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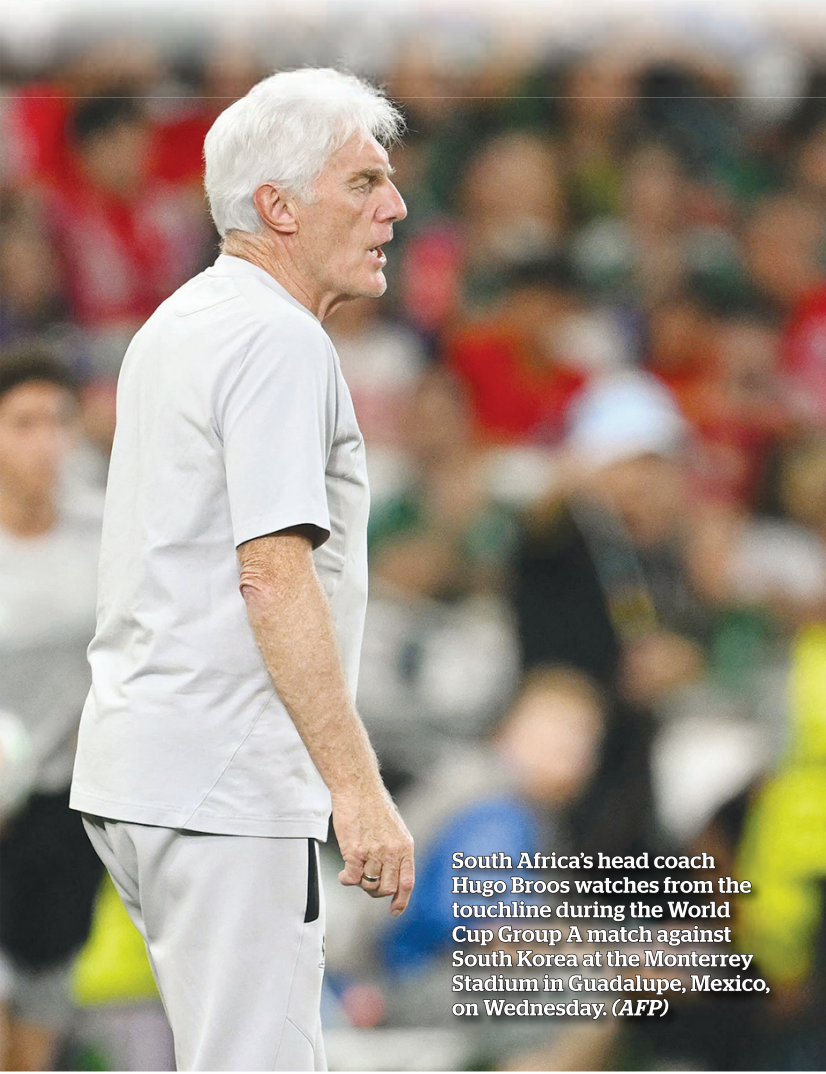
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GULF TIMES
SPORT

PREVIEW

Broos smiles, snarls before South Africa's historic match

BAFANA BAFANA FACE CO-HOSTS CANADA TODAY IN LOS ANGELES AS KNOCKOUT PHASE BEGINS



South Africa's head coach Hugo Broos watches from the touchline during the World Cup Group A match against South Korea at the Monterrey Stadium in Cuadalupe, Mexico, on Wednesday. (AFP)

AFP
Johannesburg

South Africa coach Hugo Broos smiles a lot and snarls a little as he prepares for the biggest match of his 38-year career as a tactician.

Having reached the knockout phase of the World Cup for the first time, Bafana Bafana (The Boys) face Canada today in Los Angeles in the first last-32 fixture.

The joy of the 74-year-old Belgian grandfather stems from succeeding where various coaches, including renowned Brazilian Carlos Alberto Parreira, failed. A 1-0 midweek victory over higher-ranked South Korea, through a goal from winger Thapelo Maseko, earned South Africa second place in Group A and qualification for the knockout stage.

It was a triumphant end to a mini-league campaign that began badly two weeks ago when Bafana performed poorly in a 2-0 loss to joint hosts Mexico. A slight improvement in a 1-1 draw with the Czech Republic, courtesy of a late Teboho Mokoena penalty, left many South Africans pessimistic before facing the Koreans.

But the team prevailed, displaying passion largely lacking in the earlier matches. More clinical finishing would have produced a wider winning margin in Mexico.

Recalling the victory over Korea, Broos told AFP the team he has coached since 2021 "believed in itself".

"It was a hugely emotional moment - getting past the group stage for the first time," said Broos, who guided Cameroon to the 2017 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) title. "We were not good against Mexico and a little better against the Czechs. That meant we had to defeat Korea. There was enormous pressure on us, but we made it. We are ready for the Canadians. My team will fight for 90 minutes, and longer if necessary. Let us hope for another good result."

Should South Africa eliminate Canada - who are 22 places higher in the world rankings - they will face the Netherlands or Morocco in a last-16 tie. But amid the happiness after first-round exits from the 1998, 2002 and 2010 World Cups, Broos was angry at some criticism after the Mexico loss.

"There was a lot of criticism from current and former coaches and players and some supporters. They must know that I do things my way. I do not read social media trash. I never listen to people who think they are important. It would be better for them to shut up."

"Someone suggested a statue should be erected by South Africans in my honour. I told them to make it of wood so it burns quickly when we fail."

