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MATCH REPORT

Mexico get World Cup party started with emphatic win

South Africa never looked like spoiling the opening day fiesta and finished with only nine men



Mexico's forward Julian Quinones celebrates scoring the opening goal of the 2026 World Cup in Mexico City. (AFP)

Reuters
Mexico City

Mexico got the World Cup party started as the co-hosts swept away South Africa 2-0 yesterday in an encounter with three red cards as the quadrennial football

extravaganza got underway at the Azteca stadium. Julian Quinones's early strike set the tone for a dominant Mexican display in the Group A encounter with Raul Jimenez's header midway through the second half removing any lingering tension for the home crowd.

Yet the match will be remembered as much for the three dismissals, with South

Africa having Sphephelo Sithole sent off early in the second half, with his teammate Themba Zwane following him off the pitch before Mexico's Cesar Montes was dismissed in the dying moments.

The ill-tempered encounter spoiled an otherwise party atmosphere, yet the home crowd got to celebrate an opening victory that will set them up nicely to make it out



Brazilian referee Wilton Sampaio shows a red card to South Africa's midfielder Themba Zwane during the World Cup Group A match at the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City. (AFP)

of a group that also includes South Korea and the Czech Republic.

The game was barely minutes old when Jimenez stung the fingertips of South Africa goalkeeper Ronwen Williams with a volley from 12 yards, but the tournament's opening goal was not long in coming.

Sithole was robbed on the edge of his own box by Erik Lira, preferred in the heart of midfield to captain Edson Alvarez, and he quickly fed Quinones who danced inside before drilling a low finish beneath Williams.

It took 35 minutes for South Africa to even vaguely threaten the Mexico goal when Lyle Foster glanced a header wide, yet as the first half drew to a close Hugo Broos's side were clinging on for dear life.

First Jimenez wafted a foot at an in-swinging cross to draw a fine save from Williams before Quinones struck the post from close range with the goal at his mercy

and Brian Gutierrez pushed an effort wide when he should have done better.

The second half began in a similar vein and it was Gutierrez who drew the first red card when his marauding run towards the box was stopped in its tracks by Sithole, whose clumsy tackle from behind earned him his marching orders to complete a miserable afternoon's work for the midfielder.

The crowd had begun to get a little restless at Mexico's failure to turn their numerical advantage into another goal but that frustration was relieved when Jimenez bagged his first World Cup goal, with a powerful downward header past Williams from a devilish cross by Roberto Alvarado.

The game's finale was dominated by the dismissals with Zwane sent off after a VAR check for a supposed arm to the face while Montes was sent off for Mexico for denying a goalscoring opportunity.

MEXICO OPENS WORLD CUP WITH PASSION, PARTIES AND PROTESTS

Mexico City opened the World Cup yesterday at the famous Azteca stadium with a ceremony celebrating pre-Hispanic culture, as the 80,000-capacity rocked ahead of the tournament's first match between Mexico and South Africa that kicked off against a backdrop of protests around the capital.

The opening match, which South Africa won 2-0, launched a sprawling tournament of 48 teams that will last nearly six weeks. Julian Quinones and Raul Jimenez scored for the co-hosts while South Africa had two players sent off in a one-sided game in a Azteca stadium that hosted the 1970 and 1986 finals.

The extravaganza hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada is the biggest World Cup in history, stretching until the final in New Jersey on July 19 and is projected to generate a record-breaking \$13bn billion in total revenue.

Fans in Mariachi costumes, with sombreros and trumpets, formed a sea of dark green support as Colombian superstar Shakira and Nigerian singer Burna Boy performed the 2026 World Cup anthem "Dai Dai" as pyrotechnics filled the ground.

Dancers twirled around a giant model of the World Cup trophy while fireworks went off in the historic stadium, which has been renovated for this year's tournament. J Balvin and Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli were among the other performers before kickoff as the noise levels ramped up.

But there were scuffles outside the stadium as fans pushed and shoved as they tried to get into the official fan zone in the centre of Mexico City. The run-up to the tournament in Mexico has been marked by social unrest in the capital as various groups - from teachers to families of those missing in the drug war - have marched in attempts to leverage the international spotlight to advance their cause.

The start of the action on the pitch



Shakira performs during the opening ceremony at the Azteca stadium in Mexico City.



will likely come as a welcome relief to football's world governing body FIFA, which has faced stinging criticism over the eye-watering costs of tickets. In addition, Donald Trump's immigration crackdown has seen a top Somali referee,

Iranian team officials and fans refused entry to the United States. Spain, France and England are the favourites, while reigning champions Argentina will look to their 38-year-old talisman Lionel Messi to drive them to the final.



Italian singer Andrea Bocelli and South Korean-American singer Ejae perform as a parade of flags representing the 48 participating nations, including Qatar, is held by the volunteers.



Police officers stand guard and shield themselves during a protest outside Azteca Stadium.





