Liga season, that he would be leaving his post at the end of the campaign. His short spell as interim boss was marked by an early exit in the round of 16 of the Copa del Rey against second-tier Albacete.

SPOTLIGHT

Somali referee says World Cup 'dream' ruined after US entry denial



Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan landed in Miami on a flight from Istanbul on Saturday, but was refused entrance into the country by US Customs and Border Patrol.

AFP
Los Angeles

Somali referee Omar Artan said the "biggest dream of my life" had been ripped away after he was denied entry to the United States to officiate at the World Cup.

Artan, who was named referee of the year in 2025 by the Confederation of African Football (CAF), has been dropped from FIFA's list of officials after he was refused entry to the US upon arriving in Miami on Saturday.

Somalia is one of several countries on a travel ban list introduced by President Donald Trump's administration as part of a broader immigration crackdown.

"I am very, very disappointed," Artan told the *New York Times* in a telephone interview from Istanbul. "I'm just simply a referee who's trying to live his dream, the biggest dream of my life, to come to the World Cup."

After an 11-hour interview with border

officials, Artan said he was taken to a separate holding cell where he was detained for several further hours before being put on a flight back to Istanbul. "I had the right papers and everything, I had the right visa," he added.

FIFA claimed that it was powerless to influence the decision, which it said was the sole preserve of tournament co-hosts the United States.

"In line with previous FIFA events, a host government ultimately determines who receives a visa and who is admitted into their country," said a spokesperson for football's governing body.

CAF said they were powerless to intervene. A spokesperson for United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said Artan was denied entry following a routine inspection. "The traveler underwent additional inspection, a routine part of CBP's inspection process when officers need to verify information or determine admissibility," the statement said.

"Following inspection, the traveler, a referee for the FIFA World Cup, was de-

termined to be inadmissible due to vetting concerns and was denied entry."

The Somali government expressed "deep regret" at Artan's exclusion from the tournament. "Artan represents the very best of Somali talent," said Somalia's Ministry of Sports.

Artan was among the 52 referees announced by FIFA for the World Cup finals in Canada, Mexico and the United States. He has been officiating in the Somali national football league championships since he became a FIFA referee in 2018, and refereed in the most recent edition of the Africa Cup of Nations.

The largest World Cup in history begins tomorrow shrouded in political tension. Iran, who will play their three group games on American soil, were forced to switch their training base to Mexico due to the military conflict between Tehran and the US.

The Iranian football federation on Tuesday said its allocation of tickets for supporters has been revoked, while some of the team's support staff were denied visas.

CRICKET

Bangladesh ease past Australia in rain-hit first ODI

Bangladesh benefited from 6 dropped catches by sloppy Australia

AFP
Dhaka

Mosaddek Hossain hit a career-best 86 not out and Nahid Rana took four wickets as Bangladesh trounced Australia by 86 runs in the rain-hit opening one-day international yesterday to go 1-0 up in the three-match series.

It was only Bangladesh's second ever ODI victory against Australia, following their famous 2005 upset in Cardiff.

Mosaddek capped a fine all-round performance, bagging two wickets to walk away with the man-of-the-match award.

Chasing 285, Australia were reeling at 191-9 in 42.2 overs, still needing 93 runs off 46 balls with one wicket in hand, when a fierce thunderstorm forced the players off the field at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka. Bangladesh were declared winners via the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern (DLS) method.

Cameron Green top-scored for the visitors with an unbeaten 52 off 66 balls but found little support as Bangladesh's pace attack ran riot.

Taskin Ahmed struck on the first ball, bowling opener Matt Short for a duck.

Mustafizur Rahman then removed Marnus Labuschagne for just one off the second ball of the second over to leave Australia reeling at 2-2.

OPENER STEADIED THE INNINGS

Cooper Connolly (35) survived a reprieve when Tanzid Hasan put down a chance at second slip off Mustafizur, and the opener steadied the innings briefly before being castled by an arm ball from



Bangladesh's Mosaddek Hossain watches the ball after playing a shot during the first ODI against Australia at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka yesterday. (AFP)

Mosaddek. Captain Josh Inglis fell for 19, edging a short ball from Rana to the keeper, while Alex Carey was bounced out by Rana for 47 as he attempted to rebuild alongside Green.

Australia's lower order, including Matthew Renshaw, debutant Liam Scott and Xavier Bartlett, offered little resistance, leaving Green stranded at the crease.

Earlier, Mosaddek laid the platform with his 70-ball knock on his return to international cricket after four years, hitting seven fours and three sixes.

