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MATCH REPORT

Dembele hat-trick helps France rout depleted Norway

France likely to face Sweden, while Norway will take on Ivory Coast

AFP
Foxborough, United States

Ousmane Dembele scored one of the earliest hat-tricks in World Cup history on Friday as the Ballon d'Or winner starred in France's 4-1 win over a second-string Norway, while Erling Haaland watched on from the bench.

Paris Saint-Germain forward Dembele opened the scoring in the seventh minute at the Gillette Stadium near Boston, struck again on 20 minutes and, after Thelo Aasgaard had pulled one back, he made it 3-1 in the 32nd minute.

The only player to complete a hat-trick earlier in a World Cup match is Erich Probst, who got three inside the first 24 minutes for Austria against Czechoslovakia in 1954.

Dembele moves on to four goals at the tournament after also scoring in the 3-0 win over Iraq on Monday, and his display here will perhaps ease some of the pressure on captain Kylian Mbappe to always be France's match-winner. Desire Doue completed the scoring late on, and the victory allowed France to end the group stage with the maximum nine points -- they have scored 10 goals in three games and advance as Group I winners.

France will now stay in the northeastern USA for a last-32 tie against a third-place finisher at the MetLife Stadium in New Jersey next Tuesday.

It was an emotionally charged day for Les Bleus, who had to play this match without coach Didier Deschamps after he returned to France to attend his mother's funeral. Deschamps, who will step down at the end of the World Cup after 14 years in charge, is due back with his squad on Saturday.

Norway, who also saw Jorgen Strand Larsen have a penalty saved, go through in second place with six points, their progress already having been secured before this game thanks to wins over Iraq and Senegal. That explains why coach Stale Solbakken made 10 changes to his starting line-up here following the 3-2 win over Senegal last time out.

HAALAND, ODEGAARD RESTED

Haaland, captain Martin Odegaard and striker Alexander Sorloth were among the players rested, with Benfica's Fredrik Aursnes the only one retained. The regulars will undoubtedly return in the next round, and Norway will take on Ivory Coast in Dallas next Tuesday.

France were without Arsenal defender William Saliba as he rested a sore back, so Maxence Lacroix of Crystal Palace replaced him.



France's Ousmane Dembele (right) scores against Norway during the FIFA World Cup Group I match in Foxborough, Massachusetts. (AFP)

Doue, Theo Hernandez and Aurelien Tchouameni all returned. However, Dembele and Mbappe both kept their places, with the latter winning his 101st cap and looking to add to his 16 World Cup goals and catch up with Lionel Messi's overall tournament record of 18.

But Dembele, a teammate of Mbappe's in the France team that won the 2018 World Cup, stole the headlines with his brilliant hat-trick. Mbappe released the 29-year-old for the early opener, as Dembele cut in from the right, dropped a shoulder and went back onto his right foot before firing across goalkeeper Egil Selvik and in.

Dembele was transformed into a Ballon d'Or winner after Luis Enrique, his coach at PSG, moved him from the wing into a central role. But he caused havoc here coming in from the right flank, scoring his second as he cut infield and curled a low shot on his left foot into the far corner.

Aasgaard, of Rangers, pulled one back

straight from the restart with a low strike past goalkeeper Mike Maignan with the French defence having switched off.

But Dembele curled in his team's third, again on his left foot and into the same bottom corner, albeit this time from inside the area. Three goals in the space of 25 first-half minutes is not the fastest hat-trick at a World Cup -- that record is held by Hungary's Laszlo Kiss, who needed less than eight minutes against El Salvador in 1982.

However, Dembele is now in illustrious company: the only previous French hat-tricks at the tournament were scored by Just Fontaine (twice in 1958) and Mbappe, who netted three in the 2022 final.

Norway could have pulled one back early in the second half after Oscar Bobb was tripped in the area by Hernandez, but Strand Larsen's spot-kick was poor and Maignan saved.

Doue then headed in France's fourth in stoppage time.

SPOTLIGHT

Gueye double keeps Senegal's hopes alive

AFP
Toronto

Senegal became the first African side to score five goals in a World Cup match, a stunning double by Pape Gueye inspiring them to a 5-0 win over 10-man Iraq in their final Group I match yesterday.

Senegal also boosted their chances of progressing to the last 32 as one of the eight best third-placed teams -- they have the best goal difference of the teams on three points.

Iraq go home without a point after a hugely disappointing campaign following an arduous route to qualify.

Senegal struck early, Habib Dirra getting the slightest of touches to Abdoulaye Seck's header from a corner, for his first international goal since he scored in a friendly against England last year.

Iraq's already slim hopes of keeping their hopes alive suffered a hammerblow a few minutes later.

Defender Rebin Sulaka had been brought into the starting lineup by Iraq coach Graham Arnold but his contribution lasted just 13 minutes. English referee Anthony Taylor red-carded him after consulting the VAR screen for fouling Sadio Mane when the Senegal talisman was clear on goal.

It was the earliest red card of the nine so far in the World Cup, the fourth fastest in the tournament's

history. Iraq were unable to fashion a chance in the rest of the half and despite their one man advantage Senegal could only muster one, Ismail Jacobs fierce strike from outside the box just going wide with the keeper beaten.

Senegal came out for the second-half bristling with intent.

Iraq had been further destabilised as they had to replace goalkeeper Ahmed Basil, who had taken a knock in the first-half, with Jalal Hassan at the break.

