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# GULF TIMES SPORT



## FOOTBALL

# Qatar's World Cup dream ends with defeat to Bosnia

Bosnia finish third in Group B and will wait to see if the four points are enough to qualify for last 32

By Sahar Bidappa  
Doha

Twelve days ago, Qatar were celebrating a historic milestone.

A dramatic stoppage-time equaliser against Switzerland had secured the Asian champions their first-ever FIFA World Cup point and kept alive hopes of reaching the knockout rounds in what would have been one of the greatest achievements in the nation's football history.

That optimism now feels a distant memory.

Two defeats later, Qatar's World Cup campaign is over after a humiliating 6-0 loss to co-hosts Canada in Vancouver which was followed by a 3-1 defeat to Bosnia and Herzegovina in Seattle yesterday.

Needing not only a victory but a convincing one to stand any chance of progressing as one of the tournament's best third-placed teams, Julen Lopetegui's side instead found themselves chasing the game for long periods.

The Spaniard made several changes following the Canada defeat, with veteran Hassan al-Haydos returning to captain the side in place of Yusuf Abdurrisag. Issa Laidouni was deployed in defence, while Karim Boudiaf started in midfield. Pedro Miguel returned at right-back and Ahmed Fathy and Sultan al-Braik came into the starting line-up following the suspensions of Assim Madibo and Homam al-Amin.

But the reshuffle did little to stem Bosnia's momentum.

Bosnia flew out of the blocks and could have been ahead inside the opening minutes, forcing goalkeeper Mahmoud Abu-nada into a series of saves.

Qatar struggled to contain the Europeans' intensity and fell behind in the 29th minute when 18-year-old Kerim Alajbegovic produced a moment of individual brilliance, weaving past several defenders before unleashing an unstoppable strike into the top corner.

Things went from bad to worse 10 minutes later. A deep cross from Sead Kolasi-nac found captain Edin Dzeko at the far post and, on his 150th appearance for Bosnia, the veteran striker volleyed the ball back across goal, with a deflection off al-Braik resulting in an unfortunate own goal.

At 2-0 down and staring at elimination, Qatar finally showed signs of life. Al-Haydos - Qatar's most-capped player - reduced the deficit just before the break with a close-range finish, after a pass from Edmilson Junior, to offer a glimmer of hope.

Qatar nearly found an equaliser in stoppage time when Pedro Miguel struck the



FROM LEFT: Qatar's Mohamed Mannai, Issa Laye, Akram Afif, Ayoub Aloui and Abdulaziz Hatem look dejected after their elimination from World Cup. (Reuters)



Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos (right) scored from close range in the 42nd minute to drag his team back into contest. (AFP)

post, but it proved to be their best chance of a comeback.

Bosnia remained in control throughout the second half. While Qatar pushed forward in search of a route back into the contest, the Bosnians looked the more threatening side.

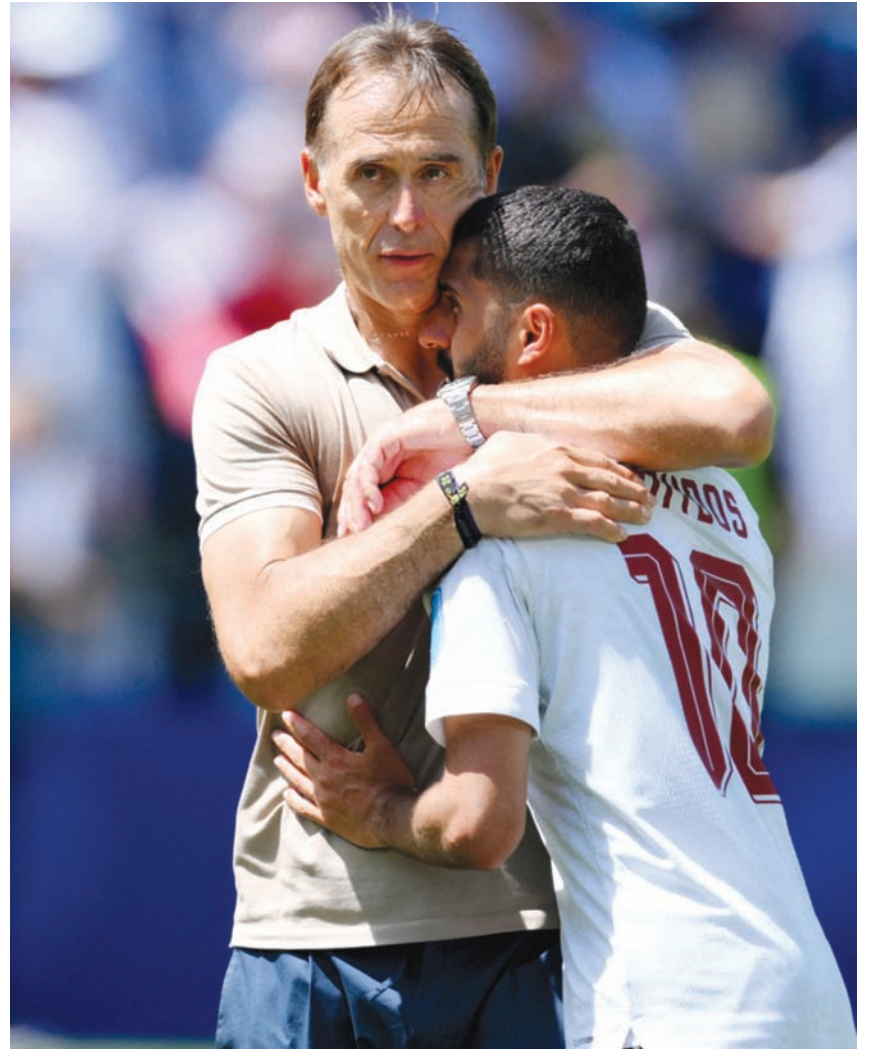
Qatar's hopes suffered another blow when al-Haydos was forced off injured in the 55th minute, bringing a disappointing end to what is almost certainly his final international appearance. The contest effectively ended when Ermin Mahmic struck 10 minutes from time to make it 3-1, sparking wild celebrations among the Bosnian players and supporters.

