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# GULF TIMES SPORT



## MATCH REPORT

# Haaland fires Norway into last 16 clash against Brazil

Man City striker prodded in from close range on 86 minutes for his fifth goal of the tournament

AFP  
Arlington, United States

**E**rling Haaland scored a late winner as Norway set up a last-16 showdown with Brazil at the World Cup after taming the Ivory Coast 2-1 in Texas on Tuesday.

The Manchester City striker prodded in from close range, the ball dribbling in on 86 minutes for his fifth goal of the tournament. It was the first time that Norway had won a knockout game in the history of the competition.

After an even first half that was slow to get going, Antonio Nusa fired Norway into the lead six minutes before the break with one of the goals of the tournament. Manchester United's Amad Diallo was sent on for the Ivory Coast after an hour and was immediately in the thick of it, stopping a certain second Norway goal and then grabbing a terrific equaliser on 74 minutes.

With extra time looming, predator supreme Haaland got on the end of a cross by Patrick Berg to make some Norwegian history. They face five-time champions Brazil on Sunday in New Jersey with the quarter-finals at stake.

Goal-scorer Nusa, who was declared man of the match, said: "This is the biggest moment in my life." He expressed his happiness about scoring the goal and the team victory.

A match between two physical teams was tepid to begin with at the impressive air-conditioned home of the Dallas Cowboys. Ivory Coast had a sight of goal after 20 minutes, defender Ghislain Konan bursting into the Norway box from the left but finding the side netting.

The Ivory Coast players and fans were irate just before the drinks break when the livewire Yan Diomande was brought down on the break just inside his own half. Referee Jesus Valenzuela surprisingly did not even book defender David Moller Wolfe.

The 19-year-old winger Diomande, who appears set to join European champions Paris Saint-Germain from RB Leipzig, was growing into the game. The African side, one of the youngest at the tournament, were on top and particularly threatening down Diomande's left-hand side of the pitch.

Haaland had little to feed on but might have done better with a tame header that bounced into the hands of goalkeeper Yahia Fofana. Then came a moment of genuine class as Nusa, fed by captain Martin



Erling Haaland (right) scores past Ivory Coast's goalkeeper Yahia Fofana in the 86th minute during the FIFA World Cup last 36 match in Arlington, Texas. (Reuters)

Odegaard, cut inside and bent the ball wonderfully into the top corner.

Odegaard put his hands on his head in disbelief at the strike by the 21-year-old, Diomande's Leipzig team-mate. Stale Solbakken's Norway finished the first half on the hunt for a second and Haaland was denied by a last-gasp block by Ibrahim Sangare, who celebrated as if scoring a goal.

The Ivory Coast, into the knockout rounds for the first time, won their 10th corner to start the second half. Nicolas Pepe was denied by the legs of Norway stopper Orjan Nyland as the Ivory Coast piled on the pressure.

Norway, runners-up to France in the group stage, were inches away from a second when Diallo blocked the ball on the goal line following a corner. The Norway fans, sensing the next round was close, began their now-famous rowing in the stands.

Almost as soon as they stopped, Diallo danced into the box past two challenges for a spectacular leveller. Then up popped Haaland to break Ivorian hearts, with goalkeeper Nyland pulling off a flying stop from Diallo's well-struck free kick at the death to send Norway through.



Norway's captain Martin Odegaard plays the drum as his team-mates do the viking row celebration after their win over Ivory Coast. (AFP)

## SPOTLIGHT

# Germany questions footballing identity after fresh failure

AFP  
Berlin

**Y**et another World Cup failure has Germany questioning its footballing identity, with some calling for radical changes at all levels in the football-mad nation.

Germany's shock capitulation to Paraguay in the last 32 on Monday, their first ever World Cup penalty shootout defeat, continues the four-time champions sheer drop from the game's elite.

Germany have now been eliminated early in the past three World Cups. Since beating Argentina 1-0 to win the World Cup in 2014, Germany have not only been unable to win an elimination match at the tournament, but they have also failed to keep a clean sheet. Calls to sack coach Julian Nagelsmann have grown, particularly with former Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp seemingly waiting in the wings. Others, including Klopp himself, have demanded far more fundamental changes to the game in Germany.

Even with diminished expectations after a lean decade, the German press slammed Nagelsmann's side after they fell to 41st-ranked Paraguay, a team who lost 4-1 to



Germany's shock capitulation to Paraguay in the World Cup last 32 match on Monday, their first ever penalty shootout defeat in football's showpiece, continues the four-time champions sheer drop from the game's elite. (AFP)

hosts USA in their tournament opener.

Once boasting club-made talents the envy of Europe, Germany's ability to produce quality players has fallen behind European rivals France, Spain and England over the past decade.

Despite being Europe's most populous nation, where football is by far the dominant sport, Germany lack depth. While injuries to teenage forward Lennart Karl, veteran striker Serge Gnabry and first-choice centre-back Nico Schlotterbeck

have hurt the Germans, other major European nations can afford to leave star players at home.

Germany's shallow talent pool ups the pressure on their few remaining world-class players to perform. Kai Havertz, Florian Wirtz and Jamal Musiala all entered the tournament after challenging seasons and have been unable to reproduce their best form in North America, despite showing glimpses of their quality.