After the 2010 World Cup, South Africa endured a decade of underachievement, often failing to qualify for the AFCON and missing three consecutive

World Cup tournaments. When Broos took charge in 2021, Bafana were attracting crowds of less than 200. Before departing for the 2026 World Cup, they drew 50,000 supporters to a warm-up match.

After finishing third at the 2024 AFCON and winning a 2026 World Cup qualifying group including Nigeria, Bafana slumped. They made a last-16 exit from the 2025 AFCON and, before overcoming South Korea, went seven matches without winning. Broos partly blamed the early AFCON departure from Morocco on allegations before the African tournament that he was a racist and sexist.

Angry at the late arrival of centre-back Mbekezeli Mbokazi for training, Broos said the player "would enter my hotel room as a black and leave as a white".

A South African Football Association official defended Broos, telling AFP "it was an unfortunate choice of words concerning a tongue lashing in a country with a troubled racial background".

Broos, who was part of the Belgium squad that reached the 1986 World Cup semi-finals in Mexico, was also unhappy that Mbokazi chose to leave Soweto club Orlando Pirates for Chicago Fire this year instead of moving to Europe.

He called the mixed-race agent of the defender "a nice little woman who thinks she knows about football". Neither the threatened racism nor sexism charges by a lawmaker materialised.

FOCUS

Brazil get Japan rematch as Ancelotti's faces knockout test

Reuters
New York

Brazil's World Cup Round of 32 meeting with Japan tomorrow comes with the chance for revenge for Carlo Ancelotti's squad and a test of how far he has taken his team since a Tokyo collapse early in his tenure.

The five-times world champions were beaten 3-2 by Japan in October 2025 after leading 2-0 in a friendly, conceding three goals in less than 20 minutes as the hosts claimed their first win over Brazil in 14 meetings.

It was another reminder of the Italian arrived, about to complete the job Ancelotti had inherited after leaving Real Madrid with only a year to turn a disjointed team into World Cup challengers.

Brazil were wobbling when the Italian arrived, about to complete the job Ancelotti had inherited after leaving Real Madrid with only a year to turn a disjointed team into World Cup challengers.

Brazil were wobbling when the Italian arrived, about to complete the job Ancelotti had inherited after leaving Real Madrid with only a year to turn a disjointed team into World Cup challengers.

Monday's match in Houston, however, will be a very different affair.

"Perhaps... they will be even more motivated," Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu told reporters after his side's 1-1 draw with Sweden secured second place in Group F behind the Netherlands.



Brazil coach Carlo Ancelotti talks to players at the Columbia Park Training Facility in Morristown, New Jersey, yesterday. (Reuters)

however, will be a very different affair.

"Perhaps... they will be even more motivated," Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu told reporters after his side's 1-1 draw with Sweden secured second place in Group F behind the Netherlands.

"We will be playing against a Brazil side that is very keen to win. I'm looking forward to it."

Japan will be much changed from the side that stunned Brazil, with injuries depriving Moriyasu of captain Wataru Endo, wingers Kaoru Mitoma and Takefusa Kubo and forward Takumi Minamino, who scored in the October victory.

Brazil also look different. The defence that started in Tokyo has disappeared from Ancelotti's

World Cup squad entirely, and the team have been improving after opening the tournament with a 1-1 draw against Morocco.

Back-to-back wins have sharpened the mood, Vinicius Jr has scored four goals and Neymar has returned to the national team after three years out because of persistent injuries.

"We're not perfect. We can improve. For example, our pace on the ball. We can be quicker," Ancelotti said after Brazil beat Scotland 3-0.

"But I'm pleased because the team has improved a lot since the first match. Now it's a knockout competition. We need to show real grit."

The fixture also carries a deeper

historical thread. Brazil have long been a reference point for Japanese football, a relationship embodied by Zico.

After success with Flamengo, Udinese and Brazil, he came out of retirement to play for Sumitomo Metal, later Kashima Antlers, from 1991 to 1994, helping shape Japan's developing professional game. He later managed Kashima and now works as a technical adviser at the club.

Zico also coached Japan from 2002 to 2006, winning the 2004 Asian Cup and guiding them to the 2006 World Cup, where Brazil beat them 4-1 in the group stage to seal Japan's elimination.

So both teams will have old scores to settle in Houston.

Japan embrace 'underdog mentality' for clash with Brazil

Japan can beat Brazil in the World Cup last 32 by embracing an "underdog mentality", Monaco striker **Takumi Minamino** said.

The two sides clash tomorrow in Houston and record five-time champions Brazil will be favourites to reach the next round. But Japan, considered by some to be outsiders to go far at the tournament in North America, beat Carlo Ancelotti's side 3-2 in a home friendly in October. And Minamino, who is at the World Cup in a non-playing capacity after suffering a serious knee injury, said they can pull off another surprise.