SPOTLIGHT

ECB chief Key ponders ban after Stokes' nightclub incident

AFP
London

England cricket chief **Rob Key** is considering imposing a total alcohol ban on the squad following a nightclub incident involving Ben Stokes but said "no rash decisions" will be made on the all-rounder's long-term future as Test captain.

Stokes will miss next week's second Test against New Zealand at the Oval after he and team-mate Gus Atkinson were dropped for breaking a curfew following England's win in the series opener at Lord's. Their night out ended in a confrontation featuring Saracens

rugby union player Toota Auvaa. The incident remains subject to investigation by both the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and the independent Cricket Regulator as well as by Saracens.

Stokes has made no comment amid speculation the 35-year-old might voluntarily resign as captain or even quit international cricket.

But Key, the managing director of men's cricket at the ECB, did not rule out stripping Stokes of leadership duties as he addressed the issue in public for the first time during an Oval press conference yesterday.

"Can Ben captain (England) again?" said Key. "I think we've just got to let that play out. The decision, as I look forward, is



about what's best for the team and what's best for Ben as well. "I haven't got an answer for that at the moment, to be honest."

"Time is probably the best thing for all of us," added Key, a former England batsman.

"Nobody wants to make any rash decisions, whether that's on Ben's side or the other end. We'll take the next step when we get to that."

Asked if the wait for the investigations to conclude meant sacking Stokes as full-time captain was no longer an option, Key replied: "As far as sacking, or any of that stuff, we haven't got anywhere close to being that far in the process."

Key made no attempt to his frustration at recent events after he and Stokes had worked on drawing up a new code of behaviour following a woeful 4-1 Ashes series loss in Australia concluded

in January where England faced accusations of tolerating a drinking culture.

He said he was pondering an even more severe policy of a total alcohol ban for players on England duty.

"Even when they win a game of cricket, is it now a time when there's just no alcohol at any time and at any stage?" said Key. "The players now have to show the public that they can be trusted. At this point it's hard to say they can."

"We don't want our players out late at night in alcohol-related incidents."

"I don't think they've become a national embarrassment. I think that Stokes and (coach Brendon) McCullum are (one of) the most

successful coach and captain partnerships we've had."

Joe Root had been made interim skipper for the second Test series at the Oval, rather than vice-captain Harry Brook, who was fined and warned for a nightclub clash with a bouncer in Wellington, New Zealand, in November.

"We just thought this was too big a job at this stage for Harry to take on," admitted Key.

"Ultimately, when English cricket's in a hole, Joe Root is the man that we ask to dig us out of it, whether that's on the field or off the field."

"We're incredibly lucky to have him. And when I spoke to him about whether he would consider this, he didn't hesitate."

CRICKET

Bangladesh stun Australia to claim maiden series win

'It's an amazing feeling, and the way we played this series'

AFP
Dhaka

Towhid Hridoy hit an unbeaten 40 as Bangladesh won the second one-day international by five wickets yesterday to clinch their first-ever series win against Australia in the 50-over format.

Chasing a DLS revised victory target of 192 in 41 overs in a rain-hit match, Bangladesh eased home with 36 balls to spare in Dhaka to take an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

Australia posted 187-8 in 42 overs with their innings cut short and ended by rain after Marnus Labuschagne, who made an unbeaten 55, and Xavier Bartlett, who hit 52, rescued the visitors from 0-3. Opening bowlers Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed took three wickets each.

The victory extended Bangladesh's winning streak to five consecutive home ODI series, following triumphs over Sri Lanka, West Indies, Pakistan and New Zealand.

"It's an amazing feeling, and the way we played this series, we showed a lot of courage," said Bangladesh vice-captain Najmul Hossain Shanto.

"We have been working really hard (in the) last few months and the way we played the last two matches, it's outstanding. And I'm really proud to be a part of this team."

Reigning ODI world champions Australia, who are missing many of their top players, lost their second successive ODI series after going down 2-1 to Pakistan earlier this month.

Shanto and Soumya Sarkar steadied the chase, putting on 86 runs for the second wicket following Tanzid Hasan's departure in the first over.



Bangladesh's Towhid Hridoy (left) and captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz celebrate their win in the second ODI against Australia at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Dhaka yesterday. (AFP)

Both fell in quick succession having scored 42 each, with Matt Renshaw dismissing Soumya and Riley Meredith removing Shanto after a successful DRS review.

Litton Das fell for 18 and Mosaddek Hossain made 15 as the innings threatened to wobble, but Towhid and captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz (22 not out) held their nerve, sharing an unbeaten 51-run partnership to seal victory with 195-5.

Earlier Australia lost three batters for ducks inside two overs in what became only the fourth instance in ODI history of a team losing three wickets without scoring.

Taskin removed Matthew Short for the second time in as many

matches in the series, the opener shouldering arms to an in-swing that came back sharply to uproot his stumps.

Mustafizur then struck twice in the second over, drawing outside edges from left-handers Cooper Connolly and Renshaw.

Alex Carey was caught at point off Mustafizur for 13.

Skipper Josh Inglis, who made 34, and Cameron Green, who scored 25, fell to left-arm spinner Tanvir Islam and Australia slumped further at 81-6.