As the final whistle sounded, Qatar's players sank to the turf in disappointment

while Lopetegui moved from one player to another, offering words of encouragement and consolation.

The defeat not only ended Qatar's hopes of advancing from Group B but also extended an unwanted record. Despite arriving in North America as back-to-back Asian Cup champions, the 2022 World Cup hosts remain without a victory on football's biggest stage, having failed to win any of their six World Cup matches across two tournaments.

For a team that briefly dared to dream after holding Switzerland - arguably the toughest side in the group - the campaign ultimately ended not with a charge towards history, but with a sobering reminder of the gap that remains at the highest level.



Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui consoles captain Hassan al-haydos after their loss to Bosnia and Herzegovina in Seattle yesterday. (Reuters)



Ermin Mahmic scores Bosnia and Herzegovina's third goal against Qatar. (Reuters)

## MATCH REPORT

# Switzerland top group with 2-1 victory over Canada

Reuters  
Vancouver

Ruben Vargas and Johan Manzambi scored second-half goals for Switzerland as they beat Canada 2-1 yesterday to qualify for the knockout stage of the World Cup as Group B winners, with the tournament co-hosts also progressing as runners-up.

Switzerland, who finished the group stage on seven points, will remain in Vancouver for their last-32 tie, while Canada, who would have won the group with a draw, ended three points behind them and will head to Los Angeles for their next game.

The two sides managed to create a total of three attempts on goal in an uneventful first half only notable for two yellow cards handed out to Swiss captain Granit Xhaka and Canada striker Cyle Larin after the pair clashed over a quick free kick for Switzerland. In the other Group B match, Bosnia and Herzegovina kept their World Cup dreams alive and ended Qatar's in a



Switzerland players celebrate in front of their fans after their 2-1 victory over Canada in the FIFA World Cup Group B match in Vancouver. (AFP)

3-1 victory in Seattle.

Although there was little quality on display from either side in a subdued first half, the Swiss came out firing after the

break. Just a minute into the second period, 20-year-old attacker Manzambi shifted the ball to Vargas, who had plenty of space to set himself before coolly finish-

ing at the near post.

Switzerland doubled their lead 11 minutes later. Brael Embolo held the ball up in the middle of the penalty area and laid it off for Manzambi who finished emphatically. Canada pulled one back in the 76th minute after coach Jesse Marsch rang the changes. Substitute Promise David latched on to Nathan Saliba's pass and guided a fine effort into the corner with his first touch after coming on, lifting the roof at BC Place.

Canadian fans continued to roar on their team, chanting "Let's go Canada", but Swiss goalkeeper Gregor Kobel made a string of saves in a frantic finale. "I am disappointed that we were not able to get a win or a draw today to keep us here," Marsch said.

"I'm so thankful for the energy in the country, and certainly in the stadium here today. But we are going to go to L.A. We're going to go where it's probably going to be an away crowd, and it'll be a little bit tougher. But we still want to electrify our country and play really well down there, and go after it still."

The match presented a stern test for Canada, who drew 1-1 with Bosnia and Herzegovina in their opener before thrashing nine-man Qatar 6-0. They faced a well-drilled Swiss side featuring the likes of Xhaka and Manuel Akanji, operating as a cohesive, hard-working unit. "We are very happy because we won, and we fought until the very last minute," Vargas said.

"But I think that Canada went right to the wire. We just seized the opportunity, and we just fought very hard until the very last minute. "Obviously, we tried to score earlier, but I am just very happy that I managed to hit the back of the net. During our preparation, the coach told us that we have to be present in the box at all times, and I am just glad that I managed to score."

In a packed BC Place, awash with Canadian red, midfielder Ismael Kone, who suffered a broken leg during the win over Qatar, was present in the dugout to support his team. Fans held up posters bearing his number eight in a show of solidarity in the eighth minute.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney was also in attendance.



## FOCUS

# Stokes says focus only on winning series after tumultuous two weeks

Reuters  
London:

England's returning captain Ben Stokes said his focus is solely on winning the series-deciding Test against New Zealand at Trent Bridge after a tumultuous fortnight in which he was left out after he and bowler Gus Atkinson broke a team curfew. Stokes was cleared to resume in his role on Sunday following investigations by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and the Cricket Regulator into an incident in a nightclub on June 8 after England beat New Zealand at Lord's to go 1-0 ahead. In his absence England suffered a heavy defeat at The Oval with batsman and former skipper Joe Root as stand-in captain. Addressing the media ahead of the third Test, Stokes said he was concentrating on securing a series win, and played down any cooling of his relationship with head coach Brendon McCullum.

"There's been a lot going on, there's no hiding away from that," Stokes, who took over from Root as captain in 2022, said. "This has been something that has happened and has obviously taken a lot of attention away from the series. But I want to make sure that my focus is where it needs to be. "I'm here as captain of this team and all I'm

trying to do is get a team focused on winning the series this week." Stokes said he had apologised to his team mates for the distractions the investigation had caused. "You need to be big enough and man enough to take that upon your shoulders, and look everyone who it has affected in the eye and apologise the way you need to apologise," he said.

"That is something that I did. It affects more than just myself. It affects a lot of people. It affected Joe Root, the squad, the people outside the playing environment. It no doubt had an effect on lads who were making their debut." Stokes and Atkinson were both given written warnings over their conduct after being found to have breached 'contractual obligations' although both were found blameless in a nightclub incident involving a Saracens rugby player. Much has been made of Stokes's relationship with McCullum. The pair have been responsible for England's attacking so-called "Bazball" style since 2022, although results have deteriorated with England losing six of their last eight Tests.

"There's been a big misconception around this with me and Brendon," Stokes said, denying suggestions they had drifted apart. "Obviously we have a professional relationship in terms of Brendon being head coach and me being captain, but then away from that we genuinely

are very good mates.

"We've built a rapport and a relationship and we've been through some testing times, we've been through some great times and do we agree on everything? Absolutely not. Do we have discussions around things? Absolutely. "Not agreeing on everything shouldn't be seen as a divide between Brendon and me." Stokes also expressed sympathy for Root after some of his tactics were criticised in the 253-run loss in the second test. "To see him stand up and take that responsibility on last week, showed a lot about his character," Stokes said. "For me as his friend, it was hard to see the reaction that he got and for me that's something that hurt."