Bangladesh also benefited from six dropped catches by a sloppy Australia, four of them off Mosaddek. Opener Tanzid Hasan

and number three Najmul Hossain Shanto made vital contributions, with the left-handed pair hitting half-centuries.

Tanzid struck 54 off 44 balls before Nathan Ellis removed him in his second spell. Shanto, continuing his rich vein of form, made 67 off 86 before a soft dismissal ended his innings.

The pair put on 96 runs for the second wicket off just 91 balls after Australia struck early, with Ellis accounting for Saif Hasan (5) who edged to second slip where Labuschagne took a simple catch.

Australia threatened to seize control when Renshaw's part-time off-spin proved surprisingly

effective, removing Litton Das (7) with a return catch before also accounting for Shanto.

But Mosaddek steadied the innings, first adding 75 with Towhid Hridoy, before late partnerships of 20 with Tanvir Islam and 45 with Taskin to ensure a competitive total.

Ellis was the pick of the Australia bowlers with 3-38, while Scott and Renshaw claimed two wickets each.

BRIEF SCORES

Bangladesh 284 for 8 (Mosaddek 86*, Shanto 67, Ellis 3-38) **beat Australia 191 for 9** (Green 52*, Carey 47, Rana 4-41) **by 86 runs (DLS method)**

ATHLETICS

American sprinter Tinch set to compete at Doha Diamond League



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Reigning world and Diamond League champion **Cordell Tinch** will compete at the Doha Meeting at the Qatar Sports Club on 19 June.

Tinch, who stepped away from the track in 2020 before making a return in 2023, had a breakthrough year in 2025 during which he won five Diamond League races and recorded a 110m hurdles personal best of 12.87 - the joint fourth-fastest of all-time - with victory in Shanghai/Keqiao. The American's 12.99 winning time in Tokyo was his fifth-fastest ever and earned him his first global medal.

He kicked off his 2026 Diamond League campaign in China with a second-place finish in Shanghai/Keqiao (13.10) and a fifth place in Xiamen (13.28).

"I'm excited to get back on track in Doha," said the 25-year-old. "I had a few challenges leading into this outdoor season and although I was happy with my result in Shanghai, I don't think I did myself justice in Xiamen."

"Progress is rarely linear and I've had to make some changes recently."

"That said, now that I'm world champion I approach every competition as the person to beat and I want to fully embrace every opportunity ahead of me."

The Mazzratty Doha Meeting is the seventh meeting of the 2026 Wanda Diamond League.

The series comprises 15 of the most prestigious events in global track and field across four different continents and began in Shanghai/Keqiao on 16 May (as a result of the Doha Meeting being rescheduled). It concludes with a single final across two days in Brussels (4-5 September).

ANNOUNCEMENT

Krishna replaces Siraj in India squad for England, Ireland T20s

AFP
New Delhi

Prasidh Krishna will replace fellow fast bowler Mohammed Siraj in India's squad for the T20 internationals against Ireland and England, the country's cricket board said yesterday.

Siraj has been advised to rest to allow sufficient recovery time ahead of a lengthy international season, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said.

India play Ireland in Belfast on June 26 and 28 before taking on England in an away series beginning in Chester-le-Street on July 1.

Siraj took 19 wickets for the Gujarat Titans in the recently concluded Indian Premier League, playing all of the franchise's 17 games.

Star batsman Shreyas Iyer will captain the side after replacing Suryakumar Yadav, who was removed following a poor run of form, three months after leading India to World Cup glory on home soil.

Teenage sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi is also part of the squad, his maiden international call-up after a string of breathtaking performances in the IPL.

Squad: Shreyas Iyer (captain), Tilak Varma (vice-captain), Abhishek Sharma, Ishan



Kishan, Sanju Samson, Shivam Dube, Nitish Reddy, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Varun Chakaravarthy, Ravi Bishnoi, Prasidh Krishna, Harshit Rana, Arshdeep Singh, Prince Yadav, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi.

COMMENT

Reports say Stokes could quit England captaincy

AFP
London

Ben Stokes is preparing to make a decision on his future as England captain, several British media outlets reported yesterday following his involvement in a nightclub incident with a Saracens rugby player.

Stokes and bowler Gus Atkinson are facing a probe by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) for breaking team curfew rules on Monday morning following England's win in the first Test against New Zealand at Lord's.

The pair were also reported to have become involved in what became a physical confrontation.

Britain's Press Association named the rugby player involved as Toota Auva'a, a 6ft 5in (1.95 metres) and 19 stones 8lbs (124.28 kilograms) former Samoa A and Samoa Under-20 captain.