Hassan survived the early wave of attacks but was helpless when Senegal finally got into their stride.

Ismaila Sarr tapped in at the 56th minute, for his third goal of the tournament, after a dreadful error by former Manchester United player Zidane Iqbal deep inside his own half gifted Senegal possession. The relief of the second goal had Sarr lying prone on his back pumping his fists with joy.

Then came the Gueye show and it had the fans off their seats.

Within 89 seconds of coming on as a substitute he let rip from outside the box with a sublime curling effort that gave Hassan no chance for 3-0 in the 59th minute.

The Villarreal midfielder possibly outdid that effort with a vicious half volley 12 minutes later that flew past the keeper.

Arnold was reduced to leaning on the dugout and ruefully shaking his head, and could only watch as Iliman Ndiaye scored with another screamer eight minutes from time.



Iraq's Kevin Yakob (left) and Senegal's Pape Gueye battle for the ball during the FIFA World Cup group stage match in Toronto. (AFP)

FOCUS

Japan say bring on mighty Brazil but wary of revenge mission



Japan's Daizen Maeda celebrates with team-mate Ritsu Doan after scoring against Sweden at Dallas Stadium in Arlington, Texas. (AFP)

AFP
Arlington, United States

Japan will give "everything we've got" and declared they have what it takes to beat Brazil in the last 32 of the World Cup in Houston on Monday. Hajime Moriyasu's side reached the knockout rounds with a 1-1 draw against Sweden at the home of the Dallas Cowboys. They finished runners-up behind Group F winners the Netherlands after one win and two draws.

Now the real competition begins when they face a Brazil team boasting Real Madrid striker Vinicius Junior and coached by the acclaimed Italian Carlo Ancelotti. "There is no bigger stage," defender Yukinari Sugawara said following Thursday's nervy stalemate with Sweden.

"We need to give 120 percent against Brazil, and to do that we need to be together as one as a team and a country, and prepare with everything we've got."

Brazil, who have won the World Cup a record five times, will be favourites to reach the last 16 in North America. But Japan are considered dark horses to go far at the tournament, and beat Brazil 3-2 at home in a friendly in October.

Moriyasu warned his men that a sense of revenge will be on the minds of the Brazilians. "Perhaps because of that match, they will be motivated even more," said Moriyasu. Veteran defender Shogo Taniguchi said it was all or nothing now. "From here on, if we lose it's all over. We need to move into a higher gear for the next game," he said.

Japan took a second-half lead through Daizen Maeda only for

Anthony Elanga to quickly level for Sweden with a shot that goalkeeper Zion Suzuki might have done better with. Japan were hanging on by the end, but Suzuki said they can beat anyone on their day, having also defeated England at Wembley in the lead-up to the World Cup.

"We know that they're a strong team but if we do things right, we can definitely win," he said of the Brazilians. "I want to approach this game as if it's the final."

AUSTRALIA EYE 'SOMETHING SPECIAL' AFTER REACHING LAST 32

Coach Tony Popovic said Australia want to do "something special" after reaching the World Cup knockout rounds for only the third time in their history.

The Socceroos played out a 0-0 draw on Thursday with Paraguay in Santa Clara in a stalemate that

suited both teams. Australia, who stunned Turkey in their opening match before losing to co-hosts the United States, qualified for the last 32 as runners-up in Group D. Next they play at the air-conditioned home of the Dallas Cowboys on July 3 against the side that finishes second in Group G.

That group, which is yet to be finalised, comprises Egypt, Iran, Belgium and regional rivals New Zealand.

"It's a special day, we've seen already how many big nations have not gone through," Popovic said. "I'd like to think that we dominated the game in a crucial World Cup qualifier with a very young squad in the third match when everything's on the line."

"The players showed composure, patience, quality, and resilience. We'll now go to Dallas and try and do something special."



CRICKET

Hundred hero Duckett guides England to 232/2

Duckett hits 113 to the delight of his Nottinghamshire home crowd

AFP
Nottingham, United Kingdom

Ben Duckett scored his first century in over a year and Jacob Bethell banished his first-innings blues after returning England captain Ben Stokes sparked a fightback in the third and deciding Test against New Zealand at Trent Bridge.

England were 223-2 at stumps yesterday's second day, 215 runs behind New Zealand's first-innings 438, with the series level at 1-1.

Opening batsman Duckett made 113 to the delight of his sun-drenched Nottinghamshire home crowd.

Together with Bethell (74 not out) he shared a rapid second-wicket stand of 179 in 30 overs after Emilio Gay fell for a duck.

England's 8-1 should have become 8-2 when Duckett, responsible for all eight of those runs, edged Nathan Smith only for Henry Nicholls to drop a seemingly routine chance at third slip.

But England were also indebted to Stokes's latest inspirational bowling display as the Black Caps, seemingly set for a total in excess of 500 at 361-2, lost their last eight wickets for 77 runs.

The seamer led England's attack with 4-70 in 21 overs, a return that took him to 250 Test wickets, with the bulk of Stokes's success coming in a Friday-morning burst of 3-13 in eight overs.

Stokes was back in the side after being omitted from England's 253-run defeat in the second Test at the Oval for breaking a midnight curfew, along with team-mate Gus Atkinson, while celebrating at a London nightclub following the first-Test win over New Zealand at Lord's.