Labuschagne and Bartlett then combined in a 103-run seventh-wicket stand before Taskin returned for his third spell to break the partnership, dismissing Bartlett.

PREVIEW

India, England ready to ambush Australia in T20 World Cup

AFP
London

Australia, almost like a ritual, will head into the upcoming Twenty20 World Cup as firm favourites, but India's recent rise and England's unblemished home record mean the behemoths of women's cricket cannot take a seventh title for granted.

After devastating semifinal defeats at both the 2024 T20 World Cup and last year's 50-over tournament, Sophie Molineux and her teammates are hungry to reclaim their global supremacy. "Australia has an amazing history in World Cups and that is something we don't forget, but it also motivates us to keep evolving rather than relying on what has been done before," Molineux said in the build-up to the showpiece.

Their biggest threat could be reigning 50-over world champions India. Bolstered by the high-octane Women's Premier League, the Indian squad under Harmanpreet Kaur is now more accustomed to playing under intense pressure and in front of massive crowds than arguably

anyone else. Meanwhile, hosts England enter with supreme confidence after sealing a big series win against India in the build-up.

Crucially, England has history on its side having never lost a World Cup when playing as the tournament hosts.

South Africa, having agonisingly lost three consecutive world finals, face a tough task navigating the "group of death." But they remain formidable, reinforced by speedster Shabnim Ismail reversing her retirement to share the new ball with Mari-zanne Kapp under their exceptional captain, Laura Wolvaardt.

Defending champions New Zealand will look to replicate their memorable 2024 triumph, though the White Ferns' fate will hinge heavily on their "big three" of Suzie Bates, Sophie Devine and Lea Tahuhu, who are all playing in their final international tournament.

The tournament, beginning with an England vs Sri Lanka contest in Birmingham today, features 12 teams split into two groups of six. The top two teams from each group will progress to the semifinals before the ultimate champion is crowned at Lord's on July 5.

New Zealand's Conway jets home between Tests to attend birth of child

New Zealand expect Devon Conway to be available for next week's second Test against England at the Oval despite a 23,000-mile (37,000 kilometre) round trip to Wellington to attend the birth of his second child.

The 34-year-old opening batsman was out for one and 41 during New Zealand's 115-run defeat in a low-scoring first Test at Lord's last week that left the tourists 1-0 down in a three-match series.

He has since made the long journey home to be with his wife for the birth of their second child, but is expected back in time when the series resumes at the Oval.

"Black Caps batter Devon Conway has briefly returned home to New Zealand to welcome the birth of his second child," said a New Zealand Cricket statement yesterday.

"Conway will spend some time at home with family before flying back to London ahead of the second Test against England at The Oval, starting Wednesday 17 June."

New Zealand captain Tom Latham, speaking after the first Test, was hopeful of having "a full bowling attack to pick from" at the Oval after Matt Henry suffered back spasms on the opening day of the series, with the paceman sending down just 15 overs at Lord's. "I think it's a day-by-day case with Hennes," Latham said. "Fingers crossed, he keeps progressing the way he has from day one to where he is now (on the fourth day)."

Wimbledon prize money pot increased to £64.2mn

Wimbledon's prize money pot has been increased by 20 percent to a tournament-record figure of £64.2mn (\$85.7mn). All England Club chiefs revealed the substantial cash boost for players during a pre-tournament press conference yesterday.

The Wimbledon singles' champions will now pocket £3.6mn each. Italy's Jannik Sinner is the reigning men's champion, while Poland's Iga Swiatek won the women's event last year. Even first round losers will be richly compensated at Wimbledon this year, with £80,000 allocated to players beaten at that stage.

The Wimbledon raise comes after several of the world's top players staged a protest prior to the recent French Open by limiting media activities to 15 minutes. The players were frustrated that prize money at Roland Garros only increased by 9.5 percent from 2025 and stayed at around 15 percent of the revenue generated from the clay-court tournament.

It is believed the players want the prize fund to be closer to 22 per-

cent of the tournament's revenue. Wimbledon's increase is from £53.5mn last year to £64.2mn for this year's event, which starts in south-west London on June 29.

"I recognise there is one topic you are most interested in hearing about this morning and that's prize money," Wimbledon chair Debbie Jevans told reporters yesterday.



"For 2026 the prize money fund will be £64.2mn, that is a 20 percent increase on last year and £10.7mn uplift which allows players to continue to share in our success.

"Our support for players is distrib-

uted throughout the draw. Gentleman and Ladies singles' champions will each receive £3.6mn and first-round prize money is set at £80,000, so players that lose in the first round will share more than £5mn in prize money.

"These figures represent a substantial increase in prize money," Wimbledon CEO Sally Bolton met with the players' representative Larry Scott at Roland Garros last month to discuss the prize money issue.

"There has been no dialogue with the players direct but we have had dialogue with Larry Scott, who has been appointed by some of players to represent them," Jevans said.

"We have had dialogue, email exchanges and a meeting in Paris. After Paris you have all read the 22 percent and £70mn, what we have done is right and appropriate.