"If we play with the underdog mentality, as we always have, I believe we have the ability to

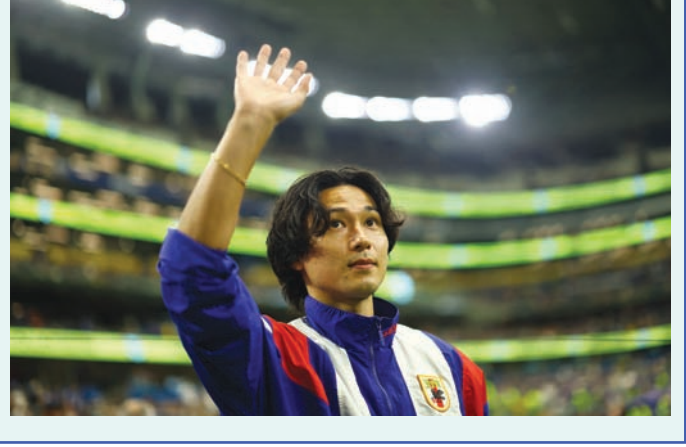
make something happen in these one-off games," said the 31-year-old, who scored in the friendly win eight months ago.

Speaking to reporters on Friday at Japan's training base near Nashville, Tennessee, Minamino said attacker Takefusa Kubo could play a part after a knee injury.

The Real Sociedad winger came off in the 2-2 draw with the Netherlands that launched Japan's World Cup campaign.

"He is especially spirited, so he needs no encouragement from me," Minamino said, according to Kyodo News.

"Everyone believes we will welcome him back in the knockout stage, and he is rehabbing with that same belief."





CRICKET

Ravindra hits gutsy 60 as New Zealand stretch lead

WITH THE THREE-TEST SERIES TIED AT 1-1, THE VISITORS CHARGE AHEAD AT TRENT BRIDGE

AFP
Nottingham, United Kingdom

Rachin Ravindra's unbeaten fifty kept England at bay after Jofra Archer's double strike rocked New Zealand in the third and deciding Test at Trent Bridge yesterday.

New Zealand, with the three-match series up for grabs at 1-1, were faltering at 12-2 in their second innings following fast bowler Archer's two wickets after tea on the third day.

But at stumps they had recovered to 120-3, an overall lead of 204 runs, to set up an intriguing finish with two full days remaining.

Ravindra was 60 not out, the 12th time in his 24 Tests he had scored 50 or more - a tally including five hundreds.

The 26-year-old left-hander received good support from Daryl Mitchell (26 not out) in an unbroken stand of 69.

Fast bowler Archer on another day of soaring heat in Nottingham had impressive close figures of 2-14 in seven overs to give England, on a run of six defeats in their last eight Tests, hope of victory.

Archer struck twice to reduce New Zealand to 12-2 - a far cry from the Black Caps' first-innings 319-2 - as skipper Tom Latham and fellow opener Devon Conway, who had made 151 and 157 respectively earlier in this match, both fell for single-figure scores.



New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra plays a shot on the third day of the third Test against England at Trent Bridge in Nottingham yesterday. (AFP)

Latham was lbw for just four to a fine delivery from the express quick that angled in and cut away.

Conway, one of a quartet of left-handers in the top four, was then struck on the helmet by an Archer delivery that lifted awkwardly off a good length.

And three balls later he fell for five when another similarly brut-

ish Archer delivery from around the wicket climbed sharply to take the splice before flying to Joe Root at first slip. New Zealand were 51-3 when Harry Brook - who had earlier missed Henry Nicholls completely while stationed at a wide first slip - made no mistake when the Black Caps No 3 edged again.

But Ravindra went to his sec-

ond fifty of the series by whipping returning England captain Ben Stokes through midwicket for a seventh four in 81 balls faced.

Earlier, Nathan Smith took 4-91 and concussion substitute Zak Foulkes grabbed two key wickets as an injury-hit New Zealand bowled out England for 354 to lead by 84 runs on first innings. Foulkes, New



New Zealand's Zak Foulkes (right) celebrates taking the final wicket, that of England's Josh Tongue on the third day of the third Test against England yesterday. (Reuters)

Zealand's first concussion substitute in Test cricket after replacing Blair Tickner on Friday, captured the prize scalps of Stokes (15) and Brook (58) in a fine return of 3-35 in just 15.2 overs. England lost three wickets for 11 runs at the start of yesterday's play as their overnight 223-2 became 234-5, with Root (21) and Jacob Bethell (74) unable to add to their Friday scores.

The double strike was just what New Zealand needed after coming into this match without injured seamer Matt Henry, who took 11 wickets at the Oval, and in-form towering paceman Kyle Jamieson, rested as a fitness precaution even before Tickner was sidelined.

Stokes was back after being omitted from England's 253-run defeat in the second Test at the

Oval for breaking a midnight curfew, along with Gus Atkinson, while celebrating at a London nightclub following the first-Test win over New Zealand.

In New Zealand's first innings Stokes took 4-70 after ending an opening partnership that threatened to take the Black Caps to a total beyond 500. But Stokes, fresh from 95 for county side Durham, only managed 15 yesterday before he was bowled by a superb Foulkes delivery that cut back sharply to the left-handed batsman.

BRIEF SCORES

New Zealand 438 and 120 for 3 (Ravindra 60*) lead England 354 (Duckett 113, Bethell 74, Brook 58, Smith 4-91, Foulkes 3-35, O'Rourke 3-53) by 204 runs

MOTOGP

Fernandez wins Dutch Grand Prix sprint

Reuters
Assen, the Netherlands

Trackhouse rider Raul Fernandez delivered a dominant performance to win yesterday's sprint race at the Dutch Grand Prix, overtaking pole sitter Jorge Martin on the third lap to claim his second sprint victory of the season.

Ai Ogura completed a landmark result for the team by finishing second, 0.362 seconds behind Fernandez, sealing Trackhouse's first-ever 1-2 finish in a sprint race.