It was Stokes, gaining movement beyond the reach of the rest of his attack, who had inspired an England recovery late on Thursday by dismissing Devon Conway



England's Ben Duckett celebrates reaching his century on the second day of the third Test against New Zealand at Trent Bridge in Nottingham yesterday. (AFP)

(157) to end an opening stand of 317 with New Zealand captain Tom Latham (151).

On a day when temperatures reached a sweltering 36C, Stokes once more got the breakthrough England needed yesterday when he had Daryl Mitchell (11) caught behind.

Stokes struck again when nightwatchman Will O'Rourke (19) skied to point.

New Zealand were reduced to 413-7 when Stokes's well-directed bouncer left Mitchell Santner in a tangle, the ball ballooning to gully to give the all-rounder his 250th Test wicket.

Stokes is the only player other than retired South Africa great Jacques Kallis to score more than 7,000 runs, while also taking at least 250 wickets, in Test cricket.

After lunch, off-spinner Shoaib Bashir caught and bowled Smith and had Tom Blundell lbw for 30 before Jofra Archer pinned Ben Sears lbw for a golden duck to end

the innings. Duckett was quickly into his stride as New Zealand, without the injured Matt Henry, who took 11 wickets at the Oval and the in-form Kyle Jamieson, rested as a fitness precaution following repeated back trouble, were made to toil in soaring heat just as England had done before them.

New Zealand suffered further disruption when the recalled Blair Tickner, hit on the helmet by fast bowler Archer while batting, only managed three overs before being ruled out with concussion.

Tickner was replaced by fellow paceman Zak Foulkes, New Zealand's first concussion substitute in Test cricket.

The 31-year-old Duckett, whose fifty was his first in 11 months, was severe on both pace and spin.

Duckett square-drove Smith for four the ball after he was dropped by Nicholls and seized on anything loose from returning

slow left-armer Santner. A pulled four off fast bowler O'Rourke took him to 98 before a quick single completed an 88-ball century, including 18 boundaries, with the often reserved Duckett punching the air in delight after reaching his seventh hundred in 46 Tests.

Duckett was out shortly afterwards when he dragged on to Nathan Smith, but by then England were 187-2.

He was brilliantly supported by fellow left-hander Bethell, who arrived in Nottingham averaging a woeful 8.75 in the first innings of a Test match.

The 22-year-old made a mockery of that statistic during a 60-ball featuring eight fours as he too thrived in ideal batting conditions.

BRIEF SCORES
England 223 for 2 (Duckett 113, Bethell 74) **trail New Zealand 438** (Conway 157, Latham 151, Stokes 4-70) **by 215 runs**

SPOTLIGHT

Gutsy Ireland shock T20 world champions India



Bowler Matt Holland celebrates with his Man of the Match trophy after Ireland beat India in the first of two T20s in Belfast yesterday.

AFP
London

Ireland stunned T20 world champions India with a landmark 34-run win in their series opener in Belfast yesterday after the tourists opted against giving an international debut to teenage sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi.

The 15-year-old batting prodigy forced his way into the squad for the white-ball tours of Ireland and England following several stunning displays in the 20 overs per side Indian Premier League.

Sooryavanshi emerged as the leading run-scorer in this season's edition after amassing 776 runs for the Rajasthan Royals - a tally which included one century and five fifties.

India, however, decided that they could do without him in the first of two T20 internationals against Ireland at Stormont, only to fall well short of a target of 183 as they were dismissed for 148 with seven balls to spare.

Abhishek Sharma top-scored for the tourists with 49 at the top of the order but no other India batsman made more than Shivam Dube's 25.

Matt Holland (3-28) and left-arm spinner Matthew Humphreys (3-38), who opened the bowling, did the bulk of the damage as Ireland's men enjoyed their first win over India in any format.

Earlier, Ireland captain Lorcan Tucker led from the front with 50 and Gareth Delany made 49 in the hosts' total of 182-9 in their full 20 overs.

Debutant Holland said yesterday: "In all honesty, I never expected this. I always knew I had it, but I never thought I'd make my debut against India. It's a dream come true. My family has flown in from Jo'burg. It's a bit of a dream."

When asked about the ball went up in the air off his first ball, he said: "After that first ball, I turned to Harry and said 'The first one's done'. And then when the ball went in the air, my heart just stopped for the moment. Really, really special. I have really been wanting to come over to Ireland since 2019. Then Covid hit and there were complications. There were setbacks from me. My brother came here first and said you have to come over. And then Cricket Ireland have been amazing in how they took care of me. I haven't seen them (family) in a while and to see them over here, nothing could be better. Them seeing me get my cap and then cheering me on, it's unbelievable."

Indian captain Shreyas Iyer said yesterday: "Initially, the bowlers were bowling venom. But in between we lost the execution and let them hit us straight down the ground, where the boundaries are smaller. I thought 140 would have been a good score to chase, given the start we had with the ball. But yeah, great start as a captain (laughs)."

He added: "Definitely, we are going to forget what happened and there's lot to learn from this game. Going to come out all guns blazing in the next game. The fast bowlers were getting help at the start, and Shivam bowls crucial overs so I always trust him. Harshit Rana bowled phenomenally well. My message to the team is you can't take anything for granted. You have to turn up and work hard and stay in the present and if you have the opportunity to squeeze the opponent, you have to do that."