"We begin looking at prize money in January. We looked at investment in facilities, in grass-roots and player prize money. I would hope the players would welcome it."

TENNIS

Serena's comeback at Queen's over after Mboko injury withdrawal

AFP
London

Serena Williams' bid to win the Queen's Club doubles title on her return to tennis came to a premature end yesterday after the American legend's partner Victoria Mboko was forced to withdraw from the tournament. Williams sensationally returned to action on Tuesday for the first time in four years, partnering with Mboko for a straight sets victory over Nicole Melichar-Martinez and Erin Routliffe in the first round.

The pair were due to play Leylah Fernandez and Laura Siegemund in the quarter-finals of the grass-court event yesterday.

But Mboko pulled out just hours before the last eight clash after failing to recover from a left knee injury suffered in the second set of her singles match against

Karolina Pliskova on Wednesday.

World number nine Mboko, who was injured after slipping on the court, was unable to finish that match. The 19-year-old Canadian was visibly upset following her injury, which effectively forced her into the splits, and was heard telling physios "there is no stability right now".

Mboko opted not to risk aggravating the injury by playing in the doubles with Williams. Tournament organisers confirmed Mboko's withdrawal from the doubles, leaving Williams to wait to continue her comeback in the Berlin Open doubles next week.

Williams still pondering whether to take her comeback tour to Wimbledon. She is yet to reveal if she will play any singles events during her shock return to action, but told reporters at Queen's earlier this week that she hadn't ruled out featuring in the Wimbledon doubles. Williams would

need a wildcard from Wimbledon chiefs to feature at the All England Club since she is not ranked high enough to earn automatic entry into the tournament.

"They have been great about giving me that space and time to decide," she said on Tuesday about potentially playing at Wimbledon. Asked if Williams would get a wildcard spot if she wants one, Wimbledon chief executive Sally Bolton said yesterday: "I can't answer that question, but I guess what I can say is we can all see how much excitement Serena being back on a tennis court and particularly on a grass court has created and so one can only imagine what that would be like at the Championships."

"The wild card committee will formally make their decisions next week and we'll be communicating those, but she has certainly created a fantastic buzz and that's exciting for the sport."

MOTORSPORT

Team Qatar enjoy successful opening day at Le Mans

'I'm delighted for the team that we were able to progress to Hyperpole, and we managed it by the skin of our teeth!'

By Sports Reporter
Le Mans, France

Team Qatar's debut entry in the 24 Hours of Le Mans began in earnest with a busy day of on-track action. With five hours of practice over two sessions and a 30-minute qualifying, the team completed a total of 47 laps and secured progression into Hyperpole qualifying. It was an encouraging first day at the iconic endurance race for the #62 Team Qatar by Iron Lynx entry, with valuable lessons learned ahead of a second day of running.

The highlight of action came during the 30-minute qualifying session, which got underway alongside the LMP2 prototype class. Taking the wheel of the Mercedes-AMG LMGT3 car was Qatar's Abdulla al-Khelaifi. Heading out onto the legendary 13.6km circuit, al-Khelaifi set his fastest lap early in the session after traffic compromised his later runs. He recorded a 3m57.531s on his second lap before nervously slipping into the drop zone, where the slowest 10 of the 25 LMGT3 entries are eliminated from Hyperpole contention. However, a post-session



Abdulla al-Khelaifi (centre) with his fellow drivers Julian Hanes and Giuliano Alesi.

disqualification for another competitor elevated Team Qatar into 15th position, securing the team's place in Hyperpole. "I'm delighted for the team that we were able to progress to Hyperpole, and we managed it by the skin of our teeth!" said a delighted al-Khelaifi. "It was very tight, but I'm really happy for the guys as I wanted them to have a chance to compete

in Hyperpole and now I'm super happy that we can, and I'm looking forward to seeing what we can achieve in that session and hopefully progress further." The opening three-hour practice session earlier in the day allowed teams and drivers to continue acclimatising to the circuit following Sunday's Test Day. Despite a number of yellow flags and slow zones to recover prototypes



Qatar's Abdulla al-Khelaifi drives during a practice session at the 24 Hours of Le Mans.

stranded in the gravel, the Team Qatar machine demonstrated strong pace from the outset. Julian Hanes recorded the team's fastest time of the session with a 3m55.904s lap, placing the car fourth overall in the FP1 timesheets. The second practice session, held under darkness, provided a productive end to proceedings. The team completed a total of 23 laps during FP2, with

al-Khelaifi taking the opening stint before handing over to Hanes after 50 minutes. Giuliano Alesi then completed the final 40 minutes of the session. "It's been a historic day at the 24 Hours of Le Mans as Team Qatar has taken to the track at this famous race for the very first time," said Abdulrahman bin Abdul Latif al-Mannai, President of the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation

(QMMF) and Lusail International Circuit (LIC). "Seeing the Mercedes-AMG LMGT3 in Qatari colours leave the pit lane was a moment of immense pride. Our presence at Le Mans reflects a long-term vision to support and develop motorsport in Qatar, while demonstrating that our drivers, engineers and talent can compete on the biggest stages in the world," added al-Mannai.

