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**MATCH REPORT**

# Messi scripts Argentina's epic comeback win against Egypt

ROMERO, MESSI AND FERNANDEZ GRAB LATE GOALS TO SECURE DRAMATIC 3-2 WIN

Reuters  
Kansas City

**L**ionel Messi inspired Argentina to a remarkable World Cup fightback as they came from two goals down to beat Egypt 3-2 in a dramatic last-16 game yesterday before sobbing tears of relief at the final whistle.

The holders were trailing 2-0 and 11 minutes from a shock defeat, but goals by Cristian Romero, Messi and two minutes into stoppage time from Enzo Fernandez kept them in the competition.

Egypt had been on the brink of one of the great World Cup upsets after Yasser Ibrahim and Mostafa Zico scored excellent goals, one in each half, and Messi had squandered an early penalty.

The North Africans fell apart in the closing stages, however, as the 39-year-old Messi, whose record World Cup goal haul is now up to 21, orchestrated Argentina's dramatic revival.

The captain provided the cross from which Romero headed home to start the comeback in the 79th minute and four minutes later Messi crashed home the equaliser after substitutes Lautaro Martinez and Gonzalo Montiel had both got vital touches to keep the ball away from Egyptian defenders.

**COUNTER-ATTACK WINNER**

The winner came from a counter-attack as Lautaro Martinez crossed from the right and Fernandez cushioned a back-post header past goalkeeper Mostafa Shoubir.

"I'd been longing for this goal for three years. We have a phenomenal group, one that never gives up," Fernandez said.

"We had to take advantage of the spaces they gave us, and we did. We came here to enjoy another World Cup and to represent our country. And that's what we're doing."

Egypt felt they deserved a penalty before the breakaway and vociferously complained but to no avail.

They had been surprisingly attacking in the early stages, bucking their recent tendency of sitting back and looking for counter-attack opportunities, and they opened the scoring after 15 minutes.

Emam Ashour attempted



**ALL-TIME WORLD CUP LEADING SCORERS**

- 21 - Lionel Messi (ARG)
- 19 - Kylian Mbappe (FRA)
- 16 - Miroslav Klose (GER)
- 15 - Ronaldo (BRA)
- 14 - Gerd Mueller (GER), Harry Kane (ENG)
- 13 - Just Fontaine (FRA)
- 12 - Pele (BRA)
- 11 - Jurgen Klinsmann (GER), Sandor Kocsis (HUN), Cristiano Ronaldo (POR)
- 10 - Gabriel Batistuta (ARG), Helmut Rahn (GER), Gary Lineker (ENG), Teofilo Cubillas (PER), Thomas Mueller (GER), Grzegorz Lato (POL)

Argentina's Enzo Fernandez scores their third goal against Egypt during their FIFA World Cup Round of 16 match in Atlanta, Georgia, yesterday. (Reuters)

to tease his way past the Argentine defence on the right flank but, seeing no way through, passed back to Marwan Attia, who floated in a long cross that Ibrahim rose to head home.

The lead should have only lasted four minutes as Haissem Hassan caught overlapping Argentine fullback Nicolas Tagliafico with a late tackle to give away a penalty. But it only served to mark the start of the goalkeeping heroics of Shoubir, whose dive to the left easily stopped a weak left-footed effort from Messi that was

Messi became the first player to miss two penalties at a World Cup after also failing from the spot against Austria in the group phase.

**MIRACULOUS SAVES FROM EGYPT GOALKEEPER**

Shoubir made a reflex stop to deny a point-blank header from Alexis Mac Allister in the 28th minute, and pulled off an even more extraordinary save six minutes from halftime to stop Julian Alvarez's shot, stretching to turn the ball around the post.

In between, Messi crashed a free kick against the post. Egypt had the ball in the net in the

62nd minute but Zico's finish, after a sweeping move inspired by Hassan's trickery and Mohamed Salah's pass, was chalked off after a VAR review found that Attia had fouled Lisandro Martinez in the build-up.

Five minutes later, however, Egypt doubled their lead in similar circumstances. Salah swept the ball forward on the counter, Hassan took it to the byline, and Zico came storming in to finish the cutback pass.

"The win was within our reach. We were only missing a few small details," Shoubir said. "As everyone saw, we were close - very close - to winning but it just wasn't meant to be."