A security guard who was with the England duo was reportedly injured in the incident.

It is the latest controversy concerning the England team following a tour of Australia where the side faced allegations of a drinking culture during a 4-1 Ashes series loss concluded in January.

The squad announcement for next week's second Test at the Oval has been delayed and there are now growing concerns over whether Stokes can continue as England captain. But there will be no need to sack Stokes from the captaincy should the 35-year-old resign from a post he has held since 2022. And the possibility remains he could now quit international cricket completely.

There have been suggestions Stokes and Atkinson were unaware a midnight curfew imposed



England's Ben Stokes after the day's action on the fourth day of the first Test against New Zealand at Lord's in London on Sunday. (Reuters)

on the players after the Ashes debacle was still in place, even though the first Test against New Zealand had finished.

Stokes, as captain, would be expected to know the rules, however, while a failure to explain fully the terms of the curfew would reflect badly on both England managing director Rob Key and coach Brendon McCullum.

Former England captain David Gower said Stokes' position as captain was "in severe doubt".

"One of the responsibilities as a captain is to set the right tone; if you're leading, you have to set the right example," Gower, 69, told the BBC yesterday. "They have to sort it out. If you've agreed to a curfew you have to abide by it."

"I've got a lot of respect for Ben and most the things he's done for the last three years or so as England captain. He has become - or, I probably have to use the past tense now - had become, a very important figure as a leader of that team. I don't know what he's thinking at the moment...

regret could be the least of it. He will be mortified, I'm sure, to have put himself in that position in the early hours.

"It's a misjudgement. You've put yourself in a bad position and you've put yourself at risk."

Stokes spoke of giving up alcohol during his recovery from injury last year.

But soon after England had completed a dominant 115-run win against New Zealand at Lord's, to go 1-0 up in a three-match series, he told reporters: "I won't be really happy until I get to share a beer with the boys."

If Stokes is stripped of the captaincy, vice-captain Harry Brook - already the skipper of England's white-ball teams - could lead the hosts at the Oval.

This would represent a remarkable reversal of fortune for Brook, who was fined and censured for late-night drinking and clashing with a nightclub bouncer before captaining England in a one-day international in Wellington in October. That episode led Eng-

land to impose the midnight curfew, with McCullum saying after the Wellington incident became public: "If you go back to the day that I walked into the job, the first thing I said to these boys is, 'don't do anything that lands you on the front page of the paper and nothing good ever happens after midnight'".

In 2017, Stokes was involved in an incident outside a nightclub in Bristol, southwest England, that led to him being charged with affray.

He subsequently missed the Ashes tour of 2017/18 before he was found not guilty of the charge following a trial at Bristol Crown Court in August 2018.

LORD'S PITCH RATED 'UNSATISFACTORY' BY ICC

The Lord's pitch for the first Test between New Zealand and England has been rated as "unsatisfactory" by the International Cricket Council (ICC).

Match referee Andy Pycroft deemed there was "excessive seam movement" and the "bounce was variable" throughout the match, the 150th Test staged at Lord's - the most at any ground. As a result, the London venue has been handed one demerit point.

"There was plenty of excessive seam movement throughout the Test, and the ball also kept extremely low on several occasions," said Pycroft. "The bounce was variable throughout as 16 wickets fell on the first day and 17 on the second. There was simply an over-balance in favour of ball against bat caused by the pitch."

The match, which England won by 115 runs to 1-0 up in a three-match series, was the second shortest completed Test, in terms of balls bowled, at Lord's.

SPOTLIGHT

South Africa's Botha quits coaching roles

AFP
Brisbane, Australia

Former South African white-ball captain Johan Botha yesterday quit as coach of Queensland and the Big Bash League side Brisbane Heat with a year left on his contract.

The 44-year-old steered Queensland to the Sheffield Shield final in his first year at the helm, but failed to win a trophy with reports saying he was forced out.

Former Australia Test captain Tim Paine, currently head coach of Australia A, is among those being touted as a replacement.

Queensland Cricket chief Terry

Svenson thanked Botha for his commitment.

"While we haven't achieved all of our on-field goals, Johan has made a strong contribution towards the development of the next generation of Queensland and Brisbane Heat players," he said.

"Despite this decision, Johan's contributions to our high performance group have been valued."

Botha played five Tests, 78 ODIs and 40 T20 internationals for South Africa between 2005 and 2012, captaining both white-ball sides during that time.

He was previously head coach of the Multan Sultans, Karachi Kings and Islamabad United in the Pakistan Super League.