United States' Tharp breaks 110m hurdles world record

Ja'Kobe Tharp clocked 12.75sec to smash the 110m hurdles world record during heats at the NCAA collegiate athletics championships in Eugene, Oregon, on Wednesday. Tharp wiped out the long-standing previous record of 12.80sec set by fellow American Aries Merritt in Brussels on September 7, 2012. The performance, run with a legal tailwind of one meter per second sec, also shattered Grant Holloway's NCAA collegiate record of 12.98sec set in 2019. The 20-year-old Auburn University standout came into the meeting with a personal best of 13.01sec. He took more than a quarter of a second off that mark. "I knew I had that in my legs," Tharp told reporters. "But it wasn't on my bingo card before this meet, not at all." Tharp said he felt like he was "going pretty fast". "The last three hurdles were kind of iffy," he said. "I was like, 'Whoa, I'm coming up kind of fast.' "I thought maybe 12.97 or 12.98 and match the (NCAA) speed record. But to see that ... I'm speechless, seriously." While he did not have a world record in mind, Tharp said he "really wanted to make a statement". Having achieved that he can now focus on Friday's final, in which he'll try to become the first athlete since Olympic champion Holloway in 2019 to win a second straight NCAA crown in the event. "I'm trying to focus on what's here in front of me," he said. "I've still got to finish it in two days, so I'm still focused on that."



Ja'Kobe Tharp's time of 12.75sec in the 110m hurdles bested the world record that had stood since 2012.

FOCUS

Somali referee banned by US to officiate UEFA Super Cup

AFP
Paris

Somali referee **Omar Artan**, who was denied entry to the United States for the World Cup, was yesterday named to officiate UEFA's Super Cup, European football's governing body announced. UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin poured praise on the Somali referee in a statement released a few hours before global body FIFA's flagship World Cup was to start. "Omar Artan is an excellent young but already experienced referee, who has proven himself at the highest competition level of the Confederation of African Football," said Ceferin. "Football is made to connect people, and UEFA wants to show its respect to Omar and his outstanding officiating skills, which had earned him such a prestigious nomination." UEFA said that after talks with the African confederation, it "has today appointed Somali referee Omar Artan to officiate the 2026 UEFA Super Cup" on August 12 in Salzburg, Austria, between Champions League winners Paris Saint-Germain and Europa League winners Aston Villa. Artan's case has been on of many incidents to taint the runup to FIFA's World Cup. UEFA said Artan's appointment



came in the framework of an accord between UEFA and CAF to encourage cooperation. "UEFA and CAF are united by a shared commitment to developing football at all levels and promoting the core values of unity, equality and non-discrimination," it said. CAF President Patrice Motsepe said Artan had "made Somalia and the entire people of the African continent, extremely proud". "His receipt of the CAF men's referee of the year award 2025 and his appointment as a referee of the FIFA World Cup 2026 are a recognition of his world-class refereeing ability and the international respect that he enjoys." His appointment to referee the Super Cup "is a great honour for Omar Artan and for African referees and is also an excellent example of football, bringing together and uniting people from Africa and Europe and worldwide", Motsepe said. A senior advisor to the

Somali Ministry of Sports said Artan's case had generated "significant concern both within Somalia and internationally". "We have been in contact with a range of sporting bodies since yesterday, especially in Europe, to raise awareness of the issue and request their support," Ciise Aden Abshir told AFP. "UEFA's decision came in response to the support we requested, and we believe it has helped uphold the principles of integrity and fair play in football. "Officiating the UEFA Super Cup is a unique opportunity, and we are grateful to UEFA for its support." Artan was barred from entering the US on Saturday after arriving at Miami International Airport. A US State Department official told AFP that the referee was "associated with suspected members of terrorist organizations", therefore "making the traveler ineligible for admission to the United States". FIFA also confirmed that he would no longer be part of the World Cup. Artan's appointment to the 52-strong roster of referees for the finals in Canada, Mexico and the United States had been a huge source of pride for his compatriots. He returned to a hero's welcome in Mogadishu on Wednesday and vowed to take part in the next World Cup in 2030.

FOOTBALL

Mourinho named Real Madrid coach on three-year deal

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid appointed **Jose Mourinho** as their coach yesterday on a three-year deal, with the Portuguese veteran making a sensational return to the Spanish capital after 13 years away. The 63-year-old replaces Alvaro Arbeloa after Madrid finished a second consecutive season without a major trophy, falling behind domestic rivals Barcelona. "(Real Madrid have) agreed to appoint Jose Mourinho as the first team's head coach for the next three seasons, until June 30, 2029," said the 15-time European champions in a statement. "Jose Mourinho will join Real Madrid on July 13, the day pre-season begins." One of football's most successful yet divisive managers, Mourinho arrives from Benfica, where the Lisbon club completed an unbeaten league campaign but finished third. Benfica said Wednesday Real Madrid were paying 15mn euros (\$17.25m) for the Portuguese coach. Mourinho managed Madrid between 2010 and 2013, winning La Liga, the Copa del Rey and the Spanish Super Cup during an intense period of rivalry with Pep Guardiola's golden era Barcelona side. Real Madrid became the first club to reach 100 points in a La Liga season under Mourinho in the 2011-12 campaign, although Barcelona did the same in the subsequent season before Mourinho departed. Mourinho divided the Real Madrid dressing room, with some players - including predecessor Arbeloa - fiercely loyal to him, while others were at loggerheads with the coach.