Mostafa Zico of Egypt celebrates scoring his team's second goal against Argentina in Atlanta yesterday. (AFP)



Lionel Messi of Argentina celebrates with teammates after their victory over Egypt in Atlanta yesterday. (AFP)



Players of Argentina applaud fans after the team's victory against Egypt at Atlanta Stadium yesterday, in Atlanta, (AFP)



## CYCLING

# Denmark's Pedersen wins Tour stage 4

Reuters  
Foix, France

Denmark's Mads Pedersen powered to victory from a big breakaway on stage four of the Tour de France yesterday, leading a Lidl-Trek one-two finish while Norway's Torstein Træen from Uno-X Mobility claimed the yellow jersey.

Pedersen was the fastest from a lead group at the end of the grueling 181.9-km hilly stage from Carcassonne to Foix, crossing the line ahead of teammate Quinn Simmons, while Spain's Raul Garcia Pierna of Movistar finished third.

It was Pedersen's third victory in the Tour de France and his 12th in a Grand Tour.

The stage was shaped by an early breakaway of 34 riders who built up a sizeable advantage over the peloton on a route featuring four classified climbs.

As the gap held deep into the stage, it became increasingly clear that the day's winner would emerge from the escape group rather than the general classification contenders.

A reduced front group formed over the latter climbs, with Jan Tratnik, Mathias Vacek and Alex Kirsch initially driving the pace before Pedersen, Simmons, Sean Quinn and Træen bridged across on the Category Two Col de Montsegur, the day's final climb.

Lidl-Trek's numerical advantage proved decisive in the closing kilometres. Vacek set a fierce

tempo under the flamme rouge and although Kevin Vauquelin swept through the final corner in front after a late attack, Pedersen unleashed a powerful sprint to secure victory.

The win also moved Pedersen into the lead of the points classification, taking the green jersey from defending champion Tadej Pogacar.

**TRÆEN TAKES YELLOW JERSEY**  
Træen was another major beneficiary of the day's breakaway, taking the overall race lead from Pogacar.

The Norwegian, who was diagnosed with testicular cancer three years ago before making a full recovery, became only the third Norwegian rider to wear the Tour's

yellow jersey after Thor Hushovd and Alexander Kristoff. "There isn't that much to say right now. Right now I'm a bit tired," Træen told TV2 after the stage.

Asked about the significance of the achievement, he added: "It is, of course, a bit of a boyhood dream coming true. A good day at work, as one would say."

Pogacar, who claimed the 22nd Tour stage victory of his career on Monday, relinquished the race lead as the peloton rolled in well behind the breakaway.

The Slovenian remains level on time with chief rival Jonas Vingegaard, while Remco Evenepoel is third overall. Isaac del Toro, Juan Ayuso, Paul Seixas and Florian Lipowitz are all within 53 seconds of the lead.



Lidl-Trek team's Danish rider Mads Pedersen celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the 4th stage of the 113th edition of the Tour de France yesterday. (AFP)

## CRICKET

# Tongue, Archer power England to win over India

THE VISITORS COLLAPSE TO 76 ALL OUT CHASING 201



England's Josh Tongue celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of India's Harshit Rana caught out by Tom Banton during the third T20 International at Trent Bridge in Nottingham yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters  
London

England blew away India at Trent Bridge yesterday to inflict a record T20 defeat on the world champions and take a 2-0 lead in the series with two matches to play.

Josh Tongue took 4-28 and Jofra Archer 3-29 as England's pace attack powered them to a commanding 125-run victory.

India, who came into the series off the back of a 2-0 series defeat to Ireland, were bowled out for just 76 in the third T20.

The trouble started when Abhishek Sharma was caught for 10 at deep point by Phil Salt off Tongue.

Then 15-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, who hit two sixes

in a five-ball 13, gloved Archer to Jos Buttler who took four catches and a stumping.

India needed Ishan Kishan and Shreyas Iyer to steady the ship but they departed in successive balls to catches from Jacob Bethell.

Archer had the promoted Axar Patel caught behind with the final ball of the fifth over and India were reduced to the rubble of 52-5. There was no way back.

England had built their total of 201-7 around an innings of 70 from Phil Salt. He played out a maiden from Arshdeep Singh in the first over of the innings before accelerating with three sixes in his 44-ball stay.

Prince Yadav impressed in just his third T20 international with 2-30 including the wicket of Buttler for 36 with a beautiful in-swinging yorker with his first ball.

Harshit Rana removed Bethell and Tom Banton with successive deliveries but Sam Curran's unbeaten 41 from 24 balls took England to a competitive total.

Harry Brook, the England captain, said after the match yesterday: "Communication and plans going into the second half were perfect. We adapted well with the bat, to carry that into the bowling was awesome. Salty played a mega innings, Jos got off to a good start."