Stokes, along with the also-recalled Atkinson, will now aim to get England back on track at Trent Bridge. "Right now my focus is on the team and on the series. We are one-all in a three-match series, this week is massive for this team regardless of what's going on," he said.

**Ben Stokes during practice ahead of the third Test against New Zealand at Trent Bridge Cricket Ground, Nottingham, Britain. (Reuters)**



## TENNIS

# Navarro shows the exit to Swiatek

ALEXANADROVA BEATS FRENCH OPEN CHAMPION ANDREEVA

AFP  
Berlin

Defending Wimbledon champion Iga Swiatek and freshly-minted French Open winner Mirra Andreeva are out of the grass court tournament at Bad Homburg, Germany, after both suffered upset defeats yesterday.

Swiatek, the world number three, fell to American Emma Navarro 7-5, 2-6, 6-3 just days out from Wimbledon, while Andreeva lost in straight sets to Russian compatriot Ekaterina Alexandrova in the key Wimbledon warm-up tournament.

Playing her first match since she was eliminated from the French Open, a tournament she has won four times, Swiatek struggled early, with Navarro winning the first three games.

Swiatek forced her way back but a series of double faults, including on the final point of the set, allowed the American to claim the opener.

The 25-year-old found her feet to claim the second set, dropping just two games, but Navarro fought back and broke Swiatek to claim the third set and the match in two hours and five minutes.

"It was hot out there and I didn't have a ton of rhythm, I think both of us felt that throughout the match. So it came down to a lot of serving," Navarro said.

"I relied on my serve there at the end and it ended up getting



Emma Navarro of the US in action during her round of 16 match against Poland's Iga Swiatek at the Bad Homburg Open in Germany yesterday. (Reuters)

me through." In the quarter-finals, Navarro will face Romanian Elena-Gabriela Ruse, who beat Russian Anna Kalinskaya 7-5, 6-2.

Earlier yesterday, French Open champion Andreeva fell in her first match since her Roland Garros victory, losing 6-3, 6-4 to Alexandrova.

World number five Andreeva, playing her first match on grass in 2026, pulled out before last week's Berlin Open on the surface, saying she wanted more time to recover and prepare for Wimbledon.

The 19-year-old matched her compatriot early in the opening set before losing seven straight games in hot conditions in central Germany. Andreeva was down 4-0 and 40-15 in the second set but fought off the break point and won three straight games to elbow her way back into the match.

But 31-year-old Alexandrova, ranked 19th in the world, steadied herself to serve out the set and win the match in one hour and 28 minutes.

Alexandrova will face Japan's

Naomi Osaka in the quarter-finals. Fourth seed Karolina Muchova cruised into the quarters with a dominant 6-1, 6-1 win over Irina-Camelia Begu.

She will face Dane Clara Tauson, who beat China's Zheng Qinwen 5-7, 6-4, 6-2.

Ukrainian world number eight Elina Svitolina pulled out of the tournament yesterday, saying Tuesday's last-16 win over Liudmila Samsonova took a "little bit more than expected out of my body."

## SPOTLIGHT

# Rules bar 15-year-old Sooryavanshi from Indian dressing room

Reuters  
London

Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, the 15-year-old who is on track to become the youngest player to represent India, cannot share a dressing room with his older teammates due to safeguarding laws during upcoming Twenty20 matches in Ireland and England.

Safeguarding protocols mandated by global cricket body ICC and the United Kingdom, enforced by the England and Wales Cricket Board and Cricket Ireland, prohibit players under 16 from using adult dressing rooms.

Sooryavanshi, who was the highest scorer in this year's Indian Premier League, will use a separate dressing room during the

two-match 20-over series against Ireland starting on Friday and next month's five T20s against England.

"The Indian team have been given three separate rooms in the pavilion and safeguarding laws have been advised," a Cricket Ireland spokesperson told Reuters on Wednesday, adding that the Indian cricket board would manage the arrangements in accordance with UK laws.

Arsenal's Ethan Nwaneri faced a similar issue until last year as he was banned from the team's dressing room due to Premier League regulations barring Under-18 players from sharing a changing room with senior professionals.

Sooryavanshi, who on Sunday scored the fastest List A fifty in just 11 balls while playing for India A, will turn 16 in March 2027.

## NZ cricket hero Blair dead at 94

London: New Zealand's Bob Blair, whose courage in the face of immense grief made him a national hero, has died aged 94, New Zealand Cricket announced Wednesday.

A fast bowler, who took 43 wickets in 19 Tests between 1952-1964, Blair is best remembered for the 10 minutes he spent batting during the Johannesburg Test of 1953.

The then 21-year-old Blair was informed in the early hours of the second morning that his fiancée, Nerissa Love, was one of the 151 killed in the Tangiwai rail disaster in New Zealand's North Island on Christmas Eve.

He initially remained at the team hotel to grieve but with New

Zealand struggling last man Blair walked out to the middle to join a bloodied Bert Sutcliffe who had earlier been to hospital after taking numerous blows while batting. The crowd of 23,000 fell silent and players from both sides were reported to have wept.

New Zealand's last-wicket duo added 33, including a then world record 25 off a single Hugh Tayfield over, before Blair was stumped for just six and then cheered off the field by spectators.

As a sign of respect, the New Zealand team will wear black armbands in memory of Blair for the first day of the third Test against England at Trent Bridge, Nottingham, today.

## BOTTOMLINE

# Line calling system glitch halts play at Wimbledon

Reuters  
London

Play was suspended briefly on all courts at the Wimbledon qualifying tournament yesterday because of a power problem with the automated line calling system.

Britain's Dan Evans had just lost the first set of his match against Australian Tristan Schoolkate on a baking hot day at Roehampton when the problem arose.

Play eventually resumed after a delay of around an hour. "There was a temporary loss of power to part of our Qualifying venue, which meant that the electronic line calling system could not function," an All England Club spokesperson said. "Power has now been restored and play is expected to

resume shortly."