Known to rule with an iron fist, Mourinho is charged with bringing Real Madrid's dressing room egos in check, after multiple conflicts and problems marked a troubled season. Madrid midfielder Fede Valverde was treated in hospital after a row with team-mate Aurelien Tchouameni in May, among other flashpoints. Coaches Carlo Ancelotti, Xabi Alonso and Arbeloa also could not find a way to successfully deploy star players Vinicius Junior, Kylian Mbappe and Jude Bellingham together without destabilising the balance of the team. In an appearance on Spanish television earlier in May, Madrid president Florentino Perez credited Mourinho with laying the groundwork for Real Madrid's last six Champions League titles, achieved in the years after the Portuguese departed. The chief said he would bring back Mourinho if he was re-elected president earlier in June, which he was. Mourinho's return to Madrid also signifies a jump back to the European elite after several years away from the game's peak. The coach burst into the limelight as he won the Champions

League with Porto in 2004, before helping Chelsea claim back-to-back Premier League titles in 2005 and 2006. Mourinho labelled himself a "special one" as his team dominated the English top flight, before guiding Inter Milan to Champions League glory in 2010 as part of a unique treble for an Italian side. Madrid chief Perez appointed him to try and stop Guardiola's powerful Barca team, which he achieved to an extent, in a fractious spell which also disrupted the harmony in the Spanish national team. Mourinho returned to Chelsea, winning the Premier League in 2015, before modest spells at Manchester United, Tottenham and Roma among other clubs. He won the EFL Cup and Europa League with Manchester United in 2017 and since then has only lifted the Conference League trophy with Roma in 2022. The coach was sacked by Turkish side Fenerbahce in August 2025 after failing to guide them past Benfica in a Champions League qualification play-off, before he was appointed by the Portuguese side the following month.

Visa rejection dashes World Cup hopes of Ivory Coast, Senegal fans

Abidjan: Ivory Coast and Senegal home-based fans have been denied visas to the United States, dashing their hopes of following their teams at the World Cup. The president of the Ivory Coast national supporters' committee and an official from the Senegalese sports ministry told AFP that their supporters would be devastated. "The supporters have cancelled the trip because the US government does not want to see supporters from certain countries, including Ivory Coast, on its soil. The United States has been clear with us, saying they do not want to see our supporters," said Julien Kouadio Adonis, president of Ivory Coast's National Committee of Elephants Supporters (CNSE). "This situation hurts us deeply because it prevents us from fulfilling our sacred duty, which is to support our team." The Ivory Coast supporters' group operates under the country's sports ministry to organise trips for the country's small number of travelling fans to

follow the team abroad. Ivory Coast play two of their three group matches in Philadelphia, against Ecuador on June 14 and Curacao on June 25 either side of a trip to Toronto to face Germany. In March, Kouadio said he hoped 500 fans would travel across the Atlantic. He said a handful of CNSE officials had been authorised to travel to the World Cup where they will be "look after the Ivorian supporters based in the United States", he said. The CNSE estimates there will be more than 1,000 at matches. The run-up to the World Cup has been dogged by the visa policies of the main host nation, the United States. For the Senegal, it is the first time home-based supporters will not be present at a World Cup in which they are competing. It is their fourth after appearing in the 2002, 2018 and 2022 editions. The ministry even tried to send the presidents of various supporters organisations, with all costs covered by the state, but their visa applications were rejected.

PREVIEW

Qatar seek redemption after woeful World Cup debut

Switzerland coach wary of potential for opening-game upset against Asian champions Qatar



Qatar's Akram Afif (left) and Ahmed Alaeldin at a training session.

Reuters
Santa Clara, California

Qatar take on Switzerland in their World Cup opener tomorrow eager to shake off the pressure of expectation, coming in as back-to-back Asian champions with an urgent need to make amends for a dismal debut as hosts of the 2022 tournament.

Qatar's 2022 unravelling was unprecedented, losing all three matches and scoring once, but after rebounding to defend their Asian Cup title and qualifying easily for this World Cup, they have unfinished business and need a strong showing to earn any credibility on the global stage.

They might have hoped for a more gentle introduction, with the resurgent Swiss unbeaten in competitive matches since late 2024 following an impressive Euros run, and keen to make a mark in their sixth successive World Cup.

"We have to accept the fact that we will play against Switzerland first, and we have to be ready to do our best against a very strong team," Qatar's Spanish coach Julen Lopetegui said. "We know our real reality, and that the competitors are better than us, but this does not mean surrendering ... it requires us to be ready in order to achieve our ambition and dream of being a strong contender."