The teams return to Stormont for the series finale tomorrow.

BRIEF SCORES
Ireland 182 for 9 (Tucker 50, Delany 49, Rana 3-24) **beat India 148** (Abhishek 49, Holland 3-28, Moondra 2-26) **by 34 runs**

PARIS DIAMOND LEAGUE

Lyles enjoying freedom, eyes top speed on track

AFP
Paris

With neither the Olympic Games nor the world championships on the summer schedule - a first since 2020 - US sprint star Noah Lyles is seizing the opportunity to "run as fast as possible" without worrying about peaking for a specific event and enjoying life off the track.

"I don't need to make sure I'm in shape for a month later," the 28-year-old eight-time world champion told AFP. "I don't have to worry about peaking because if I run fast, great. And that's all we have to worry about."

The Olympic 100-metre champion returned to Paris this week two years after his 2024 Games triumph looking to steal the show on the blue track of Charlety Stadium.

He will compete in tomorrow's Diamond League meet which has been given the green light despite concerns about extreme heat in the French capital.

During the week, Lyles had trained alongside fellow American Jordan Anthony, the world indoor 60m champion, and Trinidadian Jereme Richards, world 400m silver medallist, under the watchful eye of coach Lance Brauman before cutting the session short due to the heatwave.

Back in the cool of his hotel, Lyles reflected on his excellent start to the season with victories in Rome, where he clocked 9.8 seconds in the 100m - the third-fastest time of the year - and Ostrava where he set a new all-time best in the 150m of 14.67sec.

The 150m is a rarely run hybrid distance, but the showdown in the Czech Republic against young Australian sprinter Gout Gout had been highly anticipated.

"I never could have done that in a normal season," said Lyles. "I would have had to prioritise meets with much stiffer competition that fit well into the preparation schedule for



US coach Lance Brauman (right) stands next to US sprinters Jordan Anthony (centre) and Noah Lyles during a training session at the Charlety Stadium in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

the World Championships or the Olympics." But this year, the sprinter - who has already spent a decade on the professional circuit - is focusing on events he enjoys.

After Paris, he will not pin on a race bib again until late July for the US Championships.

"It's enjoyable being able to have the freedom... come do what I love, do some stuff off the track, then come back to doing what I love," explained the Florida-based athlete, who cultivates a wide range of off-track interests from fashion and manga to rap music.

In July he will attend a major geek culture and manga convention in the US before heading to one of the World Cup soccer semi-finals. His summer will wrap up in September with yet another new experience, the inaugural Ultimate Championships in Budapest, where he has a creative role organising shows for the athletes' entrances and medal ceremonies.

For Lyles, who has been saying for years

that athletics needs to modernise, "it's a good start" for moving the sport into a new era that blends sport and entertainment.

"The good thing is this isn't going to affect your world championships or your Olympic Championship career," he continued.

"So hopefully by having that little bit of leeway to play with some concepts and ideas, we're able to find things that do work and things that don't work."

Lyles knows that this chapter will end as early as next year with the world championships in Beijing where he will aim for a fifth consecutive 200m title to surpass Jamaican great Usain Bolt before the Olympic Games on home soil in 2028. Not everyone gets the chance to experience the Olympics in their own country while at their peak.

"It's something that you don't really get to see at Olympics in your lifetime, while you're in the peak of your career, show up in your own country. It's just a blessing in itself," said Lyles.

BOXING

Usyk says he is vacating heavyweight title belts

AFP
Paris

Heavyweight champion Oleksandr Usyk said yesterday that he was vacating his three boxing world title belts but is not retiring.

The 39-year-old Ukrainian, who is unbeaten in his professional career, said that he wanted "to make them free so that the guys who are in line for them can box".

Usyk's announcement came just a month after he came close to a shock upset defeat to Kick-boxer Rico Verhoeven.

Usyk needed a highly-controversial 11th-round stoppage to turn the tables on the Dutchman, who had been leading on the scorecards up to that point despite taking part in only his second boxing bout.

"Good day to everyone. Today is Friday, the weather is good, and it's a good day to say that I want to vacate all the belts that I currently hold - to make them free so that the guys who are in line for them can box," said Usyk in a social media post.

"My friends, I'm giving up the belts, but I'm not leaving the sport, because I still have my last dance.

"I want to thank everyone; I respect all organisations. I want to thank everyone and say there is more to come."

Usyk has been undisputed world champion at both cruiserweight and heavyweight and boasts an unblemished record of 25 victories, including 16 knock-outs, in as many fights. In his amateur career, he was Olympic, world and European champion. His most iconic victories have been against British heavyweights Tyson Fury, Anthony Joshua and Daniel Dubois -



whom he beat twice each. He beat Joshua in September 2021 to win the WBA, WBO and IBF belts and then took the WBC belt off Fury in May 2024.

He had to vacate the IBF belt for his rematch with Fury but then won it back off Dubois in July 2025, only to vacate the WBO belt a few months later. Dubois then beat fellow Briton Fabio Wardley in May to win that belt.

Mayweather-Pacquiao rematch postponed indefinitely

A highly anticipated rematch between boxing legends Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao has been postponed indefinitely, Pacquiao's camp in the Philippines said yesterday.

The news followed ESPN reporting that a planned Mayweather exhibition in Greece had been called off after an events company connected to the Pacquiao bout had sought an injunction.