Nagelsmann has copped much of the ire. Having taken over as coach despite reportedly being courted by Europe's top clubs, Nagelsmann's appointment was considered a coup for the German FA (DFB).

But with the 38-year-old's high point a last-eight defeat to Spain on home soil at Euro 2024, calls are growing to avoid hanging onto a manager too long after a World Cup setback, as with predecessors Joachim Loew and Hansi Flick.

Lothar Matthaeus, a World Cup winner in 1990, wrote in his Bild column that Nagelsmann lacked "imagination", adding Germany "have to move forward with a new coach".

Nagelsmann admitted "big changes" were needed but pledged to stay on, saying: "I'm not one to run away. I'm ready to continue if the DFB wants me to."

The DFB reportedly cancelled a press conference planned for Tuesday, instead promising to release a statement later in the day. Engaged as a sideline pundit, Klopp has cast a dark shadow over Nagelsmann and the Germany dugout since the tournament began.

Before Germany's opening game, Klopp attracted criticism for joking the young coach was only in charge of the team "for now", implying Nagelsmann was only keeping the seat warm.

But on Monday, Klopp cut a far more serious figure, dismissing suggestions he should take the wheel, while calling for more fundamental changes to the game, starting at the under-10 level.

"Look at Paraguay," Klopp said over images of the South American nation's celebrations. "They're all in tears; that's how much the Round of 16 means to them."

Klopp said the Germans were too content to dine out on their golden past. "We are Germany? No, we were Germany. To be football Germany again, we need to really change things. It's of course not about names. Not about mine, not about Julian's," Klopp said, adding: "Julian is right. The team wanted it, but they were unable to do it in some areas. And now we need to ask why is that?"



## CRICKET

# Vaughan calls for England change after Stokes exit

'I'll be absolutely staggered if this leadership group is still together'

AFP  
Nottingham, United Kingdom

Michael Vaughan said there must be more change at the top of English cricket after captain Ben Stokes's international career ended with a thumping 160-run defeat by New Zealand in the third Test at Trent Bridge.

Monday's victory gave New Zealand a 2-1 series success and condemned England to a seventh defeat in nine Tests.

Stokes stunned fans and pundits alike by announcing his departure from the international game on Sunday's fourth day in Nottingham, the series was still up for grabs.

The 35-year-old all-rounder, normally a middle-order batsman, then opened the innings but holed out.

England lost three more wickets in a manic pursuit of a stiff target of 373, before Sunday's close to leave them well on their way to a first series defeat at home in three or more Tests since 2012.

England head coach Brendon McCullum and managing director Rob Key were backed by their bosses to lead a rebuild of the team following a 4-1 Ashes series loss in Australia concluded in January.

But former England captain Vaughan, who led England to Ashes glory in 2005, told the BBC: "There must be change after what we've seen here in terms of a cricketing sense now over a period of time."



Former England captains Michael Vaughan (second left) and Alastair Cook (centre) have a word with England's Ben Stokes (right) after play on the fourth day of the third Test between England and New Zealand at Trent Bridge in Nottingham on Monday. (AFP)

"I'll be absolutely staggered if this leadership group is still together (after the New Zealand series)."

Meanwhile, England fast bowler Jofra Archer said no longer having fellow 2019 World Cup winner Stokes as a team-mate would be difficult.

"It's going to take some getting used to," said Archer at the presentation ceremony. "Not just as a captain but as a friend."

"Someone who you can always go to at mid-off or mid-on, whenever he is you can always bounce ideas off him. He's going to be a big miss."

Earlier, former England skipper Andrew Strauss expressed surprise at the timing of Stokes's departure.

"Like many people I was dumbfounded yesterday (Sunday) when the whispers started coming out that Ben Stokes was about to announce his retirement," Strauss said on LinkedIn.

Strauss, hailed Stokes as one of England's "genuine greats" but added: "I'm not convinced that the whole thing was orchestrated the right way yesterday - it seems like a huge distraction to a team that was battling to avoid a series defeat and the cricket in the last

session very much had an 'end of term' feel to it.

"Everyone has the right to bow out on their own terms, and no one has earned that more than Ben, but announcing before or after the game seems like a more sensible approach. When you are in the middle of a match, the only thing that matters is the performance of the team."

"It is a small gripe in the greater scheme of things. English cricket will be far worse (and less interesting!) without Ben involved... There will be a huge vacuum in the England team that will be impossible to fill."

## REVIEW

# Latham hails New Zealand after 2-1 Test series victory

AFP  
Nottingham, United Kingdom

New Zealand captain Tom Latham hailed his side's "old-school" cricket after they became the first team to come from behind and win a three-match Test series in England after thrashing their hosts by 160 runs at Trent Bridge.

Having reduced England to 103-4 overnight, they finished the job an hour after lunch on Monday's fifth day, with only Jamie Smith (60) offering much resistance.

Victory sealed just New Zealand's fourth series win in England following successes in 1986, 1999 and, in a two-match series, 2021.

Their triumph was all the more admirable given Kane Williamson, arguably New Zealand's greatest batsmen, retired from international cricket following a heavy defeat in the first Test at Lord's.

Matt Henry and Glenn Phillips, two of the stars of their thumping 253-run win in the second Test at the Oval, with 11 wickets and a hundred respectively, were then ruled out of the Nottingham decider through injury.