The contest was also the first to be held under MotoGP's new rules banning front holed devices.

"I think we found that we are quite strong. It is an amazing result for me and for the team," Fernandez, who took his maiden MotoGP sprint win at Mugello in May, said.

"The track was quite nice. I was quite fast in the final part of the race, but honestly, I was on my limit. We have to see what happens tomorrow."

Martin made a strong launch from pole but was overtaken by Fernandez, Di Giannantonio and Ogura, then slipped further as he battled teammate Bezzecchi for fourth.

Di Giannantonio took third after holding off Bezzecchi, while Martin faded to fifth.



Trackhouse rider Raul Fernandez (centre) after winning the sprint race at the Dutch Grand Prix ahead of teammate Ai Ogura (left) at Assen yesterday.

"The race was really close. It was a shame that I lost a couple of spots in the first three laps. We know what we have to improve tomorrow," Ogura said.

Bezzecchi, who retired from the sprint at Brno a week ago before being banned from the Grand Prix for slapping a marshal, finished fourth to extend his championship lead by one point.

The Aprilia rider now leads teammate Martin by nine points in the standings.

Marc Marquez finished seventh but was awarded sixth place after his Ducati teammate Francesco Bagnaia dropped a position after being penalised for exceeding track limits on the final chicane.

Gresini's Alex Marquez started the sprint race after missing qual-

ifying and finished 13th, while Honda's Joan Mir crashed out on the opening lap.

Di Giannantonio closed to within 22 points of Bezzecchi, with Marc Marquez a further 20 points back.

Currently Ogura sits on 143, one behind Marquez, ahead of Pedro Acosta (133) and Bagnaia (130).

SPOTLIGHT

Former England pacer Plunkett turns to baseball in the US

Reuters
Oakland, California

Former England cricketer Liam Plunkett swapped his cricket colours for a baseball glove on Friday, playing his first game for independent American club Oakland Ballers and even claiming a strikeout.

Plunkett, 41, was part of England's 2019 World Cup-winning side - his final international appearance - taking three wickets in the tied final against New Zealand as England emerged victorious by the narrowest of margins on boundary count.

He subsequently moved to the United States, where his wife is from, and has since played Major League Cricket for the San Francisco Unicorns. His latest venture came with the Ballers, who participate in the Pioneer Baseball League (PBL), an independent competition and official Major League Baseball (MLB) Partner League.

The seam bowler featured under the PBL's "marketing player" exception, a clause which allows teams to temporarily sign high-profile cross-sport athletes.

Facing the Yuba-Sutter Freebirds at Raimondi Park, Plunkett started on the mound and recorded a strikeout in the process.

"Originally, I thought it's like the ceremonial open pitch, but it was the real thing. I was first on the mound, a little bit nervous, but the

catcher was excellent," Plunkett said in a post-game interview.

"But yeah, I mean I got that strikeout. I think the hitter didn't know what was coming. I think it was a bit unusual, a mix between bowling and then pitching. Play first game, get a strikeout. What more could I ask for? Happy days!"

Earlier Plunkett told *San Francisco Chronicle*: "It's a unique opportunity. As much as I'm coming here tomorrow and it's my first time, you always want to help the team win. You don't want to be terrible at the plate, you know?"

The story in *San Francisco Chronicle* added sporting white sneakers, black sweatpants and no batting gloves. Plunkett went through a quick hitting crash course with assistant general manager Tyler Peterson.

"I'm used to the ball coming at me, so you get used to your timing," Plunkett said. "But it's a different ballgame completely against these guys who do this for a living."

"There's a lot of cricket fans in the Bay Area. There's a huge cricket community, and we hope this kind of crossover event activates that," Ballers CEO Paul Freedman told the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

"We're also hopeful that a lot of baseball fans will learn a little bit more about cricket through doing this. The Oakland Ballers were founded on the belief that there's a magic of sports in the way that it brings communities together, and we believe more sports is better."



OLYMPIC MEDALLIST CANDELORO ELECTED FRENCH ICE SPORTS CHIEF

Paris, France: Former Olympic figure skating medallist Philippe Candeloro was yesterday elected president of the French Ice Sports Federation four years before the country hosts the Winter Games.

Candeloro, a two-time Olympic bronze medalist known for his exuberant personality, bold style and trademark backflip, was elected on the second round of voting with six candidates.

The 54-year-old won 51.35 percent of votes compared to 46.77 for incumbent president Gwenaëlle Noury. Noury had led the first round ahead of Candeloro and former Grenoble skating club president Gerard Balthazard. "I'm fairly confident because I'm a positive person, but at the end of the day, it is an election," Candeloro told AFP before the vote. During the campaign, Candeloro had argued that his fame and experience as a businessman would help boost the federation's finances.

Despite a positive result last year the federation's finances remain fragile with a net profit of just 29,000 euros (\$33,000) against a five million euro (\$5.7m) budget for 2025.

"I believe I have the means to secure sponsors and partners and to organise more sporting events," Candeloro said. A major figure in figure skating during the 1990s and a long-time television pundit - a role in which he occasionally made tactless remarks - Candeloro is now turning a new page in his career.

"My biggest challenge is that people know me primarily through my media persona rather than my professional life," added the two-time world medallist. Noury had campaigned on the need for stability in the build-up to the 2030 Winter Olympics in the French Alps.