An extreme heat warning was issued yesterday for parts of Britain, including London, with temperatures predicted to reach the high 30s Celsius in the afternoon.

It was unclear whether the heat caused the power problems with the line-calling system, with investigations at the venue a few kilometres away from Wimbledon continuing. Line judges were abolished last year at Wimbledon for the first time in the tournament's history in favour of the automated electronic system.

It is not the first time this week that the system has caused problems, with play also impacted on Monday when the audio 'out' calls were temporarily silenced.

Wimbledon's heat rule was in force yesterday, allowing a 10-minute break between the sec-

ond and third set when the heat stress index reached 30.1 degrees Celsius. Heat stress index readings, combining air temperature, humidity and court surface conditions, are taken 30 minutes before play and at 1400 and 1700 local time. Unlike at the other Grand Slams, Wimbledon's qualifying tournament takes place off site at the former Bank of England sports ground in Roehampton, near the National Tennis Centre.

Plans to re-develop a golf course opposite the All England Club and move qualifying there have been approved but are still subject to a legal process.

## FRITZ WITHDRAWS FROM EASTBOURNE

In-form top seed Taylor Fritz has withdrawn from the Eastbourne Championships, ending his chance

of a hat-trick of titles at the ATP grasscourt event. His withdrawal comes after second seed Joao Fonseca of Brazil also pulled out. "Unfortunately, I have to withdraw from Eastbourne this year," the American said on X. "I waited up until after the match warmup to make the decision today because I really did want to play.

"This is never an easy decision for me, especially when it involves a tournament that means so much to me. While I know it's the right call, it doesn't make it any less disappointing."

The 28-year-old world number seven has won the Wimbledon warm-up event four times in total and will be expected to make a deep run at the All England Club.

He has shown strong form on grass so far this year, reaching the final in Halle and Stuttgart.



US player Serena Williams smiles at the practice courts at The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon, southwest London, head of the Wimbledon Championships. (AFP)

COMMENT

# Croatia scorer Budimir hails win over Panama

'WE ARE GRATEFUL TO HAVE A CAPTAIN LIKE LUKA'

Reuters  
Toronto

Croatia's match-winner Ante Budimir rejoiced in their 1-0 victory against Panama at the World Cup and hoped they would learn the right lessons as they stayed in contention to progress.

Croatia beat a battling Panama side at the Toronto stadium on Tuesday in a game neither side could afford to lose after both teams started their campaigns with a defeat. Croatia's win courtesy of a second-half goal from substitute Budimir kept alive their hopes of reaching the Round of 32.

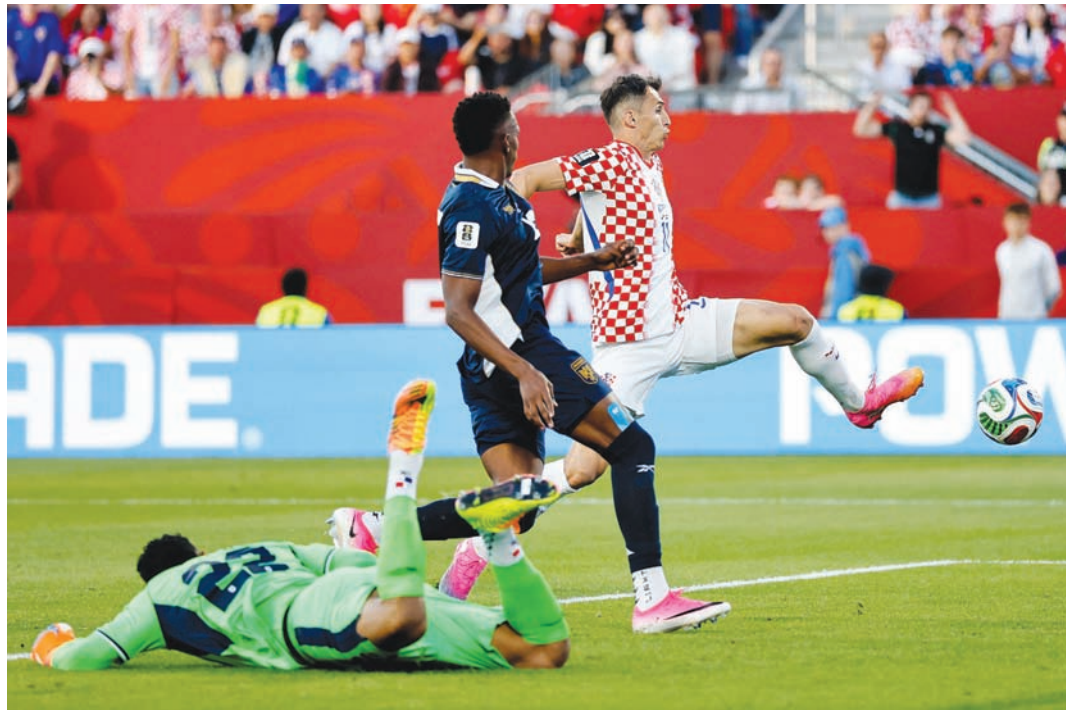
"We have started in this tournament and hope we draw the right lessons and continue to build on this victory," Budimir told reporters. Croatia, who lost 4-2 to England in their World Cup opener, are third in Group L on three points before facing a stubborn Ghana side on Saturday in Philadelphia. England lead on four points above Ghana on goal difference.

"I am happy that I secured my first goal at the World Cup, it's important for us to start winning and get back to the team we were before," Budimir said.

Croatia's Luka Modric, 40, played his 200th international and was thrown in the air by his teammates after the match. Budimir explained that it was nice to enjoy such milestones with a celebration, especially when the team win.

"We are grateful to have a captain like Luka - a great player and a great person," Budimir added.

Panama coach hopes World



Ante Budimir of Croatia scores against Panama during the World Cup Group L match in Toronto. (AFP)

Cup showing will lead to brighter future Panama coach Thomas Christiansen hoped his players' spirited performances in the World Cup would open doors to better opportunities, after the team's hopes of progressing at the tournament were dashed after a 1-0 defeat by Croatia.