New Zealand also rested towering fast bowler Kyle Jamieson at Trent Bridge because of concerns over his workload.

They suffered further disruption when Blair

Tickner pulled out during the series finale with concussion, while Will O'Rourke suffered a hamstring injury on Monday to leave the attack severely depleted. But seamer Zak Foulkes, the Black Caps' first concussion substitute in Test cricket, responded to his unexpected call-up with impressive match figures of 6-87.

New Zealand's nagging accuracy, well supported by wicket-keeper Tom Blundell standing up to the stumps, frustrated England, with Foulkes saying during the game New Zealand had "just tried to stay as boring as possible really and try to dry out the runs."

New Zealand's approach contrasted markedly with the aggressive 'Bazball' style of England, who were utterly unable to send Ben Stokes out with a win after their talismanic captain's shock announcement on Sunday he would be retiring from international cricket at the end of this match.

Latham whose first-innings 151, was one of three New Zealand hundreds in the match, was asked if teams had to be brave to be boring in modern cricket.

"Yeah I think so, I guess when you need to go a little bit old-school that's something that we pride ourselves on," he told reporters.

Superb fielding helped New Zealand overcome their bowling setbacks, with direct hits from Henry Nicholls and Mitch Santner run-

ning out both Joe Root and Josh Tongue on Monday. "Those two run outs today show the guys are engaged and giving everything they've got," said Daryl Mitchell, struck black and blue during the course of a defiant unbeaten hundred in New Zealand's second innings.

"We put a lot of work into that," added Mitchell, the player-of-the-match. "This series win is very special for our group."

England coach Brendon McCullum, himself a former New Zealand captain, was well aware of the qualities that led to his adopted side's seventh defeat in nine Tests.

"New Zealand are a side that do simple things really well for a long period of time," he said.

"They also seize really key moments and I look at even two direct hit run-outs today, it's a significant impact on the final day of a Test match."

McCullum defended England's blazing hitting on Sunday, which included promoting Stokes to open the innings, as the only way they could hope to chase down a target of 373 on a wearing pitch.

"Anywhere between 250 to 290 on the last day is achievable, anything over that and you're going to start to be a little bit in danger so we knew we had to take a risk because we far behind the game," he insisted. "And it was a risk worth taking."

## ONE-OFF TEST

# Muzarabani, Ngarava star as Zimbabwe trounce Bangladesh

AFP  
Harare, Zimbabwe

Blessing Muzarabani took four wickets and captain Richard Ngarava three for Zimbabwe as they bowled Bangladesh out for 185 yesterday to win a one-off Test in Harare.

The tourists had fared even in worse in their first innings, making a meagre 140.

An Innocent Kaia century steered Zimbabwe to 410 in reply.

Zimbabwe won the match by an innings and 85 runs to achieve a second victory in their last three Tests against the south Asians.

Player of the match Kaia said: "This victory is a reward for hard work, with a strong emphasis on fitness."

"It was a tough wicket to play on. Credit to the Bangladesh bowlers as I think they did well. But it was my game."

Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said: "In the first innings, we did not bat properly. That cost us the match. Our bowling was also not good enough."

"We came to Zimbabwe having played some good cricket in a recent series win over Pakistan. But we did not adapt to different conditions here."

Bangladesh, 40-1 overnight and 230 runs behind, were no match for the Zimbabwe bowlers on the third day with only Mushfiqur Rahim (34) and Shanto (30) offering sustained resistance.

Opener Mahmudul Hasan Joy (22) was the first Bangladeshi to fall yesterday, caught at gully by Brian Bennett off a Muzarabani delivery.

The dismissal of Mominul Haque soon after left the visitors on 48-3 before Rahim and Shanto added 61 runs in the only fruitful Bangladesh partnership.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Bangladesh 140 in 47.2 overs and 185 in 45 overs** (Mushfiqur Rahim 34, Najmul Hossain Shanto 30; B. Muzarabani 4-65, R. Ngarava 3-32) **v Zimbabwe 410 in 107.2 overs**  
**Result:** Zimbabwe won by innings and 85 runs  
**Toss:** Zimbabwe

## SPOTLIGHT

# Australia knock WI out to reach Women's T20 World Cup final

Reuters  
London

Australia moved a step closer to a record-extending seventh Women's T20 World Cup title after beating West Indies by eight wickets in the first semi-final at The Oval yesterday.

Chasing 126 for victory, Australia made a flying start as Beth Mooney and Georgia Voll put on 29 runs from just 18 balls before Voll fell in the second over. Phoebe Litchfield departed soon after, leaving Australia briefly under pressure at 43-2.

However, Mooney anchored the chase with an unbeaten 61, combining with Ashleigh Gardner in an unbroken partnership, taking them over the line with ease.

Gardner contributed an unbeaten 35 after also claiming two wickets with the ball and was named player of the match.

"I feel like I haven't really had an impact with the ball throughout the tournament. So I guess to save my best till now is always pleasing," Gardner said at the post-match presentation ceremony.

"I felt like I've just probably been pretty inconsistent, where

today I was kind of working, just making sure that I was hitting the stumps as often as possible."

Earlier, West Indies made a solid start after being sent in to bat, with captain Hayley Matthews scoring 30 from 28 balls and sharing a 47-run opening stand with Qiana Joseph.

But Matthews' dismissal sparked a collapse as West Indies slipped from a promising position to 83-6.