The two hall of famers, whose 2015 bout drew 4.6 million pay-per-view buys, have been at loggerheads since Mayweather stunned the boxing world by declaring a rematch announced by Netflix for September would only be an exhibition - something bitterly contested by Pacquiao.

MOTORSPORT

Antonelli emerges fastest in Austrian GP practice

The 19-year-old Italian, winner of 5 races in a row until he retired in Spain, looks good for strong show

Reuters
Spielberg, Austria

Formula One championship leader Kimi Antonelli was fastest in yesterday's practice for the Austrian Grand Prix as Mercedes sought to bounce back from their first defeat of the season.

The 19-year-old Italian, winner of five races in a row until he retired in Spain this month and Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton ended the dominant streak, was 0.040 quicker than teammate George Russell in session one and then 0.237 faster than McLaren's Oscar Piastri in the second.

Piastri was consistently quick, third in a scorching first practice session with conditions declared a heat hazard, but Russell dropped to sixth at the end of a day after a disrupted second practice.

"We knew Mercedes would be a step ahead, and that's how it played out, but it was productive for us," said Piastri.

Red Bull's four-times world champion Max Verstappen was fourth in both practices for his team's home race, with Hamilton also fifth in both.

McLaren's world champion Lando Norris, last year's winner at the Red Bull Ring, was seventh in the early session but third in the later afternoon when McLaren looked to be Mercedes's closest challengers.

"This track seems to suit us as we've seen in the last few years and that's a good trend for the weekend ahead," said Norris.

Russell said first practice had been strong for Mercedes but McLaren and Red Bull had been quick in the second.

"It was a real surprise to see the first lap of the McLarens in P2, just right at the top, and their race pace especially on Lando's side looked



Mercedes' Italian driver Kimi Antonelli drives during the second practice session at the Red Bull Ring race track in Spielberg, Austria, yesterday. (AFP)

a bit better than us," he added. Antonelli leads Hamilton by 41 points in the standings after seven rounds.

EARLY ISSUES FOR MCLAREN AND RED BULL

Red Bull had a difficult start to the day with Verstappen suffering issues with his upgraded car while teammate Isack Hadjar's car needed a hurried engine change and he missed the first 35 minutes.

Four-time world champion Verstappen complained that "the whole car is shaking under braking".

"At first we had an engine issue on Isack's car before the beginning of the session, so we had to do a very late call to change his engine," said team boss Laurent Mekies.

"And then on Max, we also had a troubled start with a couple of software issues that got us stuck in the garage."

Norris remained in the garage for the first 45 minutes as McLaren wrestled with a hydraulics problem while Piastri complained about his car's brakes.

BEGANOVIC IN LECLERC'S CAR

Ferrari had F2 driver Dino Beganovic in Charles Leclerc's car for the opening session, clocking the ninth best time, with the Monégasque returning for the later hour and going eighth fastest.

"I'd say it was a solid but challenging start to the weekend, with the high temperatures making an already demanding circuit even tougher," said Hamilton.

"We've definitely got some work to do to find the right setup and balance and unlock some performance."

Sergio Perez's Cadillac brought out red flags with just over a minute remaining after the Mexican stopped on the uphill climb, with the session then ended prematurely and no drivers able to do any practice starts.

The Cadillac of Valtteri Bottas caught fire in session two after limping back to the pits with a damaged suspension and the car's floor sparking off the asphalt.

Japanese driver Ryo Hirakawa replaced Esteban Ocon at Haas for the session and knocked over one of the team mechanics when he overshot his pit box, fortunately without injury.

Verstappen wants to stay at Red Bull - in a fast car, says Mekies

Spielberg, Austria: Four-time champion Max Verstappen wants to continue racing in Formula One for Red Bull, his team boss Laurent Mekies said yesterday before adding that he needs a fast car to stay. Speaking between the two opening practice sessions at the Austrian Grand Prix, Mekies made clear that he believes Verstappen hopes to remain and complete his career with Red Bull, as he has often stated. "Max has made clear to us that he wants to continue with the team," said Mekies. "It's equally clear that he needs a fast car for him to be happy with the team." Earlier this year, Verstappen com-

plained that the new 'hybrid era' cars were not enjoyable to drive and suggested he was contemplating leaving F1. "He is pushing with us to find the right developments for the car. So for us the topic is to get the car back to where we all want it to be." Verstappen has since been linked with moves to other teams including Mercedes and, more recently, McLaren - in a reported swap deal for Oscar Piastri - but this has been denied by McLaren. After seven races this year, Verstappen has managed only one podium finish with Red Bull and seen his hopes of a fourth title diminish.



Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen (left) is pictured prior to the second practice session at the Red Bull Ring race track in Spielberg, Austria ahead of the Austrian Grand Prix set to be held tomorrow. (AFP)

PREVIEW

Serena Williams set to face Joint in Wimbledon return

AFP
London

Serena Williams was yesterday drawn to play Australia's Maya Joint in the Wimbledon first round as the American legend returns to singles action after four years.

Williams retired in 2022 but the 23-time Grand Slam singles champion made a sensational comeback by playing in the Queen's Club and Berlin Open doubles earlier in June.

The 44-year-old was given a wild card entry in the Wimbledon singles - a tournament she has won seven times.

If Williams beats world number 53 Joint, a 20-year-old who has won just one of her past 14 matches, the American could face 29th seed rising star Alexandra Eala of the Philippines in the second round.