He added: "We recognised it was a tough pitch to hit from top of the stumps. We had a plan and stuck to it well. To get us to 200 on a tricky surface was phenomenal.

"We didn't need to talk much before the chase, needed to hit the top of the stumps with the occasional bouncer. Just have to adapt to the surfaces in the last two

games. As a batting unit, using the pitch to access different areas is important."

Archer, the Man of the Match, said yesterday: "I am happy to contribute. You're bowling at world-class batters, have to keep hitting the spot. Surprised it turned around so quickly. Some balls go to boundaries, got lucky with a bad ball getting a wicket. Tongue is and I are similar, he'll get a wicket if I don't. Bowled with him all summer, enjoy bouncing ideas off him."

The two sides move on to Bristol on Thursday for the fourth of the five-match series.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
England 201 for 7 (Salt 70, Curran 41, Prince 2-32) beat India 76 (Tongue 4-28, Archer 3-29) by 125 runs

## TRAGEDY

# Former Afghan pacer Shapoor dies aged 38

AFF  
New Delhi

Former Afghanistan fast bowler Shapoor Zadran, who shaped the country's early rise in international cricket, died yesterday after a prolonged illness, the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) said.

Zadran died a day before his 39th birthday at a hospital outside New Delhi where he had been treated for a rare immune-system disorder for the last few months.

"With profound grief and deep sorrow, the Afghanistan Cricket Board mourns the passing of former Afghanistan fast bowler Shapoor Zadran," the ACB said in a statement. The board hailed him

as "one of the foundation-laying figures of Afghanistan cricket" whose dedication and commitment helped propel the national team onto the international stage.

A strapping left-arm quick with long hair, Zadran played 44 one-day internationals and 36 Twenty20 matches between 2009 and 2020, representing Afghanistan during a period of rapid growth for the sport in the country.

Zadran also featured in four T20 World Cups between 2010 and 2016, taking nine wickets in as many matches.

"He was among the proud cricketers who stood at the heart of Afghanistan's early cricket journey and helped build the path that brought Afghan cricket to the international stage," the ACB said.



Afghanistan's Shapoor Zadran prepares to bowl against England during the 2015 World Cup Pool A match at the Sydney Cricket Ground on March 13, 2015. Shapoor died yesterday after a prolonged illness. (AFP)

## SPOTLIGHT

# Mooney back at No. 1 in batting rankings

AFF  
London

Australia's Beth Mooney has returned to number one in the women's T20 batting rankings after winning the player of the tournament award at the women's T20 World Cup.

The wicketkeeper-batter, also named player of the tournament in the 2020 edition at home, has overtaken Australia team-mate Georgia Voll, who had occupied the top spot since 23 March this year. Mooney won the player of the match award in Sunday's final at Lord's for a decisive 64 off 49 balls in a seven-wicket win over England that helped her finish the

tournament with 238 runs and start her fifth stint as number one.

"I just hate losing, to be honest," Mooney said when asked about the secret of her success after Sunday's final. I know what it feels like at times. I see a bit of red out there when the game's on the line as well. It's really important to go out there and make sure you do your job and do it when it counts."

Shelley Nitschke, Australia's head coach, spoke after the final of how Mooney could always be relied upon in pressure moments.

Mooney, 32 then jokingly responded to that comment by telling reporters: "I probably didn't start the tournament that well, but I've told Shell to just pick me for the finals now and don't worry about the round games."

## MOTORSPORT

# Alpine is building foundations for F1 success, says Renault's CEO Provost

Reuters  
London

Renault has a long-term plan for its Alpine Formula One team but CEO **Francois Provost** has parked the French carmaker's previous timelines for returning to the top to focus on immediate improvement.

Never mind the old three-year, five-year or 100-race plans. The priority is to stabilise a team who were last overall in 2025 but are now fighting for fifth of 11 in the constructors' standings after starting afresh. Alpine are only a point clear of sixth-placed Racing Bulls, and Frenchman Pierre Gasly's podium finish in Monaco is still subject to appeal.

But Provost told Reuters at the weekend's British Grand Prix that the recovery, led by de facto team boss Flavio Briatore and managing director Steve Nielsen, was real.

"My unique priority today is to stabilise the team, set a strong foundation for the team and start to recover this year, which is the case," he said.

"Our objective is P6 (sixth place) minimum. This is the first stage. Based on this we'll set our new vision, our new ambition."

## GUCCI SPONSORSHIP AND MERCEDES ENGINES

Provost, previously Renault's chief procurement officer, took over from former CEO Luca de Meo in July last year when the Italian left to join luxury group Kering.