Tuesday's loss ended the Central American country's dream of qualifying for the knockout stage as they needed a win or a draw. They fell agonisingly short in their previous Group L game after a last-gasp goal earned Ghana a 1-0 win.

"I think we need to congratulate them and be proud of how Panama has played against a world power such as Croatia," Christiansen told reporters via a translator. "I'm sure that people have realised that Panama has great players, and hopefully doors will be opened to play in better leagues and on better teams," he added.

The Danish national said despite the results not going their way, he was proud of the fight shown by his team, highlighting the 1-0 scorelines in both their defeats.

"These players, after these two

World Cup matches, won't be where they are," he said.

Panama are still searching for their first points after having lost all three games in their previous appearance at the 2018 World Cup. Having played two games in Toronto, Panama travel to the United States to end their campaign against England.

Christiansen reserved special praise for Canada's hospitality, saying the team had been treated well. "It was amazing, the host of the people here in Canada, especially specifically in Toronto," he said.

FOCUS

## Olympics to offer all Games competitors \$10,000 grants

AFP  
Lausanne

The International Olympic Committee, which has been under growing pressure to introduce prize money to the Olympics, yesterday announced it was setting up a grant for every athlete who takes part in the Games.

"Every athlete at the Olympic Games will be eligible for a new \$10,000 (8,800 euros) 'Fit for the Future Olympian Grant'," said the IOC on its website, adding that the total fund would be worth \$140mn for each four-year Olympic cycle.

"All Olympians, no matter where they're from doesn't matter where they finish," would be entitled to the grant, said the chair of the Athletes' Commission Pau Gasol, during a press conference at the IOC Session in Lausanne.

Gasol, a former Spanish basketball star, added that the payment would be "acknowledging the importance and relevance of being an Olympian, participating and representing your sport and to your country in the Games."

"It's not prize money," he stressed.

The IOC said athletes who competed at the Milan-Cortina Winter Games this year would be eligible to apply once the application process had been set up.

While the Olympics have long

since dropped the requirement that athletes are amateurs, the IOC has been reluctant to pay competitors. IOC President Kirsty Coventry has consistently opposed such a suggestion.

Yesterday, she said that the money for the grants would not cut into the shares of IOC revenue that go to National Olympic Committees or international sports federations. Coventry's opposition to prize money has drawn a hostile response from some former athletes.

South African Roland Schoeman, like Coventry a former swimmer, launched a petition calling for the resignation of the president and the entire executive board. "The IOC generates billions. That value comes from the athletes. It is time to demand accountability," he wrote.

World Athletics broke with tradition and introduced prize money at the 2024 Paris Games - each gold medal winner in the 48 track and field events receiving \$50,000 - relay runners sharing the prize pot.

"Does this undermine the amateur ethic?" said World Athletics president Sebastian Coe at the time of the announcement.

"Well, I'm probably the last generation to have been on the 75p meal voucher and a second-class rail ticket when competing for my own country. We're now operating in a completely different planet from when I was competing, so it is very important that the sport recognises that change in landscape."



IOC president Kirsty Coventry and Chair of the IOC's Athletes' Commission Pau Gasol Saez address a press conference after IOC's Extraordinary Session in Ecublens, Switzerland. (Reuters)

### FIFPRO hails 'landmark' CAS player pregnancy ruling against Lazio women

Milan: Global footballers' union FIFPRO hailed what it called a "landmark" decision by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) to order Lazio women to pay compensation for unlawfully ending a player's time at the club for being pregnant.

Maja Gothberg has been awarded a total of 69,333 euros (\$78,673) after it was found Lazio had withdrawn from a contract agreement in the summer of 2024 after she informed the club she was pregnant.

FIFPRO said Swedish defender Gothberg, who the previous season had helped Lazio get promoted to top-tier Serie A Women,

brought a case which "could shape how pregnancy protections are applied across professional football in future".

"The significance of this ruling goes beyond Maja Gothberg and confirms clubs cannot simply walk away from an employment relationship, even if this is not fully formalised, once they learn a player is pregnant," said FIFPRO's legal director Alexandra Gomez Bruinewoud.

In its ruling from late last month, CAS said it "unanimously concludes that the Parties have entered into a binding employment contract before the disclosure of the Player's pregnancy", even

though she never signed any contract.

"Neither the signing nor the registration of the contract is required for its legal validity," added CAS, which ruled that "it was the Club who unilaterally terminated the contract by its negation of the validity of the agreement".

CAS continued: "The Club started denying the validity of the contract precisely when it was informed of the Player's pregnancy." Gothberg praised the CAS ruling, saying her appeal "was about being treated fairly and with respect".

"The ruling sends a message that pregnancy should never be

treated as a problem or a reason to deny a player labour opportunities," she added.

Lazio released a statement acknowledging the ruling but defended the club's conduct, pointing out CAS "did not impose the additional sporting sanctions provided under FIFA regulations for cases involving discriminatory conduct".

"CAS acknowledges that S.S. Lazio Women 2015 A.R.L. did not act in bad faith and that the club proceeded on the basis of a legal interpretation which, although ultimately not upheld by the Panel, was considered to have been genuinely adopted."

### IOC TO CHOOSE 2036 OLYMPIC HOST IN 2029

Lausanne: The International Olympic Committee (IOC) will choose the host of the 2036 summer Olympic Games in "mid-2029", Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, chair of the IOC's Future Host Commission, announced. With the 2028 Olympics taking place in Los Angeles and those of 2032 scheduled for Brisbane, Australia, the 2036 edition is the next summer Games available.

The IOC also announced during their 146th session in Lausanne that they would be employing a new three-step system for picking the next hosts, beginning in March 2027. "These reforms will give potential hosts greater clarity, and their governments will have a clear timetable to provide the requested support," said Grabar-Kitarovic. The 2032 summer Games were awarded 11 years in advance but the 2030 and 2034 winter Games had six and 10 years notice respectively.

That variability stemmed from a very flexible, largely confidential procedure in which the IOC session only stepped in at the end of the process to ratify the executive board's choice.

MOTORSPORT

# F1 braced for next twist after Hamilton's Ferrari breakthrough

Reuters  
Spielberg, Austria

Formula One could take another twist in Austria this weekend after Lewis Hamilton ended Mercedes' dominant run with his breakthrough first win for Ferrari in Spain.