MOTORSPORT

Team Qatar to make Le Mans debut with big ambitions

QMMF president al-Mannai outlines vision to develop Qatari drivers, Abdulla al-Khelaifi to compete in LMGT3

Reuters
Le Mans

Team Qatar will make their Le Mans 24 Hours endurance debut this weekend in a significant step for a small country with big motorsport ambitions.

The team have linked up with Italy-based Iron Lynx to field an LMGT3 Mercedes-AMG entry at the French Circuit de la Sarthe with Qatari driver Abdulla al-Khelaifi partnering German Julian Hanes and Frenchman Giuliano Alesi, son of former Formula One racer Jean. Qatar's Le Mans entry is part of a plan to grow its local involvement in the sport. The country already hosts MotoGP, Formula One and the World Endurance Championship (WEC) rounds, is a stakeholder in the Audi F1 team via Qatar Investment Authority and is home to Dakar Rally champion Nasser al-Attiyah.

"The vision for us...is to have Qatari drivers competing at the highest level of motorsports, whether it's Le Mans or even Formula One," Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation President Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai told Reuters.

"Qatari drivers picked up by teams and factories - this is what we'd like to see at the end of it. We started very, very small in our national championships and now



Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation President Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai with Team Qatar drivers Abdulla al-Khelaifi, Julian Hanes and Frenchman Giuliano Alesi and Iron Lynx Team Principal and CEO Andrea Piccini.

our regional, continental and now we're pushing to the worldwide stage."

The Hypercar category is the pinnacle at Le Mans, with Ferrari chasing a fourth win in succession after ending Toyota's five-year run at the top. LMGT3 is the third tier, after LMP2 prototypes run by independent teams. LMGT3 is also the largest of the classes, with 25 entries and 75 drivers this year on a 62-car starting grid for what will be the 94th running of the race.

Team Qatar also have a Qatari engineer, another small step towards building the future.

"First of all you need to create excitement, you want people to be excited about this new prospect, and then we start recruiting people, developing them and taking them to these international events," said al-Mannai. "One day, hopefully, we will have a fully Qatari team competing."

The next step would be prototypes, with the GT3 programme

continuing to provide a ladder for Qatari drivers. "When you think of motorsport in Qatar, it is rallies," said al-Mannai. "We have a lot less experience when it comes to circuit racing. And this is what we are trying to do."

"We have a single-seater programme, we have a rally programme, we have an endurance race programme, and you will see in the coming years more and more Qataris coming up at the international level."



Qatari driver Abdulla al-Khelaifi drives an LMGT3 Mercedes-AMG during a practice session in Le Mans, France.

The Iran war and conflict in the Gulf region forced Qatar to postpone the MotoGP race from April until November, with the opening World Endurance round at Lusail moved from March to October.

That leaves Qatar hosting WEC, MotoGP and Formula One rounds at Lusail within five weeks at the same track outside Doha.

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia had to cancel April F1 races because

of the situation and the Qatar and Abu Dhabi Grands Prix that close out the season in November and December remain scheduled but with lingering uncertainty.

"We're planning everything as if everything will happen. And we're just hoping the US and Iran will come to an agreement and things will be better," said al-Mannai.

"In terms of planning, we are ready for these races. We just need the politicians to agree."

TENNIS

Serena makes winning return in Queen's Club doubles



USA's Serena Williams (right) and Canada's Victoria Mboko celebrate during their doubles match against USA's Nicole Melichar-Martinez and New Zealand's Erin Routliffe at the Queen's Club in London yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
London

Serena Williams made a winning return to tennis after four years in retirement as the American legend partnered Victoria Mboko in a first-round doubles victory at the Queen's Club yesterday.

Williams rolled back the years alongside Canadian teenager Mboko in a 7-6 (7/2), 6-2 win over third seeds Erin Routliffe and Nicole Melichar-Martinez at the grass-court tournament in west London.

It was like she had never been away as the 44-year-old produced her trademark thunderous serve and fearsome ground-strokes to the delight of a capacity crowd, including her two young daughters Olympia and Adira and husband Alexis Ohanian.

After appearing to end her glittering career four years ago, the 23-time Grand Slam champion stunned the sporting world on Monday with her shock announcement that she would compete in the Queen's Club doubles.

Williams' decision to pick up a racquet in a competitive setting for the first time since losing to Ajla Tomljanovic at the 2022 US Open had sparked questions about the wisdom of her move.

Would one of the sport's all-time greats be able to approach her past excellence, or would she be a shadow of her former self?

Williams hadn't played in a tournament since saying she was "evolving away" from tennis in

2022, so inevitably there were signs of rust. But she delivered a typically combative performance that will intensify questions over a potential return to singles action at Wimbledon, which starts later in June.