With a squad of players mainly from their domestic league, Qatar have a cohe-



Qatar's Spanish coach Julen Lopetegui will hope his side can upset Switzerland.

sive unit that has been formidable in Asia but could struggle to fend off higher-level opposition in a Group B that also includes Bosnia and hosts Canada.

Against Switzerland their fate could rest on defensive organisation and conditions that will ensure top goalscorer Almoez Ali and twice Asian Player of the Year Akram Afif can get into the game.

But Switzerland are in confident mood, as they should be, having been unbeaten in qualifying while conceding just two goals. They have stuck largely with the same group from the last World Cup and will include emerging talent like Dan Ndoye and versatile newcomer Johan Manzambi in attack, supported by the dependable Granit Xhaka, Manuel Akanji and Ricardo

Rodriguez, who have 365 caps combined.

Switzerland's record in reaching World Cups is matched only in Europe by Germany, France, Spain, England and Portugal, yet a quarter-final has eluded them for seven decades with a string of round-of-16 exits.

Switzerland should advance from the group with ease, though coach Murat Yakin is taking Qatar seriously, considering them "the big unknown" while keen to avoid an opening-match upset like the one eventual champions Argentina endured in 2022. "Qatar is a very serious opponent. We can't let what Argentina experienced against Saudi Arabia four years ago happen to us," he said. "In the end, tournaments like this also thrive on their surprises."

SPOTLIGHT

Raphinha eager to deliver for Ancelotti



Brazil's forward Raphinha practices next to coach Carlo Ancelotti during a training session in Morris Township, New Jersey. (AFP)

AFP
Basking Ridge, New Jersey

Brazil star Raphinha intends to repay the faith shown in him by new coach Carlo Ancelotti at the World Cup after frequently proving to be the nemesis of the Italian during past encounters at club level.

The pair came up against each other over three years in Spain when the 29-year-old forward was at Barcelona and Ancelotti was on the Real Madrid bench.

Ancelotti left Madrid at the end of last season, after a campaign in which Raphinha scored as he captained Barca to a 4-0 win at the Bernabeu in La Liga and netted twice as the Catalans won 4-3 in the reverse fixture, en route to taking the title.

He also featured in the Barcelona teams that beat Ancelotti's Real in the finals of the Copa del Rey and Spanish Super Cup. "What he has achieved in football is admirable, not just to those who worked with him but also his opponents," Raphinha said at the Brazil team's World Cup base in New Jersey.

"It was always very difficult coming up against him, but I was lucky to come out smiling a lot of the time. Now I hope to do for him all the things I did against him. To help get good results for him and for the team, because they really deserve it."

Ancelotti is leading Brazil as they attempt to end a 24-year wait to win a record-extending sixth World Cup at the tournament in North America. The former AC Milan and Chelsea coach celebrated his 67th birthday on Wednesday, three days before the Selecao begin their World Cup campaign

against Morocco in Group C at the MetLife Stadium, just outside New York City.

Brazil are set to go into that game without Neymar, who was called up for the tournament despite not being capped since 2023 because of injuries and is now set to miss Saturday's match due to a calf problem.

Raphinha may need to step up in Neymar's absence, four years after his first World Cup in which he appeared in every game but failed to score as the Selecao went out to Croatia on penalties in the quarter-finals in Qatar.

"I think I felt more pressure in 2022, because I was more immature. I was quite new to the national team and had just arrived at Barcelona," said the former Leeds United winger. "I didn't feel completely settled in the Brazil squad. I feel much more ready now."

He is coming off a season in which he scored 21 goals and set up eight more in all competitions as Barcelona won La Liga. But he missed five of Brazil's six friendly games between October and March due to injuries.

He and Vinicius Junior, who played under Ancelotti in Madrid, were the only two Brazilians ranked in the top 30 in last year's Ballon d'Or and carry much of the attacking responsibility for their country going into the World Cup.

"We are the only nation to have won five World Cups. You can't play in a tournament like this if you are not ready to handle the pressure," he said. "We are very confident. We have had years of frustration, because we had teams that were capable of winning and did not. And none of us want more frustration."

Brazil will also play Haiti and Scotland in the group stage.

ROUND-UP

Yamal, Williams train ahead of Spain's opener

Spain stars Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams took part in training yesterday, allaying fears over their fitness ahead of La Roja's World Cup opener against Cape Verde. Both wingers shone as Spain romped to Euro 2024 glory, but have been beset by injury problems this season. Barcelona's Yamal has not played since suffering a hamstring injury on April 22. Williams has also not featured for a month after missing the end of Athletic Bilbao's season.

Spain open their World Cup campaign against Cape Verde in Atlanta on Monday and coach Luis de la Fuente said earlier this week he was confident the duo would be fit to play some part, but that it was unlikely they will start. "We know that both of them are coming back from important injuries," Spain right-back Pedro Porro told reporters. "They are recovering, they are happy, they are with the group and that is the most important thing."