However, she has faced a revolt from the federation's lesser-known disciplines - short-track speed skating, bobsleigh, luge, skeleton, and

curling - which felt neglected by the governing body.

Former world champ Simpson discharged from hospital after cardiac arrest

American Olympic medallist and former world champion Jenny Simpson has been discharged from hospital after suffering a heart attack during an event in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The 39-year-old was pacing a mile group at a community track event hosted by Sir Walter Running when she collapsed and required CPR.

"We're grateful to share that Fleet Feet Chief Running Officer Jenny Simpson has been discharged from Duke University Hospital and will continue her recovery in North Carolina following the medical emergency she experienced during the Sir Walter Running Pop Up Mile event on June 17," her employers Fleet Feet said in an Instagram post on Friday.

FORMULA 1

Russell takes controversial pole at Austrian Grand Prix

RUSSELL OUTPACES BOTH FERRARIS TO SECURE FOURTH POLE IN 2026 AND 11TH OF HIS CAREER

AFP
Spielberg, Austria

George Russell demonstrated his experience and a detailed understanding of the rules yesterday to steer through a controversial final flying lap and seize pole position for today's Austrian Grand Prix.

The Mercedes driver, who struggled on Friday as team-mate and championship leader Kimi Antonelli set the pace in practice, bounced back by topping final practice and then grabbing pole after Max Verstappen crashed in his Red Bull.

The four-time champion's accident - he was unhurt after hitting the barriers at Turn Nine - prompted waved single yellow flags that Russell knew he should lift for while others behind him, including Italian teenager Antonelli, mistakenly believed they were double yellows and aborted their laps.

This meant Russell lost time, but not his lap as he outpaced both Ferraris to secure his fourth pole of the season and 11th of his career, leaving Antonelli lamenting his error of judgement.

"The lap was unbelievable," said British driver Russell, who was immediately behind Verstappen on track when he crashed.

"I don't know where it came



Mercedes' George Russell celebrates after qualifying in pole position with second-placed Ferrari's Charles Leclerc and third-placed Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton at the Austrian Grand Prix yesterday. (Reuters)

from. I saw the single yellows and made a big lift off in mid-corner. I saw the green flag. I lost a lot of time, three or four tenths or more."

Antonelli was five seconds behind Russell on his own late flying lap when he came to Turn Nine and the caution signals.

"I thought it was a double yellow," he admitted. "So, I aborted completely and I missed the front row. It was my mistake. We were very close with George, only a tenth between us"

Russell added that he was aware of the visible difference on an electronic display screen between a solid yellow sign, denoting a single yellow, and a flashing diagonal signal denoting a double.

"It's not easy, but once you know it, you know it," he said.

Looking ahead to today's race, he added: "It's going to be very hot! The Ferraris are looking incredibly fast. In the corners, they are the fastest team, but they are a bit more 'draggy' than us, which

may help us to defend." Russell took pole with a best lap in one minute and 06.113 seconds to outpace Charles Leclerc by 0.295 and seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton by 0.295 in a dramatic end to an intriguing qualifying hour.

Antonelli was fourth and Verstappen fifth ahead of defending champion Lando Norris and his McLaren team-mate Oscar Piastri, Red Bull's Isack Hadjar and the two Racing Bulls of Liam Lawson and impressive British rookie Arvid Lindblad.

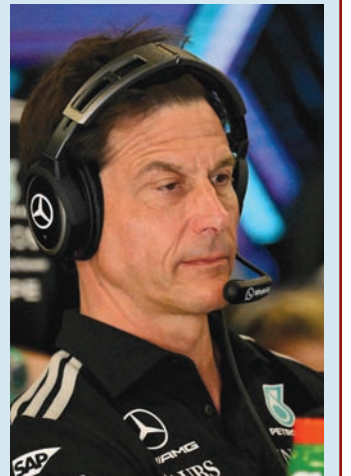
WOLFF SAYS RUSSELL WILL BE AT MERCEDES NEXT SEASON

Mercedes team boss **Toto Wolff** yesterday ended speculation linking his team to Max Verstappen, as a possible replacement for George Russell, by declaring his line-up will be unchanged next year.

The Austrian team chief spoke after seeing Russell bounce back to outpace team-mate and championship leader Kimi Antonelli in final practice ahead of qualifying for today's Austrian Grand Prix. Four-time champion Verstappen has been the subject of much speculation all season since declaring he could leave Formula One if he was not enjoying it anymore after the introduction this year of the new 'hybrid era'.

"We don't want to change things and we've said that also to George. I think it's a line-up that is good for us. I'm very happy with the two of them," Wolff told *Sky Sports F1*. He added that pre-season title favourite Russell had handled a tense situation with impressive composure. "He's been coping well," he said.

"He doesn't need to prove to anyone that he has the speed. We know he has the speed and the



ability." Verstappen has said that if he stays in F1, if he is enjoying it, he wants to complete his career with Red Bull - and his manager Raymond Vermeulen endorsed that view yesterday when he said reports linking him to McLaren were baseless. "These rumours are based on absolutely nothing. There have been no negotiations... We certainly want to stay with Red Bull, but with a car that makes winning possible," he told *Blid*.