"It was so fun. I had so much fun playing with Victoria," Williams said. "I never got to play here before, it was always just the men. It feels really special to play somewhere so iconic."

"I had nothing better to do! I got tired of sitting at home. My kids are out of school for the summer, so why not?"

Williams, who will take part in the doubles at the Berlin Open from June 15-21, has not won a Grand Slam singles title since the 2017 Australian Open.

On Sunday, she played down suggestions that she would extend her return to singles competition.

But she has won the Wimbledon singles trophy seven times and the prospect of competing at the All England Club in some capacity will be hard to resist, especially if she continues her run at Queen's.

Dressed in a white top, pink skirt and matching shoes, Williams arrived on court to cheers and a standing ovation from the capacity crowd in the Andy Murray Arena.

As former Olympic skiing gold medalist Lindsey Vonn watched from the stands, fans held up signs saying 'Welcome back Serena!'

Offering only a brief wave in acknowledgement of the acclaim, Williams was firmly focused on her first competitive match for 1,375 days.

The first point of Williams' return was served by Mboko and ended in her partner sending a volley out without the American hitting a shot.

Williams' first touch of the ball came on the next point when she dumped a volley into the net.

She made amends by hitting the first winner of her comeback with another volley to the delight of the crowd.

Williams' ground-strokes were hit with enough accuracy to keep her in the rallies, while her competitive instincts were as strong as ever.

She celebrated with a clenched fist after a ferocious smash secured a break for a 4-1 lead.

Williams had said the chance to play in front of her children was the driving force behind her sensational return and she provided a memorable moment for them.

After unleashing a superb backhand winner from an acute angle off the court, she broke into a broad grin and spread her arms out in a gesture that suggested she was surprising even herself.

Williams had no problem approaching the devastating service speed of her glory days, thudding down one unreturnable delivery that reached 120mph late in the first set. She roared "lets go" after the pair raced through the tie-break to take the opening set.

The 19-year-old Mboko was the driving force in the second set, earning admiring fist-bumps from Williams as she unloaded winner after winner. Fittingly though, it was Serena's lethal serve sealed a victory four years in the making.

FOCUS

Chadwick hoping for Hypercar future after laps of Le Mans

Reuters
Le Mans

Jamie Chadwick knows where she wants to be and what she wants to do after becoming the first woman driver to lap the 24 Hours of Le Mans' Circuit de la Sarthe in a Hypercar.

The three-time winner of the now-defunct all-female W Series is reserve for Hyundai's Genesis Magma team debuting in the top class at the pinnacle of endurance racing.

"Driving the Mulsanne Straight for the first time (in a Hypercar), these are the kind of things any racing driver dreams of," the 28-year-old Briton told Reuters yesterday. "It's definitely made me more hungry to be in Hypercar at some point and transition from this role into a full time race driver seat."

Chadwick needed the handful of laps on Sunday to feel at home in the car in case she needs to step in as a late replacement for next Saturday's start of what is the jewel in the crown of the World Endurance Championship.

Chadwick competed last year in the second-tier LMP2 category and, after racing single seaters in North America and talking earlier in her career about Formula One, sees sportscar racing



as where her future lies. "It definitely feels like where I want to find a home, where I want to find my career," said the Briton, who also works as an occasional Formula One pundit for Sky Sports television.

"And that is being a full-time Hypercar driver."

Only two women are racing at Le Mans this year, both of them French, compared with five in June last year.

F1 Academy champion Doriane Pin is competing in LMP2 with the number 30 Duqueine Oreca while Lilou Wadoux is in the GT3 class in a Richard Mille AF Corse Ferrari.

Pin, the first woman to drive a Mercedes Formula One car, is on Peugeot's driver roster and also

hoping for an eventual Hypercar chance.

"This year I will focus on the development of the car but hopefully I will have an opportunity in the near future to become an official driver in the top category of endurance," she said recently.

"I want to race against the best in the world and hopefully it will be with them (Peugeot) and competing in the WEC and the 24 Hours of Le Mans in the best category."

Wadoux drove Toyota's title-winning Hypercar in a 2022 post-season rookie test in Bahrain, the first woman in a top class prototype since Belgian Vanina Ickx raced an LMP1 Lola-Aston Martin at Le Mans in 2011.

Visma win Auvergne team time-trial but Baudin keeps yellow

American Matteo Jorgenson led Visma-Lease a Bike over the line to win yesterday's 28km team time-trial at the Tour Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes as Frenchman Alex Baudin retained the overall leader's yellow jersey.