Kering's Gucci brand has since

been announced as Alpine's title sponsor from the 2027 season.

The new boss said Renault intended to stay in Formula One for the long term, pointing to the sport's surging popularity as proof of younger people's enduring interest in cars, but planning could only start once the foundations were solid.

"When the team is completely lost, when you are nowhere, first you have to set very short-term priorities and refocus the team on delivering very concrete things. This is what I call the one-year plan," he said.

"It is doing well on the performance side and it is doing well on the sponsorship side, so I'm reasonably satisfied but humble.

"I know that the journey will be a long way."

Alpine went through five team bosses in four years from 2021 to 2024 with the former champions, who won titles from the Enstone factory with Michael Schumacher and Fernando Alonso as Benetton and Renault respectively, plunging down the order.

This year, with Gasly and Argentine Franco Colapinto as drivers, they are using Mercedes engines after Renault ended engine production at Viry-Châtillon outside Paris. Provost said the likely arrival of sustainably fuelled V8 engines from 2031, replacing the current V6 turbo hybrids, would not see a switch back to Renault-produced engines.

"I don't want to disturb the team and everyone with uncertainty. There is a clear reference today, I do not develop engines for For-

mula One," he said. "We have the Mercedes engine which is a good engine.

"It's clearly a trigger of our recovery this year."

While Alpine are majority-owned by Renault, the carmaker sold a 24% stake to an Otro Capital-led investor group in 2023 for €200mn.

That shareholding is now up for sale again, subject to Renault approval. Former Red Bull boss Christian Horner has been linked to it in media speculation, but Provost said there had been no discussions as yet and there was no rush.

There would also be no change in the role played by Briatore, the title-winning former Renault team boss brought back by his compatriot de Meo.



ANNOUNCEMENT

# IOC eases restrictions on Russians before LA Games as anthem, flag ban remains

AFP  
Lausanne

More than four years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) yesterday lifted some restrictions allowing their athletes to compete in team events and qualifying competitions for the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

"We made it clear that we wanted to ensure all athletes have the possibility to compete at the Olympic Games and not be held responsible for their government's actions," IOC president Kirsty Coventry said at a meeting in Lausanne.

However, the IOC kept in place the ban on the Russian national anthem being played and the flag being displayed, for the time being, but stipulated returning Russian athletes would have to pass "multiple" doping tests before being allowed to participate.

Yesterday, Ukraine slammed the IOC decision as "premature" and "unfounded" while Moscow's

invasion drags on through its fifth year. "We consider this decision premature, unfounded, and adopted without regard to the objective circumstances that remain unchanged: the Russian Federation continues its full-scale armed aggression against Ukraine, flagrantly violating international law and the fundamental principles of peace and security," Ukraine's Olympic Committee said in a statement.

The IOC statement, laying out a host of conditions, said individual sports could decide whether to allow the flag and anthem at their own events or stage competitions in Russia.

As for the Games, with the Los Angeles Olympics two years away, the IOC said it "will take a decision in relation to the display of the Russian flag, anthem, colours or any identifications for the Olympic Games at the appropriate time".

Russia welcomed the decision.

"The IOC is sending a clear signal: the Olympic movement must remain free from politics," Russian sports minister Mikhail Degtyarev said on Telegram, adding Russia planned to participate in qualifiers



This photograph shows the logo of the Russian Olympic Committee at the entrance of their office in Moscow on October 15, 2024. (AFP)

for the Los Angeles Games.

Russia's return remains more limited than that of Belarus, which was allowed back by the IOC in early May without any restrictions on national anthem or colours.

The IOC said to address "the lack of confidence" after a series of Russian doping scandals, "all athletes newly coming back to international competition must have

the IOC statement adding it will "closely monitor the situation".

However, IOC Sports Director Pierre Ducrey warned that the return of Russians to the global sports fold will take place within a "fractured landscape" that varies by discipline.

On Friday, World Athletics maintained the total exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes, noting no "tangible movement towards peace negotiations having materialised".

The global governing bodies for judo and swimming did not wait for the IOC's green light to fully reinstate athletes from both countries in November and April respectively, like the International Paralympic Committee had done for the Milan-Cortina Games.

A major sporting nation, Russia has been barred from competing under its national colours in the Olympic arena since 2016 - initially due to a state-sponsored doping scandal.