TENNIS

Keys beats Maria to clinch 3rd Eastbourne Open title



Madison Keys of the US poses with her trophy after winning the final against Germany's Tatjana Maria at the Eastbourne Open. (Reuters)



Czech Republic's Karolina Muchova holds aloft the trophy as she celebrates winning the Bad Homburg Open in Homburg. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Madison Keys won the Eastbourne title for a third time as the American defeated Germany's Tatjana Maria 7-5, 6-4 in the final of the Wimbledon warm-up event yesterday.

Keys, seeded second, ignored sweltering temperatures on the south coast to see off the world number 112 in 93 minutes.

It was the 31-year-old's first title since she clinched her maiden Grand Slam crown at the Australian Open last year.

Keys joins an illustrious group of three-time champions on the Eastbourne grass, alongside Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova.

In her first final since finishing as the Trophée Clarins runner-up in Paris in May, the world number 27 avenged a semi-final defeat against Maria on grass at Queen's Club last year.

Keys' first WTA title came at Eastbourne 12 years ago and she won a second in 2023. She

maintained her dominance at the event, securing an 11th title on the women's tour in her 16th career final. She was in charge throughout against the 38-year-old Maria and faced just one break point.

Having also won the Birmingham event 10 years ago, Keys now owns four career grass-court titles. It was the perfect preparation for Wimbledon, which starts tomorrow, with Keys never managing to go beyond the quarter-finals at the All England Club.

She will face compatriot Kayla Day in the first round on Tuesday.

MUCHOVA WINS WIMBLEDON WARM-UP AFTER OSAKA WALKOVER

Fourth seed Karolina Muchova won the Wimbledon warm-up tournament at Bad Homburg, Germany, yesterday after Naomi Osaka withdrew with an ankle injury.

In the first grass court final of her career, the four-time Grand Slam winner Osaka was troubled by the injury and lost the opening set 6-1, having taken a short break for treatment after losing the first three games.

The Japanese sixth seed battled on but was visibly troubled by the injury, eventually signalling she would be unable to continue one game into the second set.

Muchova's victory continues a strong season for the 29-year-old Czech, who won the Qatar Open in February and made it to the final of the Stuttgart WTA in April.

The victory will return Muchova to the top 10, with the Czech to climb to ninth when the rankings are updated on Monday.

Despite being brought forward to 0900 GMT to beat the heat, the mercury was already at 36 degrees Celsius (96.8 Fahrenheit) when the players took to the court yesterday.

A two-time winner on the hard courts of the US Open and the Australian Open, Osaka came into the match hoping to break through for a debut grass court title just days out from Wimbledon.

Osaka had been broken just five times in four matches on her way to the final but quickly found herself two breaks and three games down in the opening set, before seeking medical treatment.

COMMENT

Sabalenka urges Grand Slams to 'get it done' in prize money boycott row

AFP
London

World number one Aryna Sabalenka has urged Grand Slam chiefs to solve the prize money row that prompted Wimbledon stars to limit their media duties ahead of the tournament's overall revenue.

Sabalenka is among a group of leading players fighting to increase the total prize money on offer at the four Grand Slam tournaments.

With Wimbledon starting tomorrow, the Belarusian and her fellow players met the media at press conferences yesterday.

But, as several stars did at the recent French Open, Sabalenka and other players again restricted their time with journalists in a prize money protest.

Wimbledon organisers have increased the total pot for this year's tournament by a record 20 percent in response to the demands of a players' group led by former WTA chief executive Larry Scott.

While Sabalenka acknowledged that was a welcome gesture, the four-time Grand Slam champion said it still wasn't enough and called for negotiations between the players and the tournament chiefs.

"It's a great start that they raised the prize money. But if you look over the last 10 years, if you compare the prize money to 2016, it's kind of like the same," she told reporters.

"I really hope we can finally get to the table and really get it done, come to a conclusion that every-

one is going to be happy with. "Hopefully we'll never have to do this again."

All England Club officials admitted they were "surprised and disappointed" by the protest, pointing out they have proposed a player council to solve the dispute.

Wimbledon's £64.2mn (\$84.7mn) prize money for 2026 is around 15 percent of the tournament's overall revenue.

But that figure is short of the 16 per cent that the players want.

The Wimbledon singles champions will bank £3.6mn, an increase from the £3mn earned by 2025 champions Iga Swiatek and Jannik Sinner.

Even first round losers will receive £80,000 - a significant rise from last year's £66,000.

Sabalenka and her fellow millionaire stars have been accused of greed by demanding more prize money. But the 28-year-old insisted they were fighting on behalf of lower ranked players, who do not enjoy the same rewards and benefits that come with being at the top of the sport.

"Listen, we do it for the tour, we don't do it for ourselves. We do it for the rest of the players who are suffering to even hire a coach," she said.

"It's not an easy life for players who is, like, lower in the ranking. So we do it for them.

"I'm more than sure the crowd understand us. I mean, we're playing matches, we're there, we're competing, we're bringing the show. "Now we are just limiting our media. We are just trying to really get to something that everyone is going to be happy with."

FOCUS

Agassi and Wozniacki serve up special show in NYC

Reuters
New York

The manicured lawns of Wimbledon came to the heart of Manhattan on Friday when former Grand Slam champions and fan favourites including Andre Agassi and Caroline Wozniacki took to a temporary pop-up grasscourt erected in New York's Central Park.

Agassi and Wozniacki were joined by former US player James Blake and Canadian former world number five Eugenie Bouchard for a series of exhibition matches designed to bring a taste of southwest London to New York ahead

of the Grand Slam's start tomorrow. The quartet played singles exhibitions before teaming up for mixed doubles on a Wimbledon-style court installed at Wollman Rink at the southern end of Central Park, against a backdrop of trees and Manhattan skyscrapers.