Deandra Dottin and Jannillea Glasgow provided late resistance, but could only help their side to post 125-7 from their 20 overs, with the total proving well below par against the tournament favourites.

The victory maintained Australia's perfect record at the tournament, with the defending champions having won all five of their group-stage matches to finish top of Group A.

Australia will face the winners of Thursday's second semi-final between hosts England and South Africa in Sunday's final at Lord's.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Australia 127 for 2** (Mooney 61\*, Gardner 35\*) **beat West Indies 125 for 7** (Matthews 30, Dottin 26\*, Gardner 2-13, Wareham 2-17) **by eight wickets**



Australia's Ashleigh Gardner and Beth Mooney celebrate after the ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2026 semi-final against the West Indies at the Oval in London yesterday. (Reuters)

## COMMENT

# Russell has mental strength to win Formula One battle, says former boss

Reuters  
Vienna

Maturity and mental strength can give George Russell an edge in the psychological Formula One title battle with teenage Mercedes teammate Kimi Antonelli, according to the Briton's former boss Claire Williams. Russell, 28, is second overall but a hefty 40 points adrift of 19-year-old Italian phenomenon Antonelli, who has taken the sport by storm in only his second season with five wins from the first six rounds.

This weekend the two will line up again at Silverstone, a home race for Russell, in round nine of the championship.

"My experience of George ... I think he is perfectly capable of winning that psychologi-

cal battle when it comes to trying to win a world championship," Williams, who was Russell's first F1 boss when he drove for the team from 2019-21, told reporters.

"He's quite self-aware and he will be sitting there each and every day (thinking) - 'What do I need to do in order to surpass my team-mate? How can I win that battle?'"

Williams, who left Formula One after the sale of her family-owned team in 2020 but still works as an occasional pundit and guest speaker, compared the current Mercedes duel to the one between Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg at the same stable 10 years ago, when Rosberg took the title by just five points.

"It is the psychological battle that wins the war at the end of the day. And I think George, because he has got a layer of maturity over Kimi at this stage, just by sheer numbers, that's where

he will win the fight," she said. Russell has won twice this season, most recently in Austria last weekend, and goes to Silverstone seeking to chip away further at Antonelli's advantage.

The Briton started the season as the London bookmakers' title favourite but Antonelli soon ripped up those odds with his amazing run of five wins in a row.

Williams recalled how her compatriot had always shown a maturity beyond his years, noting that the driver himself used to tell a story about how rivals would call him "Grandpa" in his karting days.

"I believe he has got it. He has got the talent. It is just making sure that the Mercedes has the reliability he needs to get it over the line," said Williams.

"George just needs to take a step back, and focus and roll his sleeves up."



Winner Mercedes' British driver George Russell celebrates on the podium with the trophy after the Austrian Grand Prix. (AFP)

FOOTBALL

# Ancelotti shows Brazil his worth but concerns remain

AFP  
Houston

Carlo Ancelotti kept his trademark cool to guide Brazil into the World Cup last 16 but defender Gabriel admits there is room for improvement as they attempt to defy the sceptics.

Brazil were a half away from going out of the tournament before fighting back for a dramatic 2-1 win over Japan in Houston. Down 1-0 at half-time after a wonderful solo goal by Kaishu Sano, Casemiro silenced his doubters to level for Brazil and their legion of fans with a 56th-minute header.

Ancelotti sent on Gabriel Martinelli on 66 minutes, and with extra time looming, the Arsenal winger struck in the fifth minute of added time to leave Japan's players in tears.

A side attempting to win Brazil's sixth World Cup – and first since 2002 – face Norway or the Ivory Coast next. Arsenal centre-back Gabriel, whose cross was converted by Casemiro, said: "We faced a great team, we ended up conceding a goal but we knew we had the possibility of coming back into the game. So it was about show-

ing a bit of composure in the final third."

That was the message to the players from the famously laid-back Ancelotti at half-time – remain calm, keep plugging away, the goals would come.

After an even first half against a Japan team considered dark horses by some, Brazil dominated in the second period. "At half-time I told them not to lose patience because we were going to score sooner or later," said Ancelotti.

Brazilian media outlet O Globo praised the Italian, Brazil's first foreign coach since 1965, for his tactical flexibility. "Ancelotti has stated several times that he doesn't want the national team to have just one identity, but rather, several," said O Globo, adding that the "chameleon" style could be Brazil's "trump card". "Brazil's greatest weapon was Ancelotti's reading of the game," it said.

This Brazil side has been panned at home as being only a shadow of the great sides of yesteryear after labouring through qualifying. They boast the Real Madrid attacker Vinicius Junior, who scored four times in the group stage, but are otherwise not laden with world-class talent.

They were unimpressive in



Brazil coach Carlo Ancelotti during a training session in Morristown, New Jersey, yesterday. (Reuters)

drawing 1-1 with a strong Morocco team to start the group phase, before 3-0 wins over limited Haiti and Scotland teams. And while Japan are a technically talented side with big ambitions, they came into the last-32 encounter having

drawn two and won one – a 4-0 thrashing of Tunisia – in the group phase.

After conceding, the defender Danilo having given the ball away, Brazil's thousands of fans grew restless in Houston. The 34-year-

old midfielder Casemiro has been a particular focus of their discontent.