The scenic Spielberg circuit hosts the eighth round of the season with Mercedes the favourites on paper after six wins - five in a row for Italian teenager and championship leader Kimi Antonelli - and seven pole positions so far.

Mercedes boast a good record at Spielberg and George Russell won there in 2024 but seven-time champion Hamilton has now had two second places and a win from his last three starts and is gathering momentum.

McLaren's reigning champion Lando Norris won from pole last year, with Australian teammate Oscar Piastri setting the fastest lap, and the team is the most successful constructor at the track with seven wins.

A first win of 2026 would send McLaren to their home British Grand Prix at Silverstone next week with an added spring in their step.

Red Bull's Max Verstappen

meanwhile has a record four wins at his team's home track while Hamilton's teammate Charles Leclerc is also a past winner at Spielberg (2022), and was third last year, and is as keen as anyone to get back on top of the podium.

Throw in Antonelli's response to being sidelined by mechanical failure at the Barcelona-Catalunya Grand Prix, and Russell's eagerness to close the gap on his teammate, and Sunday's race has all the makings of an epic tussle.

"It's not going to be straightforward but I'm already looking forward to the next one because I really want to go back to where we left (off), from where we were finishing before," said Antonelli after his Spanish blow.

The 19-year-old is 41 points ahead of closest rival Hamilton, whose teammate Leclerc also failed to score in Barcelona through no fault of his own and needs to close a widening gap to the Briton.

Another win for either Hamilton or Leclerc would be Ferrari's 250th in Formula One.

Mercedes have recognised the Ferrari threat, with team boss Toto Wolff calling Barcelona a reality check and acknowledging that the team may have to change their approach in future amid ongoing reliability concerns.

"Others have gained ground quickly and we need to respond," said the Austrian, whose team will bring some updates to Austria with a focus on performance and reliability.

"We are in a fight for both championships but must improve if we want to come out on top come the end of the season. Our Achilles heel so far has been reliability."

Wolff said in Barcelona there would also be discussions with the drivers about handling "a situation where we risk holding each other up. I think it's not going to be a problem. It's just maybe we need to recalibrate."

Champions McLaren will be bringing an experimental rear wing for Friday practice, with otherwise minor updates.

Norris took his first F1 podium in Austria in 2020 and, after looking like Mercedes' closest challengers in Miami last month when he and Piastri finished one-two in a Saturday sprint, could pose more of a threat again in Spielberg.

"While we take nothing for granted in such a tight field, we are optimistic that the car and driver characteristics will again suit the circuit, putting us in the fight at the front," said McLaren's applied engineering technical director Neil Houldey.

### Ducati sign Acosta as Bagnaia to leave at end of 2026 season

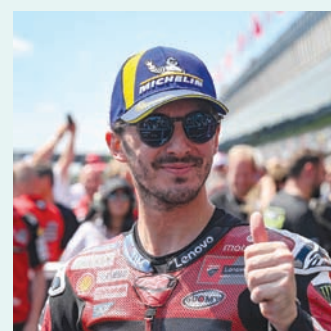
Ducati have signed Pedro Acosta for the 2027 and 2028 MotoGP seasons, the Italian manufacturer said yesterday, hours after confirming that two-time champion Francesco Bagnaia will leave the team at the end of 2026.

The 22-year-old Spaniard will form a headline partnership with seven-time world champion Marc Marquez, whose contract was extended until 2028 earlier this week.

Bagnaia's departure will bring down the curtain on an eight-year stint with the team, during which he delivered their first riders' title in 15 years in 2022 and became their most successful rider with 31 victories, 62 podiums and 28 pole positions.

Acosta, regarded as one of the sport's brightest talents, won Moto3 and Moto2 world titles within three years of his championship debut.

He impressed in MotoGP as well, claiming Rookie of the Year honours in 2024 and finishing fourth overall in 2025 with KTM, with 13 podiums. He currently sits sixth in the standings this season, 48 points behind championship leader Marco Bezzecchi.



Known as "Pecco", Bagnaia's final appearance for the team will be at the Valencia Grand Prix, scheduled from November 27 to 29.

"We've grown together, we've weathered every kind of situation together without ever giving up and we've always spurred each other on to give our all," Bagnaia said in a post on Instagram. "I feel the need to start afresh with a new challenge, but I'll never forget what we've been. You're part of me, and you always will be." Bagnaia, who joined Ducati as a rookie in 2019, has faced a challenging period over the past 18 months, where he has been overshadowed by Marquez since the Spaniard joined the factory

team in 2025. Marquez dominated last season en route to securing a seventh title, while Bagnaia finished fifth, trailing his teammate by 257 points, after previously being Ducati's leading rider.

"Sporting results tell only part of Pecco's value: his clean and elegant riding style (I like to call him 'Il Pinturicchio' - the little painter) together with his great fairness on track - combined with remarkable determination when overtaking - made Ducatisti fall in love with him," Ducati Motor Holding CEO Claudio Domenicali said in a statement.

"On top of that, he is a great professional and a great person away from racing." Bagnaia will arrive at this weekend's Dutch Grand Prix after claiming his first win of the season in the Czech Grand Prix sprint last week. He was unable to secure a double, however, as he was overtaken late in Sunday's race by Marquez and pole-sitter Ai Ogura, eventually finishing third after leading for several laps. He heads into the next round trailing championship leader Marco Bezzecchi by 53 points.



## SPOTLIGHT

# Tuchel says England remain on course despite Ghana draw

'It was difficult today but I hope the fans don't lose belief'



England Manager Thomas Tuchel talks to captain Harry Kane after the game against Ghana in Foxborough, Massachusetts. (AFP)

AFP  
Foxborough, United States

England coach Thomas Tuchel admitted his team had lacked a cutting edge in a frustrating 0-0 draw with Ghana on Tuesday but insisted there were plenty of positive signs going forward in their quest to win the World Cup.