Just after the Beijing Winter Olympics concluded in February 2022 the Russian army invaded Ukraine with the support of Belarus, triggering a wave of sports

sanctions. Following a period of total exclusion, the IOC had gradually begun reintegrating athletes starting in March 2023 under a neutral banner, subject to strict conditions, and excluding team events, specifically for the Paris 2024 and Milan-Cortina Games.

For several months, Coventry had hinted at a more complete reintegration, emphasising the importance of "keeping sport a neutral ground."

A place where every athlete can compete freely, without being held back by the politics or divisions of their governments? In late June, during the IOC's 146th session in Lausanne, this principle was further enshrined in the Olympic Charter that the organisation's role was "to apply neutrality at all times, free from governmental, cultural, societal or economic pressure".

Furthermore, the IOC Executive Board had last December recommended the return of Russian and Belarusian athletes to junior competitions, including team sports, under their national flags and anthems.

TENNIS

# Djokovic defeats Auger-Aliassime in five-hour epic

Djokovic to meet holder Sinner in semis; Muchova ends Osaka run



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates winning against Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime during their singles quarter-final on the ninth day of the 2026 Wimbledon Championships at The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon, southwest London, yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters  
London

Novak Djokovic reached an eighth straight Wimbledon semi-final after grinding down Canadian Felix Auger-Aliassime 7-6(10) 3-6 6-3 6-7(4) 7-6(10-4) in an epic battle yesterday to set up a blockbuster showdown with reigning champion Jannik Sinner.

Djokovic, the seventh seed, chuckled after several missed chances in a long opening-set tiebreak, and had the last laugh when Auger-Aliassime blasted a volley long to surrender a set that he should have comfortably won.

A double fault from Djokovic gifted Auger-Aliassime a break to go up 5-3 in the next set and the Canadian held his nerve and serve in the next game to draw level in the contest, before the Centre Court roof was closed at around 7.40 p.m. local time.

The move prompted complaints from Djokovic, but he composed himself as the third set got underway and produced cleaner ball-striking to finally break Auger-Aliassime in the sixth game and then tighten his grip on the match.

Auger-Aliassime lost his opening service game in the fourth set and let his frustrations boil over when he whacked his chair with his racket, but put up a brave display and got back on level terms via the tiebreak to force a decider.

There was no separating the pair for 12 games of the final set until Djokovic drew on his experience in the match tiebreak to finally overcome Auger-Aliassime and soak up the deafening applause from a thoroughly-entertained crowd.

Earlier American Coco Gauff and Germany's Alexander Zverev both broke new ground at Wimbledon but Naomi Osaka's title hopes evaporated on a boiling hot day at the All England Club.

Hot weather warnings might have furrowed the brow of men's defending champion Jannik Sinner but he tamed German veteran Jan-Lennard Struff 7-5 7-6(4) 6-3 to reach the semi-finals.

Seventh seed Gauff's relationship with grass has been lukewarm since she made her Wimbledon debut as a 15-year-old in 2019 and had never gone past the fourth round.

The bond is clearly getting stronger though as she proved

with a composed 4-6 6-3 6-3 victory over American number one Jessica Pegula on Centre Court.

Zverev, whose Wimbledon ceiling had also previously been the fourth round, returned to finish off dangerous Czech Jiri Lehecka to reach his first quarter-final there.

The 29-year-old had been three games from victory on Monday evening before being snagged by Wimbledon's curfew and despite allowing Lehecka back into the match on the resumption he completed a 6-4 7-5 3-6 7-6(6) win.

He will be back on court today to face American Taylor Fritz in a battle of the 140 mph servers.

Japan's Osaka's outfits and tennis have sparked in equal measure at this year's Championships, and her dominant victory over world number one Aryna Sabalenka on Sunday had many predicting she could go on and win a fifth Grand Slam title.

The 14th seed ran into inspired Czech Karolina Muchova in the quarter-finals on Tuesday, however, losing 7-6(4) 6-4.

On a day of personal bests, Muchova also ensured her deepest Wimbledon run after twice

falling in the last eight and she will now stand in the way of Gauff.

Muchova could be joined in the semi-finals by a second Czech on Wednesday when Linda Noskova plays Elise Mertens.

Gauff's progress at this year's Wimbledon has been far from smooth, dropping sets in three of her four matches.

But she is finding ways to win. Friend and doubles partner Pegula, playing her first ever match on Centre Court, looked the more assured player for a set and a half yesterday but Gauff solved the puzzle for an impressive victory.

"Pretty insane, honestly," was Gauff's immediate reaction to the win. "Considering how I hadn't won a match on grass in two years before this tournament, I'm definitely just really happy with how I played today."