But with Ancelotti – at his first World Cup as a coach but a serial winner at club level – holding the reins Brazil turned it around

for an ultimately deserved win. They would be favourites to beat Norway or the Ivory Coast, and suddenly the quarter-finals are in view.

Gabriel, one of the outstanding defenders in the Premier League in recent years, struck a note of caution.

"Let's rest now and think, we know this competition isn't easy and they are two great teams," he said of their next opponents. "We need to improve for sure."

Brazilian media flagged other concerns.

There was the sight of attacking midfielder Lucas Paqueta going off in distress and replaced at half-time. Barcelona winger Raphinha has been injured since coming off against Haiti.

And for some pundits Casemiro, despite his goal, and the 34-year-old fullback Danilo are liabilities. Ancelotti will hear nothing against defensive midfielder Casemiro, having brought him back into the fold after becoming coach in May last year.

"Casemiro is a leader," the 67-year-old said. "He knows his position very well, how to play his position. "No one is teaching him how he has to play in his role. That's very important."

TENNIS

# Swiatek survives scare to reach second round

Serena beaten at Wimbledon in first singles match in four years

Agencies  
Houston

Iga Swiatek survived a scare to start her Wimbledon title defence with a 6-1, 2-6, 6-3 win over American world number 79 Taylor Townsend yesterday.

Serena Williams' bid for a fairytale return to Wimbledon was shattered by Australia's Maya Joint as the American legend's first singles match in four years ended in a 6-3, 6-7 (6/8) 6-3 defeat yesterday.

Earlier, Swiatek suffered a second-set wobble that left her in danger of becoming only the third reigning female Wimbledon champion to lose in the first round in the Open era. But world number three Swiatek, a six-time Grand Slam champion, steadied her nerves in the deciding set, surviving a 21-minute first game before securing the breaks of serve that edged her into the second round.

The visibly emotional Swiatek buried her head in a towel after converting match point. The 25-year-old Pole hasn't reached the semi-finals of a Grand Slam in her last three attempts since winning Wimbledon. Townsend's power-hitting pushed Swiatek to the brink of another disappointment at the majors.

But the 30-year-old has never been past the Wimbledon second round and Swiatek did just enough to set up a last-64 clash against 2021 Wimbledon runner-up Karolina Pliskova.

"It was a tough couple of weeks. A season when not everything went how I wanted. I don't think I won any three-set matches this year, so I'm happy I could do it," Swiatek said.

"Obviously it means a lot to be the defending champion here. In the end I kept my composure. I knew I needed to be solid."

Eighth seed Elina Svitolina was sent spinning out in the opening round after a 7-5 6-2 defeat by fellow Ukrainian Daria Snigur, as her wait for a maiden Grand Slam title was extended. The 31-year-old, twice a semi-finalist at the All England Club, failed to capitalise on her early momentum after taking a 4-0 lead and Snigur made her pay by battling back to take the opening set with little fuss. World number 77 Snigur's flat hitting helped her break in the fifth game of the second set as the pressure began to mount on Svitolina, whose challenge appeared to fade even faster as the sun began to set over the western stands. Snigur reeled off the



Poland's Iga Swiatek returns the ball against US player Taylor Townsend during their first round match on the second day of the 2026 Wimbledon Championships at The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon, southwest London, yesterday. (AFP)



USA's Serena Williams reacts as she plays against Australia's Maya Joint during their first round match in Wimbledon yesterday. (AFP)

games to claim her first top-10 win since 2023 in only 68 minutes and set up a meeting with French qualifier Leolia Jeanjean in the next round. The 24-year-old jumped and punched the air after what she described as a special victory.

World number two Elena Rybakina had to dig deep to reach the second round with a 6-4, 1-6, 6-3 win against France's Lois Boisson. Rybakina, who won Wimbledon in 2022, is looking to clinch her second Grand Slam crown this year after her triumph at the Australian Open in January. The 27-year-old is also in contention to take top spot in the WTA rankings from Aryna Sabalenka depending on their results at the All England Club over the next fortnight.

Rybakina will face Caty McNally or Elena-Gabriela Ruse in the second round.

Sixth seed Amanda Anisimova, the 2025 finalist, beat North

Macedonia's Lina Gjorcheska 6-3 6-2. Robin Montgomery lost in three sets to Italy's 2024 Wimbledon finalist and 13th seed Jasmine Paolini while Caty McNally went out 5-7 3-6 to Romanian Elena-Gabriela Ruse and Sofia Kenin lost in straight sets to Croatian Petra Marcinko.

Madison Keys, the 26th seed in the women's draw, came back from an opening set down to beat Kayla Day 6-7(5) 6-4 6-3 in an all-American clash.

French Open champion Alexander Zverev has an allergy to grass and admits to struggling on Wimbledon's "beautiful" Centre Court but showed enough in a first-round win over hard-hitting Belgian Alexander Blockx on Tuesday to suggest he could embark on his best run yet in southwest London. The 29-year-old German second seed, who finally joined the Grand Slam winners' club at the 41st attempt with his title run at Roland Garros, sur-

vived a barrage of Blockx thunderbolts on Centre Court to seal a 6-4 6-7(8) 7-6(5) 7-6(0) win.