Baudin, who won Sunday's opening stage, led his EF Education-Easy Post team to a third-placed finish, 29 seconds off Visma's time.

That was enough to give him a 12sec lead over Frenchman Kevin Vauquelin and Briton Oscar Onley in the overall standings after they led Netcompany Ineos to a second-placed finish on the third stage around Perreux. Jorgenson, a twice former winner of Paris-Nice, moved up to fourth overall at 15sec. "It's seven times better than winning on your own because we get the moment right afterwards together, which in cycling you don't often get where you win together with your teammates," said Jorgenson in reference to the seven-man team. "It's a really cool discipline and a really nice day."

But pre-race favourite Paul Seixas, the teenage French prodigy, lost 45 seconds with his Decathlon CMA CGM team finishing sixth, while overall contenders Juan Ayuso and Isaac Del Toro lost 32 and 61 seconds respectively.

Spaniard Ayuso and his Danish Lidl-Trek team-mate Mattias Skjelmoese moved up to fifth and sixth

overall at 47sec, with Seixas now 12th at 1min and Mexican Del Toro 16th at 1min 16sec.

Australian sprinter Michael Matthews had set the early pace for Team Jayco Aula with a time of 33:46 after a blistering finish to the race against the clock. But Lidl, who finished fourth at 32sec, soon smashed that before Netcompany then set the new benchmark. Baudin's EF were inspired by their bid to retain the yellow jersey and kept in touch through the two time checks. Visma finished the strongest, in part due to Onley's troubles, and Jorgenson is now well-placed to push for overall victory once the race hits the high mountains at the end of the week.

"I think the last 10 kilometres we couldn't have gone any faster. I was given a free ride to the last climb," said Jorgenson, who crashed out of the Ardennes classics in April after a good start to the season where he was second at Tirreno-Adriatico and the Drome Classic.

"On a personal level, it feels good to win a race and it is really nice after the spring I've had to come back and be on top again."

Vauquelin and Onley are also well-placed but there is work to do for Seixas and Del Toro to claw back the time they lost. Before the final three summit finishes, Wednesday and today's stages invite a battle between the breakaway and the sprint teams.



FOCUS

US players ready to seize 'once in a career' chance

'Nobody putting more expectation and more pressure on us than ourselves'

Reuters
Irvine, California

United States captain Tim Ream urged his teammates to embrace the pressure of a home World Cup on Monday, saying the tournament represents a once-in-a-career chance for the squad ahead of their opening match against Paraguay on Friday.

Speaking at the US training base in Irvine, California, the defender said the co-hosts were well aware of the expectations surrounding them but insisted the players were putting the greatest demands on themselves.

"This is a once-in-a-career opportunity," Ream said during a press conference before a public training session that attracted more than 5,000 fans under sunny Southern California skies.

"With that comes more expectation, more pressure, but at the same time, we have to enjoy it. There's nobody putting more expectation and more pressure on us than ourselves."

The United States, who are co-hosting the 2026 World Cup with Canada and Mexico, will begin their campaign in front of home supporters, an occasion several players described as both emotional and motivating.

Ream, one of the squad's most experienced players, said he had encouraged younger teammates to take in the scale of the moment rather than be consumed by it. "It's about just opening your eyes and taking everything in, because this is unique, this is different," he said. "Take it in, enjoy it, embrace everything that it is because it is so unique, it's so special and it's not something that we'll ever get to do again."

Forward Folarin Balogun said



USA goalkeeper Matt Turner during a team training session in preparation for the FIFA World Cup at Great Park Championship Soccer Stadium in Irvine, California. (Kirby Lee-Imagn Images)

representing the United States at a home World Cup carried special meaning after his international journey. "I feel like my individual journey is a bit full circle now," said Balogun, who was born in Brooklyn to Nigerian parents and moved to London when he was just one month old.

"The opportunity to represent my nation in front of a home crowd is going to be something special for me, for my family, for my friends and for the team. I didn't realize at that moment how big football was out here in America," admitted the striker.

Balogun is expected to lead the

line for coach Mauricio Pochettino's men, playing as a lone striker, inside Christian Pulisic on the left, and in front of Weston McKennie and Tyler Adams.

Striker Ricardo Pepi said the squad was trying to frame the tournament not as a burden but as a chance to represent the country, their families and each other.

"At the end of the day, we see this as a fantastic opportunity to be able to play in front of our country, in front of our people," Pepi said. "Just a little bit of the pressure aside, I feel like we see it more as an opportunity."

Goalkeeper Matt Freese, re-

flecting on his path to the squad, said the moment was the result of years of work without guarantees.