"It's a long tournament and I think the boys tried everything. They played with the right energy," said Tuchel after the stalemate in Boston. "We always try to entertain our fans. It was difficult today but I hope the fans don't lose belief. There is a long way to go. I just feel I was right that we were in a very difficult group."

England had 79 percent of the possession but could not break down a determined Ghanaian defence in the Group L contest. They also lacked the cutting edge which made the difference in their opening 4-2 win against Croatia in Dallas, having 19 attempts on goal but managing only three on target.

Manchester City's Nico O'Reilly hit the bar late on after coming off the bench, and Harry Kane blazed the rebound over to sum up a frustrating day for England. "It fell to him and 99 times out of 100 he takes that chance. If he converts his chance maybe we are talking now about the patience and discipline and performance," added Tuchel.

"But now it is 0-0 and maybe the headlines are a little different. We had enough set-pieces to decide the match but we were not clinical enough."

The German said that it was "just natural" to rely on Kane, who was unable to add to his two goals against Croatia and move ahead of Gary Lineker as his country's all-time top scorer at World Cups.

Tuchel also admitted that the match could serve as a "reality check" even if the outcome is hardly too problematic for England -- they have four points from two games and a win against Panama at the MetLife Stadium on Saturday will clinch progress to the last 32 as group winners.

"This is a difficult, difficult team to play against. None of us thought there was an easy match ahead of us, but there were a lot of things that were much better than against Croatia. "It is just not the same result or excitement but it takes two to tango," he added in a nod to Ghana's defensive approach.

England remain unbeaten against African opponents at World Cups but the Black Stars were clearly delighted with the point which keeps them on course to make the knockout phase for the first time since they got to the quarter-finals in 2010.

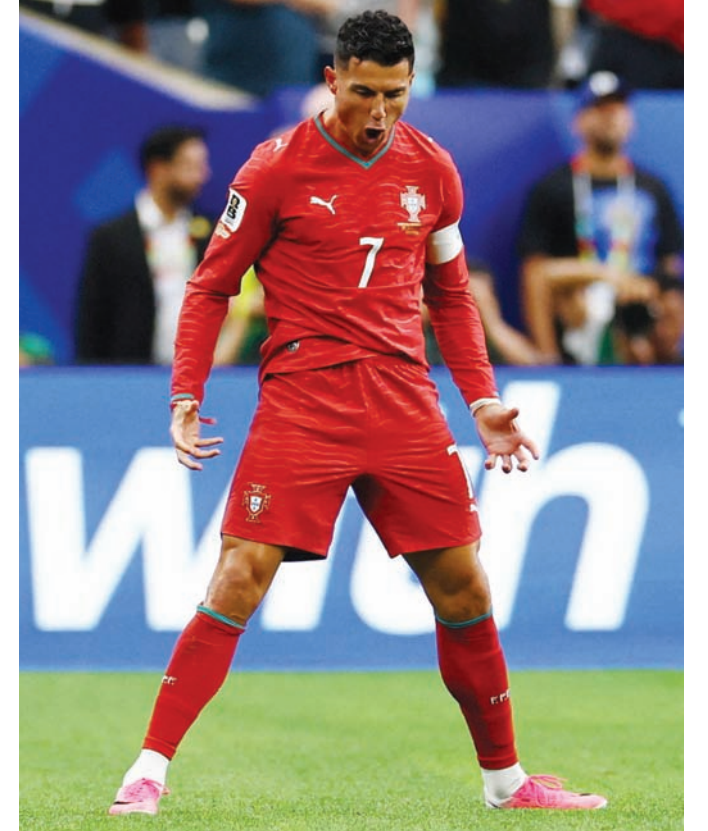
"Football is not only about possession. It is also about having the right attitude," Ghana coach Carlos Queiroz said as his team built on their opening 1-0 victory against Panama. "We celebrated because we got a draw against a team who are one of the favourites to win the World Cup."

His team also have four points before heading to Philadelphia next to take on Croatia. "You have to pay a high price to get points. Probably because we are in the United States where everything is expensive," he joked.

However, the former Real Madrid and Portugal boss also felt his team should have had a penalty for a late challenge on Prince Adu by Ezri Konsa. Nothing was given by the Honduran referee and he was not summoned to check the VAR monitor. "The VAR went for a coffee which is natural but it is a clear penalty and a red card," insisted Queiroz.

## FOCUS

# Ronaldo delights in silencing critics after 'attacks'



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates after scoring against Uzbekistan in Houston on Tuesday. (Reuters)

AFP  
Houston

Cristiano Ronaldo declared "I'm back" and said those "attacking" him should never write him off after making World Cup history in a 5-0 hammering of Uzbekistan on Tuesday in Houston.

The 41-year-old, under pressure to deliver after a barren recent run at major tournaments, pounced after six minutes to become the first player to score in six World Cup campaigns.

He added a second with a smart finish before half-time as Roberto Martinez's side ran riot against limited opposition.

The five-star display was in stark contrast to a stale 1-1 draw with the Democratic Republic of Congo in which Ronaldo was lauded and largely anonymous.

That sparked renewed calls in some quarters for Martinez to drop the veteran captain, with Ronaldo, the coach and the team all facing flak at home. Ronaldo shouted into a television camera "I'm back, I'm back", and said after his two-goal display: "I can say it was a very tough week, a difficult week, a week in which public opinion was very harsh on us, on all the players, especially on the coach."

"But it's always like that, it's fine because when you think about it, it's already 23 years I've been a professional and whenever things don't go well it's, 'Cristiano, he's finished, he's old'. But well, it was a good response from me and my teammates, which is what we wanted."

Ronaldo, the leading scorer in men's international history with 145 goals, has been compared un-

favourably with the likes of nemesis Lionel Messi and other star forwards such as Kylian Mbappe, Erling Haaland and Harry Kane so far at the World Cup.

Put to him that he had now joined the party in North America, Ronaldo said: "I always arrive, even if it's later, but I'm there. So, it's about continuing my work. I truly believe in what I do. My career has always been like this, it wasn't going to change."

He told Martinez and his teammates, who are on the cusp of the last 32, to ignore the outside criticism. "Because we know that when we don't play well or don't win we're always attacked, especially me," he said. "But as I said before, I'm already used to it and I carry on."