A victory in the second round would raise the possibility of a potential blockbuster third round tie against reigning champion Iga Swiatek, who starts her title defence against American Taylor



American player Serena Williams trains at the practice courts at The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon, southwest London, yesterday. (AFP)

Townsend. Williams, who has been practising at Wimbledon for the past week, last played a singles match nearly four years ago at the US Open in what had appeared to be her farewell to the sport.

She said at the time she was "evolving away" from tennis.

But just prior to the Wimbledon warm-up event at Queen's this year, Williams announced her stunning return, a move motivated by a desire to play in front

of her two young daughters. She has not played at Wimbledon since losing to Harmony Tan in the first round in 2022.

Her last Grand Slam match was the US Open third round defeat against Ajla Tomljanovic that seemed to have brought the curtain down on her astonishing career.

It remains to be seen if Williams can cope with the physical demands of singles competition after so long away from the sport.

SINNER OPENS AGAINST KECCMANOVIC

In the men's singles draw yesterday, defending champion Jannik Sinner was pitted against Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic.

The Italian world number one has not played since suffering a shock defeat against Juan Manuel Cerundolo in the French Open second round in May.

Sinner, a four-time Grand Slam champion, is looking to win Wimbledon for the second time, with his main rival Carlos Alcaraz absent as he continues to recover from a wrist injury.

Novak Djokovic starts his latest bid for a record 25th Grand Slam title against China's Wu Yibing.

The 39-year-old Serb has won Wimbledon seven times, but he has not triumphed there since 2022. Djokovic earned his most recent Grand Slam crown at the 2023 US Open, with his last two major finals ending in defeat against Alcaraz at Wimbledon in 2024 and the Australia Open this year.

Second seeded Alexander Zverev, who won the French Open in June, faces Alexander Blockx in the first round.

Wawrinka announces farewell fete with Federer and Murray

LONDON: Stan Wawrinka announced yesterday he will throw a farewell party for fans on December 19 in Geneva with former tennis stars Roger Federer and Andy Murray on the card of the "One last backhand" event. The 41-year-old three-time Grand Slam champion said on Instagram that after more than 20 years on tour, it was time for him to hang up his racquet.

"Before leaving, I wanted to organise one last evening to thank you and say goodbye," said Wawrinka who has fallen out of the top-100. "I'm lucky to be able to count on my friends, with whom I've shared so many great moments over the years. Andy Murray, Gael Monfils, and Roger Federer will be there," he said.

The Swiss player won 16 titles during his career - including the Australian Open in

2014, the French Open in 2015 and the US Open in 2016. He reached a career-high world number three ranking in 2014.

Wawrinka is preparing to play in his final Wimbledon starting next week thanks to a wildcard granted by organisers of the tournament where he reached the quarter-finals twice. Wawrinka will take on Matteo Berrettini in his final Wimbledon campaign starting next week.

Meanwhile Grigor Dimitrov, another former World No. 3 who currently sits at No. 169, returns to the main Wimbledon draw after a heartbreaking fourth-round exit in 2025. The Bulgarian held a two-sets-to-love lead over then-World No. 1 Jannik Sinner before suffering a pectoral injury and retiring. It was the fifth consecutive major appearance from which Dimitrov retired.



SPOTLIGHT

Plucky Keys and Maria set up Eastbourne final



Madison Keys of the US poses for a photo with a fan after winning her semi-final match against Croatia's Petra Marcinko at Eastbourne Open yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
London

American Madison Keys and German veteran Tatjana Maria set up an Eastbourne final when they both benefited from their opponents retiring mid-match in the semi-finals yesterday.

Maria was leading 6-1 1-2 against former French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko when her opponent retired feeling unwell during a rain delay at Devonshire Park.

Second seed Keys took the first set 6-1 against Croatian 20-year-old Petra Marcinko who then quit with an abdominal injury.

The 31-year-old Keys has dropped only 14 games in reaching the final, spending just four hours on court as she bids for a third title at the south-coast tournament.

"It's always bittersweet winning a match this way and hopefully she gets better for Wimbledon," Keys said.

"She's an incredible young player, has lots of years ahead of her so I'm sure we'll see lots of her."

At 38, Maria is the oldest ever finalist at the Eastbourne WTA event. She fought off early break points before surging ahead against the error-prone Latvian.

Ostapenko had a medical timeout when she was trailing 4-1 and, after a rain shower interrupted play early in the second set, she did not return from the stoppage.

Maria said: "I was feeling well, then the rain started but I was focused. I was ready to go out here."

"It's never nice to end like this but I'm happy with my week for the moment, and I'm happy to be in the final," she added.

In the men's ATP event, Britain's Jack Draper's hopes of reaching a final on his return from injury were ended by France's Ugo Humbert who won 7-5 6-3.

Draper's compatriot Toby Samuel also fell just short, losing his semi-final to Belgium's Zizou Bergs 4-6 7-6(5) 6-2.

OSAKA SINKS WANG TO REACH FIRST GRASS COURT FINAL

Four-time Grand Slam winner Naomi Osaka is into the first grass court final of her career after blasting past China's Wang Xinyu at Bad Homburg yesterday.

The Japanese sixth seed Osaka won 6-3, 6-3 in sweltering conditions at the key Wimbledon preparation tournament and will face Czech fourth seed Karolina Muchova in Saturday's final.