"You dream of this opportunity, you work for the opportunity, but you never know if it's going to come," Freese said. "Pressure makes diamonds, and I think we're a group of 26 guys that wants to show that we're a bunch of diamonds."

Expectations are high for the co-hosts, who have markedly improved under Pochettino, boast arguably their most talented ever roster, and with home advantage are favorites to top Group D over Paraguay, Turkey and Australia.

PREVIEW

Hosts Mexico face South Africa under pressure to deliver in World Cup opener

Reuters
Mexico City

Mexico will launch their home World Cup campaign against South Africa tomorrow under pressure to deliver the winning start fans expect at the Estadio Azteca, where the tournament returns for a third time.

The Group A clash marks a return to the World Cup stage for the iconic venue that hosted matches in 1970 and 1986, while also reviving memories of the 2010 tournament opener, when South Africa held Mexico to a 1-1 draw in Johannesburg.

This time, the hosts arrive as clear favourites and know victory could prove crucial to their hopes of finishing top of a group that also includes South Korea and the Czech Republic.

Mexico have gone unbeaten in their last eight matches, equaling the longest unbeaten run they have taken into a World Cup and providing further encouragement for Javier Aguirre's side ahead of the tournament.

The atmosphere is expected to be festive as more than 80,000 fans pack the renovated Azteca for the first match of the expanded 48-team tournament, but the occasion will bring its own pressure for a side expected

to make the most of home advantage.

South Africa, meanwhile, are back at the World Cup for the first time since hosting the tournament in 2010 and coach Hugo Broos believes his largely domestically based squad can surprise more fancied opponents.

The Belgian, who faced Mexico in the 1986 World Cup, acknowledged the challenge posed by the opening-day atmosphere but said his players must remain focused.

"For us it will be a fantastic experience," he said. "It is very important that we keep ourselves to the game plan and don't listen to what is happening in the stands."

South Africa's preparations were disrupted by visa issues that delayed the arrival of several members of the travelling party, costing them valuable time to acclimatise to conditions in central Mexico.

Yet Broos's side emerged from a difficult qualifying campaign and will hope to frustrate the hosts once again, 16 years after earning a draw in the last World Cup opener involving the two nations.

For Mexico, however, anything less than three points would be viewed as an early setback in a tournament they hope will finally deliver a breakthrough on home soil.



Mexico's coach Javier Aguirre with his players during a training session.

Iran says US revoked World Cup ticket allocation for supporters

Iran's football federation said its ticket allocation had been pulled just days before the World Cup starts, leaving supporters who had already made travel plans unable to attend their team's matches. The World Cup begins tomorrow, with Iran playing their first two Group G games in Los Angeles, against New Zealand on June 15 and Belgium on June 21, and then facing Egypt in Seattle on June 26. In a statement, the Iranian federation FFIRI said it had already begun the ticket sales process for the matches but could no longer provide them to fans.

"This is despite the fact that many Iranian football fans, relying on the officially announced process, had already made the necessary plans to attend the matches," the FFIRI added in a statement. "Depriving Iranian supporters of access to their lawful and official allocation of tickets is an action contrary to the spirit governing international competitions and the principle of equality among participating countries. This development raises serious questions about the interference of non-sporting and political considerations in the organization of the world's biggest football event."

Each participating federation at the World Cup receives 8% of the tickets for each of their matches to be allocated to fans according to their own criteria. The FFIRI did not say who had made the decision to withhold the tickets but urged FIFA, football's governing body, to adhere to "the principles of neutrality, fairness, and established regulations" and called on it to prevent off-field issues from casting a shadow over the tournament. In a statement, FIFA said: "FIFA is working closely with the IR Iran Football Federation to identify compliant solutions that maximise opportunities for Iranian supporters to attend matches." Iran's participation in the World Cup has been clouded by uncertainty since the US and Israel launched air strikes on the Islamic Republic in late February, triggering a regional conflict.

The FFIRI negotiated to move the team's base camp from Arizona to Mexico, due to uncertainty over whether they would be granted US visas and a growing feeling in Iran that the squad's presence in the US should be kept to a minimum. After weeks of uncertainty, the US awarded visas to all the players last week - 10 days before their first match - but several members of staff did not receive them. A US official said that the administration had issued "the visas necessary for Iran to compete in the World Cup". FIFA said earlier that Secretary General Mattias Grafstrom had held a "positive discussion" with FFIRI President Mehdi Taj after the team arrived at their tournament base. "With the team now in Mexico, FIFA will continue dialogue and collaboration with the FFIRI to ensure the team and the delegation's experience is a positive one," Grafstrom said in a statement.