Zverev lost 12 of the first 13 points as he resumed at 3-3 in the third set against Lehecka and looked heavy-legged as all his good work on Monday appeared to be unravelling. But he steadied the ship and despite serving a double-fault on match point in the fourth-set tiebreak, he got it done.

GOLF

# Rai feels rested, ready to chase 2nd Scottish title

Reuters  
Glasgow

Former Genesis Scottish Open champion Aaron Rai isn't too concerned by the changes made to the course at The Renaissance Club in North Berwick.

While the eighth, ninth, 17th and 18th holes will remain the same, the rest of the course effectively will flip, with the first to seventh playing as the 10th to 16th, and 10th to 16th playing as first to seventh.

"There's not been a huge amount of change to the golf course itself, an extra couple of bunkers, nothing huge in terms of design," Rai told reporters yesterday.

"I think it's likely to impact the flow of the course and how it feels. I think there will be pockets of holes - pockets of difficult holes that seem to be closer together and then pockets of holes that provide a little bit more opportunity. So I don't know what the reason is behind the rerouting, but I'm presuming that's part of it just to create that balance and flows within the course, some of which are very challenging and some of which give you a little more opportunity. I think it can be a really good change."

Rai, who won the tournament in 2020, arrives as a first-time major winner following his breakthrough triumph at the PGA Championship in May.

The 31-year-old Englishman followed that up with top-20 finishes at the Memorial (T19) and US Open (T11) before tying for 30th at the Travelers Championship.

"It's been great," Rai said when asked to describe life as a major



champion.

"It was really nice initially to have a couple of weeks away from tournaments just to try to sit with it a little bit more," he said. "I then played four events back-to-back, which again was really good to try to get into some normal habits and routines around the game."

"And then last week was the first time I was back in the UK, so great to see friends, family. Managed to go to Wimbledon over the weekend, which was amazing to experience. So yeah, a pretty busy few weeks since the PGA but yeah, very good overall."

With The Open Championship looming on the horizon next week, Rai is excited to return to links-style golf.

"Such a different style to what we're used to for the rest of the year (on the PGA Tour)," he said. "Personally, I really enjoy the variety, and that's generally because of the conditions that we face in links golf, a lot of different ball flights, a lot of different shapes. So many options around the green. So I think it's a real test of skill and creativity. Those are my biggest draws of links golf, this style of golf."

## RAHM EXCITED ABOUT RETURN TO SCOTTISH OPEN

GLASGOW: Jon Rahm hopes the local accents are all he struggles with this week when the LIV Golf star tees it up at the Genesis Scottish Open.

The tournament, co-sanctioned by the PGA Tour and DP World Tour, begins tomorrow at The Renaissance Club in North Berwick. Eligible as a DP World Tour member, Rahm is playing in his first non-major PGA Tour event since the 2023 Tour Championship.

The 31-year-old Spaniard has enjoyed a lot of success playing links golf, including two wins in the Irish Open (2017, 2019) and a runner-up finish at The Open Championship at Royal Liverpool in 2023.

"A victory on Scottish soil would be fantastic," Rahm said yesterday.

"As a European, understanding where it came from, and links golf, (joining) a list of great champions in the Scottish Open would be something that would be really, really exciting."

Rahm has two wins and four runner-up finishes on the LIV

Golf tour this season. The two-time major winner also tied for second at the PGA Championship in May.

Rahm also missed the cut at last month's US Open and finished T55 in his last appearance in the Scottish Open in 2022. He's hoping for a better result as he prepares for The Open Championship next week at Royal Birkdale.

"I just think you need to have a great understanding of spin, trajectory, control, and how the ball reacts on the fairway and on the greens, right," he said yesterday. "You can usually, except a few holes here with some trees, where you can start the ball whatever you want, you hit whatever shot shape you feel like hitting or you can be as aggressive or as passive as you want to be."



## FOCUS

# Belgium's new approach sans big names pays dividends

DE KETELAERE SCORED TWO FIRST-HALF GOALS AFTER GARCIA MOVED HIM TO CENTRE FORWARD

Reuters  
Atlanta

**B**elgium look to have found their best playing style at the World Cup after thrashing co-hosts the US 4-1 on Monday, but the successful tinkering of coach Rudi Garcia has come at a cost to his top players.

Belgium had been on the brink of elimination in the first knockout round against Senegal, coming back from two goals down with five minutes to play to advance to the round of 16, where Garcia made significant changes to the side.