"It was an amazing experience," Wozniacki said.

"Playing on a grasscourt in the middle of Central Park doesn't happen every day.

To be part of this amazing event was something that I won't forget."

The head agronomist at the All England Lawn Tennis Club, Mark Ferguson, oversaw the court, and the grass was specially grown in neighbouring New

Jersey for the pop-up installation.

"I think it's a fantastic kind of juxtaposition of Wimbledon and New York together," Ferguson said.

The exhibition also provided an opportunity for the former players to discuss the return of 23-time Grand Slam singles champion Serena Williams, who is set to make a surprise comeback at Wimbledon after four years away from singles competition.

"I'm very excited to see her back," Wozniacki said.

"It's always great to see some of the best players ever come back and play. I'll be watching, I'll be supporting and it will be great."

Asked whether she might consider

another comeback of her own, Wozniacki smiled and replied: "I don't know. That's a good question."

Bouchard said Williams faced a daunting challenge by returning directly at Wimbledon without a warm-up event. "I think it's bonkers - in a good way," Bouchard said.

"The fact that she hasn't played a singles match in four years is pretty crazy to play the first one at Wimbledon.

"But if there's anyone that can handle it, it's Serena."

Tennis legends Andre Agassi (left) and Steffi Graf with Caroline Wozniacki (centre) in New York on Friday.





SPOTLIGHT

Cape Verde eye seismic shock against Argentina

The Blue Sharks reached the knockout rounds as runners-up in Group H on their World Cup debut

AFP
Houston

Cape Verde say they have the quality, the heart and the global football family behind them as they size up a seismic World Cup shock against Lionel Messi's Argentina.

The debutants will play the reigning champions in Miami on July 3 and on paper Argentina are overwhelming favourites to saunter into the last 16.

But Cape Verde, the smallest nation to ever reach the knockout rounds, have already defied the odds in drawing with Spain, Uruguay and Saudi Arabia.

Netherlands-born midfielder Deroy Duarte said: "Our first objective was to go to the World Cup, our second was to pass the group stage, and this is what we did."

"Everything is an honour and a reward, and we see Argentina as a game like this - another chance to make history."

"So why not? We will give everything and then at the end of the game we will see."

Cape Verde, an archipelago off the west of Africa with a population of just over 500,000, came into their maiden World Cup ranked 67th and most people expecting them to be on the first plane home.

But their success has been in the

planning for a while, the country having targeted its large diaspora to recruit players.

Of the starting XI that were full value for their 0-0 draw with Saudi Arabia in Houston on Friday, six were born outside the country.

Three were born in the Netherlands, and the others from the Republic of Ireland, France and Portugal.

The Blue Sharks served notice in their opening game of the competition when the 40-year-old goalkeeper Vozinha starred in a stunning 0-0 draw with European champions Spain.

Proving it was no fluke under their coach Bubista, a former Cape Verde international who goes by one name, they then held two-time former champions Uruguay 2-2. They headed into their final group encounter against the Saudis knowing that a third draw, coupled with Spain beating Uruguay, would see them into the knockout rounds.

They did their part, then had an agonising minute on the pitch crowded around a mobile phone to see if Spain kept up their end of the bargain.

They did so, the Spanish beating Uruguay 1-0, and the Cape Verde squad erupted as one in celebrating their feat. Some of the players and fans were in tears.

Back home in the capital Praia people stayed up into the early

hours to see their heroes put their country on the map.

"From the very beginning we've said that one of the purposes we had was to show our country to the rest of the world," Bubista said, draped in his country's blue, white, red and yellow flag.

Beating Argentina would go down as the biggest shock in World Cup history, but Vozinha said Cape Verde have "a big heart" - and talent to go with it.

"Maybe for many of you the Cape Verde players are not good enough," he told reporters.

"But we came here to show that we have a lot of quality."

Duarte said they feel they have the rest of football rooting for them.

"We've received a lot of support from people of different countries," he said.

"But also this is how Cape Verde people are, we like to receive people and treat them like they are ours."

Duarte, who was born in Rotterdam and plays in Bulgaria, said facing Argentina was "a dream come true."

"What a match, I've always seen Argentina on the television when I was young," the 26-year-old said, smiling.

"It's a special moment, a special game. But still the ball is round. We played against Spain and Uruguay and drew, so why not?"



Cape Verde head coach Bubista and winger Jovane Cabral celebrate after their 0-0 draw against Saudi Arabia in Houston. (AFP)

FOCUS

Salah focal point of Egypt attack but others are also stepping up

Reuters
Seattle

Egypt's Mohamed Salah had a quiet game in Friday's 1-1 draw with Iran at the World Cup and left the field early in the second half, but coach Hossam Hassan's new-look side showed they can step up when their talismanic forward has an off day.

The 34-year-old winger, who had scored one and set up two others in Egypt's previous Group G games against Belgium and New Zealand, will be assessed after asking to be substituted, though Hassan said he did not think the issue was serious.

Egypt will hope Salah is good to go for their round-of-32 game against Australia next week after they reached the World Cup knockout stage for the first time. Salah tallied nine of Egypt's 20 goals in their World Cup qualifying campaign, and while he has scored only one of their five goals in the group stage, he remains the centrepiece of the attack.