Zverev lost in the first round at Wimbledon last year to big-serving Frenchman Arthur Rinderknech and a clash with the fast-rising Blockx looked fraught with danger. But he was clinical when it mattered most against the 21-year-old and managed to avoid a repeat.

"That was tough," Zverev said on court. "When I saw the draw I thought here we go again, someone who serves 140 mph and can take the racket out of your hands."

Blockx went toe-to-toe with Zverev in a match full of high-octane baseline rallies but occasionally showed his inexperience on his Wimbledon debut, especially with a ragged service game at 4-4 in the opening set that proved costly.

Zverev needed his vastly improved defensive skills to stay in many of the rallies as Blockx let rip but he squandered a set point in the second-set tiebreak before a double fault handed his opponent the set. Blockx had his chances in the next two sets but Zverev eventually drew his sting to progress and set up a second round against Valentin Royer of France. "I just struggle on this beautiful court for some reason," Zverev said.

"It's the biggest honour in tennis to play on this court. I still at times struggle, it's no secret. But I'm getting better. If I can get through the first two or three matches, hopefully I can have the best run of my career."+

FOCUS

# Japan search for answers after World Cup exit

AFP  
Houston

Japan will never win the World Cup unless football becomes the country's number one sport, midfielder Daichi Kamada warned after their heartbreaking 2-1 defeat to Brazil on Monday.

Asia's best side arrived in North America with ambitions of winning the tournament, and they were touted as outside favourites to go far. But they were knocked out in the last 32 and have now failed to win a World Cup knockout game in five attempts. Football has to compete with baseball and a host of other sports in Japan and Kamada thinks that has to change if they want to progress.

"To become a country with serious ambitions of lifting the trophy, you need to have more quality and there are areas where we're still lacking," the Crystal Palace player said. "We have to keep hyping up Japanese football and making it better, and I feel that if it doesn't get to a level where it's Japan's national sport, we won't be able to win it."

Japan took the lead in the first half against Brazil but conceded an equaliser 11 minutes after the break. As extra time seemed likely, Gabriel Martinelli struck in the 95th minute to send Brazil through and leave Japan wondering what they have to do to join world football's elite powers.

"It's a shame we lost but if you look at the process leading up to the game and the three and a half years leading up to this World Cup,

I don't think there was anything negative or lacking or wrong," said defender Shogo Taniguchi. "That's how positive and confident I was coming into this."

Japan breezed through the World Cup's Asian qualifiers and were the first team to book their place at the tournament. They tuned up by claiming first wins over Brazil and England in friendlies but were then struck by injuries, losing key players Kaoru Mitoma, Takumi Minamino and Wataru Endo ahead of the tournament. Japan still impressed in North America, drawing with the Netherlands and Sweden and beating Tunisia to finish Group F as runners-up.

Goalkeeper Zion Suzuki said there was room to improve.

"There are still areas where we're a little naive, and I strongly feel that we need to grow," said the 23-year-old, who enhanced his reputation with a series of outstanding displays. "I don't think it was wrong to approach games against the big teams with the mindset of underdogs and I think if we keep on this path, a great view awaits us at the end."

Japan's next assignment is the Asian Cup, which kicks off in Saudi Arabia in January. They have won the tournament a record four times but their last title was in 2011. "The next tournament for us is the Asian Cup, and we will focus on winning that," said Moriyasu, whose future with the team remains unclear after eight years in the job. "Even if we win the Asian Cup, I don't think it will wash away the pain of losing at the World Cup."

## LEBRON TO LEAVE LAKERS TO PLAY UNPRECEDENTED 24TH NBA SEASON

LeBron James, the NBA's all-time leading scorer, will return for an unprecedented 24th season but not with the Los Angeles Lakers. Lakers owner Jeanie Buss thanked James in a statement for his eight years with the club, confirming multiple media reports that the 41-year-old superstar had told the team he was leaving. "LeBron James is one of the greatest athletes in history," Buss wrote in a statement posted on the Lakers' X account.

"We will always be thankful for his eight years with the Lakers - including the title he led us to in 2020 under the toughest imaginable circumstances and the countless records he broke in purple and gold."

James's agent and close friend Rich Paul had told ESPN that James opted to inform the Lakers of he planned to sign with another club before the Tuesday night start of the free agency negotiating period. "King James" became a free agent after the Lakers' second-round playoff exit but had not yet confirmed that he would indeed continue one of the most extraordinary careers in league history, with four championships and an unmatched collection of individual records. As the start of the free agency negotiating period approached James had been linked with a possible return to Cleveland or Miami - both clubs he led to titles - or with a move to join his close friend Stephen Curry on the Golden State Warriors. James's unprecedented 23rd NBA campaign got off to a rocky start last year as he missed the first month of the season because of sciatica. Once fit he again proved remarkably effective, shooting 51.5% from the field as he averaged 20.9 points, 6.1 rebounds and 7.2 assists in the regular season. In the playoffs he averaged 23.2 points, 6.7 rebounds and 7.3 assists and led the Lakers to a first-round series victory over the Houston Rockets despite the absence of star teammate Luka Doncic, who was sidelined with a hamstring strain. James had helped push the Lakers to the fourth seed in the Western Conference, despite late-season injuries to Doncic and key contributor Austin Reaves. After beating the Rockets the Lakers fell to the defending champion Oklahoma City Thunder in the second round of the playoffs. James said in the wake of that exit that he was proud of a season in which he was "put into positions I never played in my career."