Kevin De Bruyne, Jeremy Doku and Romelu Lukaku were all benched, with De Bruyne, so long the talisman of the team, not even used in the clash in Seattle.

Nicolas Raskin, Amadou Onana and Dodi Lukebakio replaced Hans Vanaken, De Bruyne, and Doku, with Charles De Ketelaere moving to a centre forward role that reaped immediate reward with two first-half goals to set the Belgians on their way to a comfortable victory.

Before kickoff, Garcia said his selections were logical given the players' training form and tactics for the day, and they worked out perfectly as the Belgians produced their best football of the tournament.

Their approach left the hosts looking listless and overawed, as a more aggressive midfield with captain Youri Tielemans pushed higher repeatedly won the second balls and regained possession quickly. They also used the space out wide to stretch a brittle and static U.S. defence.

## ONANA'S LOSS TO KNEE INJURY DID NOT HAMPER BELGIUM

Not even the loss of Onana to a knee injury in the first half put them off their stride, with Vanaken taking over his role in front of the three defenders.

Garcia said he had been sure



Belgium players celebrate their win over the USA in the World Cup Round of 16 match in Seattle. (Reuters)

of his line-up until hours before kickoff on Monday but knew how he wanted to play.

"We wanted to take control of the game from the start," he said.

"The plan was to bring Kevin in if we needed him, but once we scored, it was no longer necessary," Garcia explained.

"And when Onana was injured, we turned to Hans with his stature. By the way, I am very happy with his goal because at that age (33) to score at a World Cup, after not always being called up to the national team."

Garcia had been the subject of much criticism in Belgium as they struggled through the first round, drawing their opening two games before a comprehensive 5-1 win over New Zealand meant they topped the group.

Against Senegal, they only survived courtesy of their opponent's defensive folly, winning with a penalty late in extra time after being on the brink of elimination.

Belgium, however, will now consider themselves serious con-

tenders ahead of Friday's quarter-final against Spain in Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, Belgium midfielder Nicolas Raskin said his side's 4-1 win over the United States felt like a measure of justice after FIFA's decision to allow US striker Folarin Balogun to play despite his red card in the previous game.

"Like I said, I think there was always a justice somewhere in life and the fact that something can happen like that, you can put it all you want, but we don't think that was fair," Raskin told reporters.

The decision triggered widespread criticism, including from Belgium's football federation, which unsuccessfully challenged Balogun's eligibility hours before kickoff.

Belgium, however, made the controversy irrelevant on the pitch, sweeping aside the hosts to advance in the tournament.

"And today, I think it just brings us a little bit of luck. We needed to win the game and the message throughout," Raskin said.



Charles De Ketelaere of Belgium celebrates with teammates Timothy Castagne and Dodi Lukebakio after scoring his team's second goal against USA in Seattle. (AFP)

## SPOTLIGHT

## Portugal coach Martinez confirms departure after loss to Spain

Reuters  
Arlington, Texas

**S**aying Portugal's national team needs "a new voice," manager Roberto Martinez confirmed he is stepping down after the 1-0 loss to Spain on Monday in their round of 16 match in Arlington, Texas.

Martinez has coached Portugal since 2023 and planned to leave his post after the team's run to what he hoped was a World Cup championship. His contract was due to expire after the tournament.

"Yes, this is my last game with the national team," said Martinez, a native of Spain who turns 53 on July 13. "I'm proud. I've had 45 games, and I felt welcomed in Portugal and loved. It's a memory I'll take with me always."

"It was a pleasure, a source of pride and responsibility. It's hard, but it's the end of a cycle and in the context it makes absolute sense."

Martinez said, "It's important to have a new voice now" and added that it was fair for Portuguese Football Federation president Pedro Proenca, who was appointed last year, to be able to choose his own manager.

"I want to thank the president and the board for their support and for providing me and my coaching staff with all the necessary conditions," Martinez said. "I appreciate their strength and support, but it is the end of a cycle."

Portugal is a co-host of the 2030 World Cup along with Spain and Morocco and is automatically qualified. Martinez managed Belgium's national team from 2016-22 and also coached Everton, Swansea City and Wigan Athletic. He led Portugal to the 2024 European Championship quarterfinals, then the UEFA Nations League title in June 2025.

Portugal finished second in this World Cup in Group K, going 1-0-2 (5 points) with a 5-0 win over



Portugal coach Roberto Martinez reacts during the World Cup Round of 16 match against Spain at the Dallas Stadium in Arlington, Texas. (Reuters)

Uzbekistan and draws against the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1-1) and group winner Colombia (0-0).