At Egypt's last World Cup appearance in 2018, Salah scored both their goals as the side were eliminated with three straight defeats by Uruguay, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Since Hassan took over as coach in 2024, Egypt have played far more dynamically and used Salah's gravity to pull in defenders and open the space for team mates.

At this World Cup, Salah played



Emam Ashour of Egypt is tackled by Saman Ghoddos of Iran during the Group G match in Seattle on Friday. (AFP)

a key role in their opening goal against Belgium in a 1-1 draw, feeding the ball to midfielder Emam Ashour, who netted from outside the box. Egypt's 3-1 win over New Zealand in their second match showcased the team's wider attacking cast, with the goals coming from Salah, Mahmoud Hassan "Trezeguet" and Mostafa Abdel Raouf "Zico".

In Seattle, it was midfielder Mahmoud Saber who scored inside five minutes, with Salah leaving the field in the 57th minute. Egypt were only denied top spot in the group on goal difference after Belgium thrashed New Zealand 5-1 on Friday. Even if Salah is injured, Egypt's attack still poses a threat for Australia when they play on July 3 in Dallas.

REVIEW

Pino, Williams injuries mar Spain's World Cup progress

AFP
Guadalajara, Mexico

Spain's progress to the last 32 of the World Cup came at a cost as Yeremy Pino's tournament appearance over, while Nico Williams suffered another muscle injury in Friday's 1-0 win over Uruguay.

Crystal Palace's Pino was forced to play out the final few minutes struggling with a shoulder injury after Luis de la Fuente had used his three windows to make substitutions.

Williams was only introduced 15 minutes from time after being nursed back into action after an injury-disrupted season at Athletic Bilbao. But he ended the game with an issue that could be a bodyblow to La Roja's hopes of World Cup glory.

The latest injuries leave De la Fuente desperately short of options in wide areas. Lamine Yamal is yet to play 90 minutes in over two months on his return from a hamstring injury and Liverpool's new signing Victor Munoz has not featured at the World Cup after a setback in his return from a muscle problem.

"Nico was experiencing some slight discomfort. It could be a strain or just fatigue, we'll have to wait until tomorrow to know for sure," said De la Fuente.

"However, and I am really sad about this, what really concerns me is Yeremy's injury. It looks



Spain's Yeremy Pino reacts during the FIFA World Cup match against Uruguay in Guadalajara, Mexico, on Friday. (Reuters)

bad and there is a very strong possibility he will miss the rest of the tournament."

Spain were far from their fluid best in Guadalajara as Alex Baena's goal, thanks to a goalkeeping error from Fernando Muslera, secured top spot in Group H.

The European champions will next face Austria or Algeria in Los Angeles.

De la Fuente conceded his side must improve once the knockout stages get underway, but praised Spain's discipline as Uruguay lost their heads in bowing out of the tournament. Some lenient refereeing from American official Ismail Elfath had allowed the South Americans physical approach to thrive until Agustín Canobbio was shown a red card in stoppage time for a wild

lunge on Pau Cubarsi. "I am proud of my players in a match that pushed us to the limit in every sense of the word, physically very demanding and rough, that we stood up to be counted," added De la Fuente.

"We know we can find ourselves in games like this and the most important thing is that we rose to the occasion, even if the performance wasn't particularly dazzling."

"In football, you can't always play with the brilliance you wish for, or that we are capable of showing at other times."

"We maintained an incredibly high level of concentration, responsibility, and composure, and we avoided rising to the many provocations that could have led to serious trouble."

BOTTONLINE

Oldies but goodies: Belgium coach Garcia lauds his leaders

Reuters
Vancouver

Belgium coach Rudi Garcia credited his senior players for leading the charge in their 5-1 rout of New Zealand at the World Cup on Friday, brushing aside criticism about the team's veteran core earlier in the tournament.

Leandro Trossard, 31, struck twice as Belgium thrashed New Zealand to clinch top spot in Group G and advance to the round of 32. Kevin De Bruyne (34), Romelu Lukaku (33) and Alexis Saelemaekers (27) were also on the scoresheet. Belgium finished above Egypt on goal difference after both sides ended with five points from

three matches. The Belgians will next face one of the eight best third-placed teams. Garcia told reporters that his side were more efficient than in their games against Egypt and Iran.

"This is what the oldies did tonight, quote unquote," he added. "Now, we haven't won anything yet but we moved on to the next phase, but thank goodness we had a difference of four goals and that gave us the opportunity to be first of the group ..."

"We can't say that we are fully into it but we are growing into it. We're gaining momentum. We'll see against whom we will be playing in the round of 32, but we will relish this first victory."

Garcia made five changes to the side that drew 0-0 with Iran.

Striker Romelu Lukaku was dropped to the bench, while winger Jeremy Doku returned to the starting line-up after recovering from illness and a brief absence following the birth of his son.

Asked whether external criticism about the team's "oldies" had been a motivation, Garcia said: "No, I did not read it, but this is what I've heard from France, from Belgium and this is not a source of motivation honestly."

"I trust my players and that's why my team is the way it is right now."

"I fully trust my leaders and there's only one thing that we can do. It's actually happening on the pitch and so the answer happened on the pitch and I have nothing else to say."



Leandro Trossard of Belgium celebrates scoring a goal during the FIFA World Cup Group G match against New Zealand in Vancouver. (Reuters)