The Spaniard Martinez, who has defiantly stuck with Ronaldo no matter what, said he understood the former Manchester United and Real Madrid star's reaction at the end of the game. "He's a human being. I think he's allowed to have emotions, he's allowed to have feelings," he said.

Martinez said Ronaldo's dedication, drive and hard work was how he had extended his career into middle age. "I've never worked with a player that has got that capacity -- that whatever happens today, tomorrow is going to be the hungriest player to improve," he said of Ronaldo, who now plays in Saudi Arabia.

Uzbekistan's coach Fabio Cannavaro, a former defender who lifted the World Cup for Italy in 2006, called Ronaldo "one of the strongest players in the history of football".

He said: "As a defender, you need to be very smart to be close to him, because if you give one centimetre in the box, you are dead."

## Hydration breaks purely sporting, not commercial: Infantino

Los Angeles: FIFA president Gianni Infantino has defended the introduction of hydration breaks at the World Cup, insisting that for football's governing body they are driven purely by sporting considerations and not commercial interests.

Mandatory three-minute breaks, introduced in the 22nd and 67th minutes of every match at the tournament, have drawn criticism from players, coaches and fans since the opening round of fixtures.

The breaks, introduced to help players cope with high temperatures across North America, have opened up additional advertising

windows for broadcasters. This has fuelled debate over their impact on the game, with some viewers complaining about being exposed to commercials during the three-minute stoppages.

"There is no additional revenue for FIFA, as all commercial agreements were signed well in advance. So, this is not a financial issue for us. For us, it is purely a sporting matter," Infantino said in a statement.

The breaks allow coaching staff to give in-game tactical instructions, a shift critics say disrupts match momentum and fundamentally alters the nature of the game. England manager Thomas Tuchel

said the additional break "interrupts and changes the identity of the football match", while Uruguay coach Marcelo Bielsa said dividing matches into shorter segments takes away the fundamental characteristic of the game.

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente and Dutch captain Virgil van Dijk have supported the intent behind the rule in extreme heat, but questioned the need for it in cooler conditions and at covered venues.

"The main reason is the heat, but we also have to understand that in a competition like the (FIFA) World Cup, played over 39 days, with teams potentially playing eight matches in those 39

days, having a moment to rest is extremely important," Infantino said. "What matters even more to us is ensuring that all teams, in every match, are playing under the same conditions. It's very difficult to accept that a coach might have the opportunity to influence a match by making adjustments simply because it's hotter, while in another match, where the temperature is slightly lower, the same coach doesn't have the same opportunity."

Infantino added that the breaks had not reduced the intensity of matches, suggesting players were able to maintain a high level of performance throughout games.

## COMMENT

## We succeeded in frustrating England, says Ghana coach

Reuters  
Foxborough, Massachusetts

Ghana fully deserved their hard-earned goalless draw against World Cup contenders England in their Group L match on Tuesday, coach Carlos Queiroz said, as his team snatched a point that all but assures the Africans a spot in the knockout stage.

England had most of the possession -- as much as 80% for much of the first half -- but struggled to create any meaningful scoring chances until late in the game when Nico O'Reilly headed onto the crossbar and captain Harry Kane fired over. Queiroz's players worked hard to shut down spaces around the box and double-team England forwards when they did find an opening.

This was the first match in this World Cup where neither team managed to get a shot on target for the entire first half.

"I am so proud of the way our players fought during the game, how much they stand behind the plan, the game plan," said Queiroz, in his fifth World Cup appearance as a coach. "When you have to defend, you defend. I cannot play samba when they play rock and roll. That's the name of the game, but the goal was exact-



Ghana coach Carlos Queiroz shouts to England's Jude Bellingham. (Reuters)

ly to finish the first half with the England team frustrated, with no solutions."

It was much of the same after the break with Kane getting England's first shot on target in the 59th and piling on late pressure, but they could not add another win following their 4-2 victory over Croatia.

"The first goal, it's achieved, we qualify for the second round," said Queiroz, whose team are on four points, as many as England, following their 1-0 opening win over Panama, but have not yet mathematically secured their spot in the knockout stage.

## BOTTOMLINE

## Munoz takes Colombia into last 32

Reuters  
Guadalajara, Mexico

Right-back Daniel Munoz emerged on Tuesday as the unexpected hero of Colombia's national team, scoring a dramatic late goal that secured victory and qualification for the Coffee Growers in the World Cup Round of 32.

While all eyes were on Bayern Munich winger Luis Diaz and Minnesota United midfielder James Rodriguez, it was Munoz who stepped up to give Colombia a 1-0 win over DR Congo, adding to his goal in Colombia's victory against Uzbekistan.

The Crystal Palace player initially put the ball in DR Congo's net in the eighth minute, but after a VAR review, Italian referee Maurizio Mariani ruled him off-side and disallowed the goal.

Nearly 70 minutes passed before a superb pass from Juan Fernando Quintero reached Munoz who finally broke through the resolute defense put up by goalkeeper Lionnel Mpsasi.

After being named Player of the Match, Munoz sought to temper the well-deserved accolades. "Just because I scored the goal doesn't mean I'm the star. We're all the stars. We all earned these three points. This is a family, and here, the star is Colombia," Munoz said after the match. "The effort of the entire team deserves



Colombia's Daniel Munoz (left) vies for the ball with Congo's Edo Kayembe. (AFP)

recognition. Nothing is easy; nobody is getting anything for free," he said.

In Colombia's first match last week, Munoz paved the way to victory by slipping into the Uzbekistan penalty area in the 40th minute to score the opening goal of a contest that ended 3-1.

The defender already knows what it is like to score for the national team. In the 2024 Copa America, where Colombia finished runners-up, he netted two goals to end the tournament as one of Colombia's

top goalscorers. Tuesday's goal takes his overall tally to five in 46 appearances.

A fast-paced player, Munoz operates along the right flank and is not only an effective finisher but also a prolific provider. During his four seasons with Genk in Belgium, he played in a more offensive role and scored 19 goals and provided 20 assists. Since arriving at Crystal Palace in the English Premier League in 2023, Munoz has scored 11 goals and provided 16 assists.