## FOCUS

# Paraguay coach salutes 'extraordinary' win over Germany

AFP  
Foxborough, United States

Paraguay coach Gustavo Alfaro praised his players for producing an "extraordinary" performance after beating Germany on penalties to secure a place in the World Cup last 16 on Monday.

Julio Enciso gave Paraguay a first-half lead in Foxborough, but Kai Havertz equalised and it appeared four-time world champions Germany would eventually scrape through in extra time.

However, Jonathan Tah had a goal chalked off and Paraguay won 4-3 in a dramatic shootout as goalkeeper Orlando Gill made two crucial saves, after a 1-1 draw.

"I experienced it with great intensity, like everyone," said Alfaro. "It was a match full of tension from start to finish because we knew we were facing one of the main title contenders, a rival of enormous quality who, beforehand, were favourites."

Alfaro said his team executed the game plan effectively, limiting Germany's ability

to impose their style. "The players understood perfectly what the match required and put in a huge effort to prevent Germany from finding spaces and playing their game," he said.

He acknowledged the physical toll of the contest, pointing to the demanding conditions on a hot day in Massachusetts.

"It's true we lacked certain things, but the demands of the match were very high. The temperature was high and the constant effort to recover and close down spaces often left us with less energy to attack," Alfaro added.

Germany had never before lost a World Cup shootout, but Paraguay held their nerve – even after Antonio Sanabria and Fabian Balbuena missed kicks that would have secured victory. Even that, Alfaro felt, was part of Paraguay's identity. "It seems if we don't suffer, it doesn't count. The shootout was dramatic, going to the sixth penalty," he said, before dedicating the win to supporters. "This qualification is for all Paraguayans who believed in us."

Paraguay won a World Cup knockout match for only the second time. Their re-

ward is a potential date with tournament favourites France, if Didier Deschamps' side can get past Sweden on Tuesday.

Enciso, who plays for Ligue 1 side Strasbourg, acknowledged the challenge ahead but said he was confident Paraguay can keep their unexpected run going.

"They're a very good team, with players of the very highest level. No need to name them, they're stars. They win everything and we're going to prepare to face them as such," said Enciso, who came off with an injury in the second half.

"We also have our own strengths, and with our style of play, we're going to try to make things difficult for any opponent."

A win in the next round would allow Paraguay to match their best World Cup result. They reached the quarter-finals in 2010 before losing to a late goal against eventual champions Spain.

Enciso attributed Paraguay's victory over Germany to the team's fearless mentality. "We respected them a lot because we knew their players. They have some very good players. But we're not afraid of anyone," he said.



Paraguay's players celebrate after winning the penalty shootout against Germany in the World Cup round of 32 match at the Boston Stadium in Foxborough. (AFP)

## SPOTLIGHT

# Morocco 'unstoppable', says coach after thrilling win over Netherlands

Moroccans advanced to the last 16 after beating the Netherlands on penalties

AFP  
Monterrey, Mexico

Morocco coach Mohamed Ouahbi believes his team is primed to make a deep run at the World Cup, declaring that the Atlas Lions could be "unstoppable" if they play to their potential.

The Moroccans, beaten semi-finalists at the 2022 World Cup, advanced to the last 16 on Monday after winning a thrilling battle with the Netherlands on penalties in Monterrey. It was another stylish display by the African champions, who dominated for long periods in a match that finished 1-1 after extra-time. Ouahbi said Moroccan football is now reaping the benefits of the 2022 team's groundbreaking exploits in becoming the first African team to reach the World Cup semi-finals.

"The World Cup in Qatar changed the mentality of the Morocco team, and I'm well placed to speak about this," said Ouahbi, who last year coached Morocco to a momentous victory at the Under-20 World Cup in Chile. "Moroccan players in Morocco believe in themselves, the supporters, the fans believe in us as well. It's so important. They're demanding, but it's because they know just how far we can go," he said.

Morocco face co-hosts Canada in the last 16, with a potential quarter-final meeting with France looming on the horizon. Ouahbi said there would be no question of complacency against Canada.

"We know that it's game after game, and people think that it's kept to be easy for us, it's going to be a walk in the park for Morocco, which is not the case. Canada is a team that is going to be difficult for us."

But Ouahbi said Morocco could go even further than the 2022 team if they fired on all cylinders. "What we need to be telling ourselves is no one can stop us," he said. "We're unstoppable if we play the football that we know how to play. But nobody is unbeatable. And I tell my guys that as well. If we get things wrong, we'll go home, and we need to ensure that we have all the tools that we're using, the tools in our arsenal to



Morocco's head coach Mohamed Ouahbi (left) celebrates with his players Bilal El Khannouss, Chemsidine Talbi and Anass Salah-Eddine after winning the round of 32 clash against the Netherlands in Guadalupe, Mexico. (AFP)

go as far as we can, and that's the mentality that we want all of our players in Morocco to have."

Netherlands coach Ronald Koeman meanwhile said Morocco's emergence reflected the quality of African football. "It's very clear watching this World Cup that African teams have greatly improved in tactical sense, and also in the way they play their matches," Koeman said.

"Morocco is the country that, in terms of talents, really generates good players, young players that continue to join the major clubs in Europe. It's not without a reason why they have a higher ranking than the Netherlands."