With the mercury topping out at 38 degrees Celsius (100.4 Fahrenheit), the semi-final between Muchova and Romanian Elena-Gabriela Ruse was suspended for more than an hour and a half due to extreme heat.

The match resumed and Muchova won 6-4, 6-4 in one hour and 40 minutes, not including the delay. Tournament organisers also brought forward today's final to 11am local time



SPOTLIGHT

Better to qualify this way, says Plata after Ecuador stun Germany

Plata scored the winner as Ecuador snatched a place in the knockout rounds

AFP
East Rutherford, United States

Ecuador's World Cup hero Gonzalo Plata said qualifying for the last 32 with a dramatic 2-1 win over Germany on Thursday made the achievement even sweeter.

Plata bagged the winning goal in the 77th minute in New Jersey as Ecuador snatched a place in the knockout rounds as one of the best third-placed sides. However, they did it the hard way after taking just one point from their opening two Group E games, including a frustrating 0-0 draw against rank outsiders Curacao.

"It's very beautiful. Before the World Cup began we hoped we could do it, and it happened in a different way (than expected) because we suffered a lot," said Plata, who plays for Brazilian club Flamengo.

"We suffered too much in the first two games. Everyone wanted qualification to the next round, and maybe it could have been sooner, but it is better this way. We arrived with hunger and we had to show everything."

Ecuador had to overcome a dreadful start as Germany took a controversial second-minute lead through Leroy Sane despite an apparent foul on Pedro Vite, but Sunderland's Nilson Angulo soon brought them

level. But Plata sealed a memorable comeback when he turned in a corner, sending Ecuador into the knockout rounds for only the second time. They reached the last 16 at the 2006 World Cup before losing 1-0 to England.

"It did not matter what happened at the start. From the first minute if we could not score a goal, we had to suffer until the final minute, and then we had to suffer until the end of the last game," said Plata.

"This team is incredible. We believe a lot. We had a lot of faith, we believe in the teammates we have here, we have 26 players that will give their lives. And the people that were here, how incredible, filling the stadium everywhere we have gone. They made us feel like the home team. This is much more than just us."

Ecuador coach Sebastian Beccacece had faced heavy criticism from fans after a poor start to the tournament, but the Argentine responded by guiding the country to a first-ever win over Germany. "Sometimes we have to endure the pain of defeat and sometimes we get the satisfaction of victory. The important thing is that balance. This isn't going to change my life," he said.

"We always said that our vision, from the moment we arrived, was to empower a group of players so they wouldn't feel inferior to anyone or superior to anyone, so they'd feel they can compete with anyone."



Ecuador's Argentine head coach Sebastian Beccacece and midfielder Gonzalo Plata celebrate after the victory over Germany in East Rutherford. (AFP)

REVIEW

Germany committed 'tactical suicide': Nagelsmann



Ecuador's forward Kevin Rodriguez (left) and Germany's defender Malick Thiwai fight for the ball during the World Cup Group E match in East Rutherford. (AFP)

AFP
East Rutherford, United States

Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann said his side, who had already qualified for the last 32 of the World Cup, had committed "tactical suicide" after Ecuador came from behind to beat the Germans 2-1 on Thursday. Leroy Sane gave Group E winners Germany a perfect start by netting after two minutes but Nilson Angulo equalized seven minutes later. With Ecuador chasing a place in the knockout round, they were the hungrier side and Gonzalo Plata scored a priceless winner on 77 minutes in New Jersey that put them in third place, which was enough for a place in the next phase.

"We got off to a great start," Nagelsmann said. "Unfortunately, right after scoring, we started committing tactical suicide with our positioning. That makes things difficult. Ecuador had everything to play for, and you could tell -- they had their foot on

the gas. But I also can't say that any of my players didn't give it their all. That's too simplistic."

Nagelsmann said he would have preferred not to head into the next phase on the back of a loss - Germany will play in the last 32 against a group third-place finisher on Monday. "Defeat is never good, not even in a game where you can't lose top spot," the coach said. "We'll learn our lessons and go on. We have to learn from it and improve, but we also have to look forward. We won a lot of matches, we lost one, and on Monday it's important to start well and give it everything to get to the next round."

Germany captain Joshua Kimmich said it was obvious that Ecuador were the more determined side. "The difference was today that our opponent wanted to win more than us. You could really feel it, especially in the second half. This is why they won, and it was really deserved," he told reporters.

He said Germany must tighten up defensively in their last-32 game or face being dumped out of the tournament.

PERSPECTIVE

US coach Pochettino brushes off Turkiye defeat, says topping group was main goal

Reuters
Inglewood, California

The United States conceded a stoppage-time goal to lose 3-2 to Turkiye on Thursday but coach Mauricio Pochettino said there was little reason for concern after his side still finished top of their World Cup group.

The US will face Bosnia and Herzegovina in Santa Clara in the round of 32 on Wednesday, and Pochettino was frustrated that much of the post-match discussion centred on the defeat rather than the co-hosts achieving their main goal of winning Group D.

"At the moment no one congratulated us for finishing first in our group," Pochettino said. "I congratulate the players, the staff and the fans to finish first in a very difficult group."

Turkiye had already been eliminated before kickoff but the Argentine said the mood after the match was as if his team were the ones going home. "Our objective was to finish first, and we finished first," he said.