Spanish media reported De la Fuente will name the same side that beat Peru in their final warm-up friendly 3-1 on Monday, with Alex Baena and Ferran Torres deputising for Yamal and Williams on the wings. The 2010 winners also face South Africa and Uruguay in Group H.

MOROCCO REPLACE INJURED EZZALZOULI AND AGUERD

Morocco made two injury-enforced changes to their World Cup squad, with winger Abde Ezzalzouli and defender Nayef Aguerd ruled out ahead of their tournament opener against Brazil. Real Betis forward Ezzalzouli picked up a knee injury in a friendly against Norway last weekend. He has been replaced in Morocco's squad by Amine Sbai of Angers. Marseille centre-back Aguerd, who has not played since March after undergoing surgery for a groin issue, makes way for Saudi-based Marwane Saadane.

Captain Achraf Hakimi posted a message of support for the injured pair.

FOCUS

United States' Pulisic 'ready to battle' Paraguay

AFP
Los Angeles

United States' Christian Pulisic said the World Cup co-hosts are "ready to battle" on football's biggest stage as they prepare for a potentially bruising opener against Paraguay tomorrow.

AC Milan forward Pulisic has been the US side's talisman since his teenage years, shouldering massive expectations in a nation not traditionally known for its soccer prowess.

With hopes running higher still as the US hosts the World Cup for the first time since 1994, alongside Mexico and Canada, 27-year-old Pulisic remains unarguably the biggest name but said the squad around him is now "able to compete with anyone."

"We want to be a real force in this tournament," he said. "We got three really good games to show everyone what we're all about," he added.

The first of those comes against South American opposition in Paraguay. Kicking off at 6pm local time in Los Angeles (4am Qatar time Saturday), the first US-based game of this World Cup will be preceded by a Hollywood-style opening ceremony.



Spain's Lamine Yamal trains with team-mates in Chattanooga, Tennessee, US. (Reuters)

It is a double blow to Morocco's World Cup hopes, four years after they became the first African and Arab nation to reach the last four of the competition. Both Ezzalzouli and Aguerd were part of the 2022 squad. Morocco play five-time world champions Brazil in New Jersey in their opening game on Saturday. They will also face Scotland and Haiti in Group C.

However, new coach Mohamed Ouahbi has a lack of experienced defenders at his disposal following the retirement of long-serving captain Romain Saiss and an injury sustained by Adam Masina in the Africa Cup of Nations final in January.

Crystal Palace's Chadi Riad was included despite limited playing time this season after returning from a lengthy absence in January.

Morocco have also turned to Fulham defender Issa Diop. The 29-year-old opted to represent his mother's country, having previ-

ously played for France at youth level. He was also eligible for Senegal through his father.

JAPAN CAPTAIN ENDO WITHDRAWS FROM WORLD CUP DUE TO INJURY

Japan captain Wataru Endo has withdrawn from the World Cup squad due to injury in a blow for the Samurai Blue, with the midfielder also announcing his retirement from international football. Endo, who endured an injury-hit season with Liverpool, has been replaced by Borussia Muenchengladbach striker Shuto Machino, the Japan Football Association said.

The 33-year-old said he was frustrated at not being able to participate in the showpiece event but took pride in the team's growth since the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Japan are in Group F and kick off their eighth appearance at the World Cup finals against the Netherlands in Dallas on June 14 before taking on Tunisia and Sweden.



Paraguay are the lowest-ranked team in Group D, which also contains Australia and Turkey, but have as much World Cup pedigree as any of their rivals. The South Americans reached the quarter-finals in 2010 - their last appearance on soccer's grandest stage - and beat both Argentina and Brazil during qualifying.

US coach Mauricio Pochettino, who took Tottenham Hotspur to a Champions League final and also managed Chelsea and Paris Saint-Germain, is trying to make his talented team more streetwise.

Pulisic said the Argentine manager has helped the locker room prepare for South American opposition in a match on Friday that

may be scrappy, physical, and not always be easy on the eye. "We know we have to be ready to battle. It's not about just playing beautiful football - we have to do the little things and compete," said Pulisic.

The US are expected to line up with Monaco striker Folarin Balogun between Pulisic and PSV Eindhoven's Sergino Dest. The likely midfield trio is Juventus star Weston McKennie, Bayer Leverkusen playmaker Malik Tillman and Bournemouth anchor Tyler Adams.

Pulisic had been suffering a five-month goal drought, but was on superb form in a 3-2 friendly win over Senegal last month, with a goal and an assist. But he emphasised the credentials of the team around him. "There's so many good players around me. I genuinely don't feel like I have to do anything on my own," Pulisic told reporters.

Paraguay's best players include former Newcastle United forward Miguel Almiron, and diminutive young ball-running midfielder Julio Enciso, who joined French club Strasbourg from Brighton last summer. Experienced defenders Omar Alderete and Gustavo Gomez are the squad's leaders, while Argentine coach Gustavo Alfaro - who took Ecuador to the last World Cup - has preached a simple, direct style, with plenty of aerial attacks.