Last Thursday, Portugal held off Croatia 2-1 in the round of 32 before elimination on Monday, which also marked the final World Cup game for legendary attacker Cristiano Ronaldo, 41.

"We didn't fail," Martinez said. "We lost a game against a team that's one of the favorites. We showed incredible individual talent. Winning or losing is about details in the big games, with big teams. ... You fail when you don't try to win, and we tried to win until the last minute."

Martinez said to those thinking Ronaldo should have been subbed for late in the game that he was

physically capable of playing at least 90 minutes and delivering the needed goal.

"This is not the time to look for anything beyond the fact that we are talking about a football icon," Martinez said of Ronaldo.

"There aren't many Cristiano Ronaldos. I will forever appreciate what he tried to do in this World Cup, because his dream was to win it. He was an incredible example of a captain, both on a footballing level and a human level."

"His impact inside the dressing room and within the group of players is something the entire coaching staff and all the players will carry with us forever. He is an example of football, of an athlete and of the human being behind the athlete."

## Kane calls for calm after England's World Cup epic against Mexico

**Harry Kane** said England need to "calm down" after the emotionally draining win over Mexico that took them through to the World Cup quarter-finals. Thomas Tuchel's 10-man team won 3-2 on Sunday after a memorable backs-to-the-wall performance against the co-hosts in Estadio Azteca.

England, back at their training base in Kansas City, are enjoying some downtime ahead of Saturday's quarter-final against Erling Haaland's Norway in Miami.

"Into the next round. Incredible night, we appreciate the support. I know we had loads in the stadium and loads watching back home staying up late," England captain Kane said in a video on social media.

"The connection with everyone is even stronger now and we feel more than ever."

"We recover now, we calm down, we have a couple of days relaxing and then obviously get prepared for a massive quarter-final."

Kane, whose second-half penalty proved decisive, said the Azteca experience and the nature of the win made it one of his favourite games in an England shirt.

"Going into that game was so special, the atmosphere, the stadium... everyone was so excited to be there and play in this iconic game," he said.

"To come through the adversities in the game and battle through the way we did and put our bodies on the line and the boys covering every blade of grass was just incredible to be part of, to be honest. "It's one of my favourite games in an England shirt, without a doubt."

The 32-year-old Bayern Munich forward will come up against Golden Boot rival Haaland on Saturday. Kane has six goals so far at the World Cup - one behind top-scorers Kylian Mbappe, Lionel Messi and Haaland.

### 'I celebrated in bed' - Norway's Solbakken stays grounded after beating Brazil

Norway coach Stale Solbakken admitted he celebrated his team's historic World Cup win over Brazil by getting tucked up in bed and watching quarter-final opponents England come through a gruelling tie against Mexico.

"I celebrated in bed with a

coke and chocolate while watching the game. The rest of the staff was upstairs drinking beer," said Solbakken the day after Norway's stunning 2-1 victory over the five-time World Cup winners in New Jersey. Erling Haaland's late brace settled the game in Norway's favour and took them through to the quarter-finals for the very first time.

It will be the first competitive meeting of the nations since 1993, when Norway defeated England in Oslo in a qualifier for the following year's World Cup in the United States - Norway went to that tournament, which is also the last one England missed.

"We have to study England but obviously we have seen them in their previous games in the tournament and they will be a very strong opponent but hopefully it will be a very even and tight game," Solbakken said of Saturday's showdown in Miami. Haaland is currently the joint-top scorer at this World Cup with seven goals, level with Kylian Mbappe and Lionel Messi.

The Manchester City striker's goals have come in just four appearances at his first World Cup - if he scores again in the quarter-finals, he would equal the feat of the late West Germany great Gerd Mueller, who netted in each of his first five World Cup appearances, in 1970.

"I think it is a good comparison with Gerd Mueller even if their bodies are not similar," Solbakken said. "But he scored all his goals more or less inside the box as well and it says a lot about Erling's quality, and hopefully he can make it five in the game on Saturday," added the coach.

Solbakken played down the potential advantage of Haaland playing his club football in England. "It doesn't hurt us that he plays there but I don't think that is a big thing for him or for us. "He plays national games, Champions League games, Premier League games in the same manner."

Besides Haaland, one of the main features of Norway's first appearance at a World Cup since 1998 has been the "Viking Row" celebration of their supporters.

"I hope it is not only the rowing that has got us to the quarter-finals," joked the coach, who has been in charge since 2020.

"But I think it is a fun thing. The players have taken to it and the world has taken to it."



England's forward Harry Kane takes part in a training session. (AFP)