## MOROCCO WIN SPARKS JOY, ARRESTS IN NETHERLANDS

Morocco's dramatic penalty shoot-out win over the Netherlands sparked scenes of joy Tuesday in The Hague, home to a large Moroccan community, but also violent arrests amid clashes with police.

In the Schilderswijk district of the city, fans draped in Moroccan flags dancing and cheering in the streets, as car horns blared and firecrackers exploded. Several hundred supporters gathered at a crossroads in the district, kicking a ball in the air and celebrating wildly with passengers of passing vehicles, sometimes jumping on cars.

Around one hour into the festivities

however, the mood soured as riot police arrived on the scene, deploying water cannon and conducting baton charges to clear the crowd. Around dozens were arrested, with police pinning several young men to the ground after striking them in the legs with batons. Handcuffed, they were driven away in police vans.

Dutch police on bicycles played a cat-and-mouse game with youths through the streets but there was no major damage caused. Despite multiple attempts, people declined to speak to the media, preferring to keep their identities secret.

Many on the streets wore balaclavas or other face coverings.

## Portugal's Silva bides his time after being benched



Palm Beach Gardens, United States: Bernardo Silva said it was not his job to question the coach's decisions after being benched for the past two games as Portugal prepare for tomorrow's World Cup showdown against Croatia.

The midfielder, who recently joined Real Madrid from Manchester City, was dropped from the starting line-up after a disappointing 1-1 draw against DR Congo in Portugal's opener.

He came on as a late replacement in the 5-0 hammering of Uzbekistan but was kept on the bench for the 0-0 draw against Colombia. Silva, 31, told reporters he was eager to be involved in the last-32 match in Toronto.

"Of course I want to be a part of it, of course I want to contribute, of course I think I can help," he said. "But I'm ready, I'm ready to help the team in whatever way I can, whether as a starter, playing five minutes, or in the locker room."

Silva, one of a clutch of top-class Portugal midfielders including Bruno Fernandes, Ruben Neves and Vitorinha, said it was up to head coach Roberto Martinez to make the tough calls.

"It's up to us to do our best, support the players on the field, train well, create a good atmosphere and, above all, be ready for when that opportunity comes again," he said.

Silva outlined what he felt Portugal needed to do against Croatia to progress to the last 16. "Try to be a team that creates danger, that is aggressive, that is direct, while at the same time not losing control of the game, which we lost a little against Colombia," he said.

Silva added that no side would play "eight perfect games" but said Portugal had the tools to win matches even when under par. Martinez's team will face a Croatia side still led by Luka Modric, who remains the side's creative force at the age of 40.

Silva paid a glowing tribute to Modric, hailing the veteran playmaker as his footballing idol and "a huge inspiration". Modric, 40, continues to be the heartbeat of the Croatia side that finished runners-up in 2018 and third in 2022.

"Luka is actually an idol for me, not only because of the way he has played and remained at the highest level, but also because of the way he has conducted himself throughout his career," Silva told reporters.

"He's a huge inspiration to me and I imagine to almost every footballer. I'm really happy to see that, even at his age, he's still performing at such a high level. I've been fortunate enough to play against him many times. I actually asked for his shirt after one of the Manchester City-Real Madrid matches and I'm really glad I did. It's one of the most special shirts I have at home. I wish him all the best – just not in two days as we want to beat him!"

## REVIEW

# Koeman defends Netherlands' defensive approach



Netherlands coach Ronald Koeman is expected to announce his resignation in the coming days after the Dutch were eliminated from the World Cup by Morocco on Monday. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Monterrey, Mexico

Netherlands coach Ronald Koeman said they went with a more defensive approach against Morocco to give them a better chance of winning rather than out of any fear of their opponents, after his side were eliminated from the World Cup on Monday.

Koeman made no apologies for fielding five defenders, even if he expects a torrent of criticism in the wake of their 3-2 shootout defeat following a 1-1 draw after extra time.

Koeman, who has previously had to deal with disapproval after diverting from the traditional 'Dutch school' of attacking football, felt playing with five at the back was the right strategy to

overcome the North Africans.

"With this defensive approach, we gave away much less than we did during the (group) matches," said the coach, who added he would decide on his future with the side after reflecting on the team's elimination.

"That was positive, but also we were less offensive. You can think of the tactics whatever you like, but we gave away much less against a team much stronger than Sweden and Tunisia.

"And if I had to do it again, I would do it the same way again. I also know that if Morocco hadn't equalised with that late goal, there would be all sorts of compliments for me as the Dutch coach, but now, probably, I'm going to be scolded for the fact that I chose five defenders, but once again, I believe it was necessary."

Koeman said he had discussed the approach with his players,

and they had agreed. "You will criticise me, and that's your right, but you watch football from the sidelines," he told reporters.

"I'm with the team. I knew what needed to be improved. This is how I improved it. And once again, if I had to do it again, I would have done exactly the same. It was not about being afraid."

"That's not what it was about at all. Why afraid? I mean, we had three strikers on the field," he added in a testy exchange.

"This is about a better defensive position, not out of fear, but based on an analysis of the opposition, and we can keep discussing this until tomorrow evening. You have your opinion, with all due respect, that's fine. But I have a different view," Koeman added.

Morocco advanced to a last-16 meeting with Canada in Houston on Saturday.