Iran's Mehdi Taremi and Alireza Jahanbakhsh arrive with the team at their World Cup base in Tijuana, Mexico, on Sunday. (Reuters)

ROUND-UP

Neymar feels like a 'kid' at his last World Cup

Agencies
Morristown, United States

Brazilian star Neymar said he feels like a "kid" ahead of what will be fourth and "final" World Cup, which could yet risk being derailed by a nagging calf injury.

The 34-year-old is a doubt for the start of Brazil's World Cup campaign and is expected to miss their tournament opener against Morocco in New Jersey on Saturday. But Brazil's all-time record scorer is said to be "recovering well" and will hope to play a part for Carlo Ancelotti's side in the United States. The five-time champions play Haiti on June 19 and face Scotland five days later in their final Group C match.

"Even though it's my fourth World Cup, it's a different feeling because of everything involved and, obviously, because it's the final one," Neymar said in a preview of the feature-length documentary "Vai, Brasil" (Go, Brazil).

Neymar has been an integral part of Brazil's last three World Cup campaigns but there was some surprise at his inclusion this time as injuries have prevented him from playing for his country at all since 2023. "I'm here feeling like a kid, like an 18-year-old going to his first World Cup," said the former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain forward.

"I'm very proud, very happy to be here. I'm going to enjoy every second, every moment of this World Cup and I hope it will be special as well," he added. Neymar made his World Cup debut on home soil in 2014 but was sidelined by injury when Brazil lost 7-1 to Germany in the semi-finals. They were knocked out in the quarter-finals at the past two tournaments.

All-Brazilian line-up to referee opening game at World Cup
Brazilian referee Wilton Sampaio will take charge of the opening



match of the FIFA World Cup between Mexico and South Africa, leading a three-man Brazil team for the curtain-raiser in Mexico City. Compatriots Bruno Pires and Bruno Boschilia will be Sampaio's assistants in tomorrow's Group A inaugural clash at the Estadio Azteca.

Sampaio also officiated matches at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and was part of the video assistant referee (VAR) team when it was introduced at the 2018 edition in Russia. FIFA has assembled a record pool of match officials - 52 referees and 88 assistant referees - for the expanded 48-team tournament.

The United States has denied entry to one referee, however - Omar Abdulkadir Artan of Somalia - who had been expected to be the first Somali to officiate at a

match in the World Cup. Referee appointments for each game are typically announced two to three days in advance.

Spain beat Peru 3-1 to head into World Cup on high

Spain gave a taste of what makes them one of the World Cup favourites with a 3-1 win over Peru on Monday in their final friendly before the showpiece kicks off. The European champions were missing Barcelona star Lamine Yamal as he recovers from injury but still had too much for a Peru side who did not qualify.

The 18-year-old Yamal and fellow winger Nico Williams are expected to be available for Spain's World Cup opener against debutants Cape Verde on June 15.

Luis de la Fuente's team took the

lead after just two minutes in Puebla, Mexico, when Real Sociedad's Mikel Oyarzabal rifled into the top corner from outside the box.

Barcelona midfielder Pedri doubled Spain's lead on 32 minutes, and a Pedro Gallese own goal eight minutes after half-time made it 3-0 when the goalkeeper flapped a cross into his own net. Jairo Velez scored a consolation after 66 minutes in front of a crowd of 46,000.

Japan 'pray' on Endo fitness for World Cup opener

Japan captain Wataru Endo is in a race to be fit for their World Cup opener against the Netherlands on Sunday, leaving coach Hajime Moriyasu "praying" he makes it. The Liverpool midfielder is struggling with a foot injury and was not involved in any full training sessions at Japan's pre-tournament camp in Mexico.

Endo took part in running and passing drills with his team-mates on Monday after moving to their World Cup base in Nashville, and Moriyasu said he was still in contention to face the Dutch in Dallas.

"According to the medical reports, there is nothing to say that he can't play," Moriyasu, whose team also play Sweden and Tunisia in Group F, told reporters before leaving Mexico. "So we just believe, pray and wait."

Endo suffered a season-ending foot injury playing for Liverpool against Sunderland in February and returned for Japan in a 1-0 friendly win over Iceland in Tokyo on May 31. He came off at half-time and has continued to feel discomfort. Moriyasu said replacing the 33-year-old in his squad was an option if he was not able to play a part in the tournament.

Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma was left out after injuring his hamstring less than a week before Moriyasu named his squad. Monaco's Takumi Minamino also missed out after tearing the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee in December.