"I'm so positive and I'm happy. Your questions are a little bit weird."

Pochettino said the defeat had to be viewed in context, with the US already through to the knockout stage and making wholesale changes to their starting line-up after victories over Paraguay and Australia. "Whenever a team has already qualified and another team has already been knocked out, so many situations come into play," he added.

Pochettino said the performance reinforced his belief in the depth of the squad, with several players making their World Cup debuts. "We are a much better team now than before," he said. "We qualified as number one and we went to the next round. I need to remind you that we won the group."



Coach Mauricio Pochettino said the defeat to Turkiye had to be viewed in context, with the US already through to the knockout stage and making wholesale changes to their starting line-up.

MONTELLA SAYS TURKEY LEAVE WORLD CUP WITH HEADS HELD HIGH

Turkiye coach Vincenzo Montella said his side would return home with their chin up after ending their World Cup campaign with a last-gasp 3-2 victory over the United States in Los Angeles. Montella praised the players for showing their skills, abilities and character despite the mental toll of already being eliminated and playing in front of a predominantly pro-US crowd. "We can go back home with our chin up," Montella said.

"Football hurts, but I got emotional at the end of the game... Today's match matters much more than 1,000 victories."

Montella said Turkiye had created enough

chances throughout the tournament but had not been clinical enough, while stressing he would not blame individual players for missed opportunities. He said his side had been unfortunate in their opening two matches, arguing that even a draw from either game could have changed their fate, but accepted that "football is not always fair."

Montella said the team's celebrations after the final whistle reflected their national pride and gave him confidence for the future. Turkey were making their first World Cup appearance since 2002, and Montella said he hoped they would not have to wait another 24 years to return. "Hopefully we will do better, not in 24 years but earlier than that," he said.

FOCUS

Isak scolds Elanga for confusion over Sweden's qualification

Reuters
Arlington, Texas

Anthony Elanga's equaliser helped Sweden qualify for the World Cup's round of 32 following a 1-1 draw with Japan, but while his teammates were celebrating the result, the striker collapsed on the ground in frustration thinking they had not qualified.

Sweden finished a point below second-placed Japan in Group F, but will progress in the competition as one of the higher-ranked third-placed teams.

Elanga, believing they had needed a win, was pushing his team-mates to find a second goal and even pulled up with cramp, earning some harsh words from his teammate Alexander Isak.

"He got a little scolding from me there. He was a little frustrated at the end of the match and you can understand that now," Isak told reporters after Thursday's match.

Elanga said his teammates were trying to shout at him, but he did not know that they only needed one point to qualify until the match was over. "I just shouted, come on, we can go for more... I got cramp at the end but didn't want to stop running," he said.

Elanga was not the only player unaware that they had qualified. "I was just as clueless," said Sweden



Sweden's Anthony Elanga was unaware a draw against Japan would be enough to seal World Cup knockout spot. (AFP)

goalkeeper Jacob Widell Zetterstrom, who made his World Cup debut against Japan, and had kept the scoreline even with a diving save at the end of the first half.

Sweden coach Graham Potter could not help but smile about Elanga's confusion.

"It couldn't have been any clearer for him. He's obviously thinking about something else, bless him. I love him at the moment, but dear me," he told reporters.

Sweden's will only know their round-of-32 opponent after the remaining final group-stage games are played out.

Atlanta Stadium bucks World Cup pricing trend

Atlanta: In a World Cup beset by criticism over pricing, Atlanta Stadium, and the city as a whole, are providing relief to the wallets of football supporters, with fan-friendly food options, a free Fan Fest and cheap transportation.

The ground, which NFL's Atlanta Falcons and MLS side Atlanta United call home, is easily reachable in downtown Atlanta and for those using public transport, local rail company MARTA has not raised prices during the tournament.

"We're in a very privileged situation," the stadium's chief operating officer Dietmar Exler told Reuters. "We have 15,000 hotel rooms within 15 minutes walking. We have two subway stations right next to the stadium that connect you to the airport in around 20 minutes. We have infrastructure like many European cities, which in the U.S. is usually not that common. It's a different environment here. And we have Fan Fest, less than 10 minutes walking from the stadium."

World Cup ticket pricing is not something the stadium owners have any control over, but once fans are inside the state-of-the-art air-conditioned ground, they may be surprised by the array of food options available, and the cost. "It doesn't matter who shows up here, whether it's FIFA or a concert, the promoter decides the price of the ticket," Exler said. "What is under our control is food, for example, or transportation here. That's the city of Atlanta, that's all of us together."

The stadium opened in 2017, and Falcons owner Arthur Blank's research at other NFL grounds led to him wanting to offer something different to supporters. "For us, the North Star is always fan experience. We want to give the fans the best possible experience in whatever we do," Exler said.

"We have street-level pricing, meaning we charge the same as the restaurants around town. We shouldn't charge more just because you're inside of the stadium held captive. On top of that, we have a dozen items that are fan-friendly priced. For example, bottomless Coke is \$2. You get a cup, you can refill it as often as you want. A hot dog is \$2, and there are another 10 items that are protected like that."

Those prices have not increased since the stadium's opening and there was never any thought of taking advantage of the influx of international fans. "We will always have those prices," Exler said.

"From college football games to the Falcons, from Atlanta United to the World Cup. That's just our commitment to the fans. In Atlanta, we are committed to fan-friendly pricing."