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Ton-up Buttler takes new No 1 England to Twenty20 series sweep of India



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Noskova survives tearful meltdown to clinch first Wimbledon title

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SPORT





FOOTBALL

Spain-France is ‘final before the final’: Coach De la Fuente

‘WE HAVE THE GREATEST RESPECT FOR OUR OPPONENTS, BUT WE FEEL CAPABLE OF BEATING ANY TEAM’

AFP
Los Angeles

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente said yesterday that the World Cup semi-final with France would be “a final before the final”.

He said his side, who beat Belgium 2-1 in Friday’s quarter-final thanks to an 88th minute Mikel Merino winner in Los Angeles, were “capable of beating any team”, including tournament favourites France and red-hot forward Kylian Mbappe.

“It’s not an exaggeration to describe this match as a final before the final,” De la Fuente said at the post-match press conference.

“We’re one of the teams capable of reaching the final,” he said.

“From now on, we are fully focused on France.

“We’re aware of their immense potential, but we also know that we’re the only team to have beaten them in two semi-finals.”

Spain defeated the French in the Euro 2024 semi-finals on their way to becoming European champions and also in the 2005 Nations League semi-finals.

“The match will be more open than ever,” the coach said. “We will have to raise our level of play, and we’re going to give everything.

“The French are in great form, and we have different playing styles,” De la Fuente added.

“We have the greatest respect for our opponents, but we feel capable of beating any team.”

Luis de la Fuente’s golden touch carried his side into the semi-finals as Fabian Ruiz and Mikel Merino, two players elevated by his bold selection calls, scored the goals in a tense quarter-final.

Fabian, a surprise starter after Pedri dropped to the bench, opened the scoring before Merino came on after 86 minutes and struck two minutes later, pouncing when substitute goalkeeper



Mikel Merino of Spain celebrates with his team-mates scoring his team’s second goal during the World Cup quarter-final against Belgium at Los Angeles Stadium in Inglewood, California. (AFP)

Senne Lammens failed to hold Pau Cubarsi’s low strike.

It was the third time Merino had scored a knockout winner as a substitute under De la Fuente, after his late extra-time goal against hosts Germany in the Euro 2024 quarter-finals and his late strike versus Portugal in the last 16 at this World Cup.

“It’s unfair that Mikel doesn’t

play from the start, but it would also be unfair if someone else were left out,” de la Fuente told reporters.

“Only 11 can play, and they understand that - the role they have to play at any given moment. When they take to the pitch, they know what they have to do; that’s why it’s a pleasure to be their manager.”

De la Fuente stressed that European champions Spain’s run to the

last four was built on collective responsibility rather than individual roles. “What matters is the team,” he said. “It doesn’t matter who starts the match. Everyone is important, even those who haven’t played.”

Asked how he keeps players content despite fierce competition for places, De la Fuente praised their maturity and professional-

ism. “One of our strengths as a team is that we have not only the best players in the world - which they are - but also the best people, people who make

Luis De La Fuente, head coach of Spain, looks on during the World Cup quarter-final against Belgium in Inglewood, California, on Friday. (AFP)

it easier for everyone to get on together,” De la Fuente said.

“So we shouldn’t be surprised that they understand their roles, because I believe this is possible in any field, in any profession. It’s on the basis of respect that we build everything, and this national team is also an example of that.”



FOCUS



Spain’s forward Lamine Yamal in action during the World Cup quarter-final against Belgium at the Los Angeles Stadium in Inglewood, California. (AFP)

My goals don’t matter if we win World Cup: Yamal

AFP
Los Angeles

Lamine Yamal said if Spain wins the World Cup nobody will care about his failure to score, after the teen superstar was again absent from the scoresheet in his side’s quarter-final win over Belgium.

At a tournament where stars like Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe, Erling Haaland and Harry Kane have been prolific, 18-year-old Yamal has just one goal to date, in a routine 4-0 group drubbing of Saudi Arabia.

“Obviously I want to score, but I don’t go onto the pitch thinking about that. I do it thinking about helping the team,” said Yamal.

“If we win the World Cup, no one will remember whether I scored goals... the important thing is winning,” said the Barcelona star, after the victory in Los Angeles set up a semi-final clash with France. “I know I can contribute

even if I don’t score. I know my movements draw in many opponents, so I do everything I can to help the team,” he said.

“Then just 16, Yamal was the breakout star of the Spanish team that won the European Championships two years ago.”

He only scored once during that victorious campaign - a stunning strike in a 2-1 semi-final win against France.

“There’s an idea that I should be scoring more, like at the Euros, but we won the Euros with me scoring just one goal. And I have one goal here too, so I’m relaxed about it,” he said, with a smile.

But Spain will be hoping Yamal, who turns 19 the day before the semi-final, can bag further goals if his side are to see off the free-scoring tournament favorites France.

“There are two possibilities - either they reach three consecutive World Cup finals, or we beat them three times in a row. We’ll see what happens,” said Yamal.

“We aren’t afraid at all.”

MOTOGP

Brilliant Marquez is still ‘King of the Ring’

AFP
Hohenstein-Ernstthal, Germany

Seven-time world champion Marc Marquez demonstrated his continued mastery of the Sachsenring with victory in yesterday's German MotoGP Sprint, just hours after booking pole for the main race today.

The 33-year-old Ducati rider, whose impressive record at the track has furnished him with the nickname ‘King of the Ring’, went from pole to flag to claim the win ahead of his brother Alex Marquez, 30, on a Ducati-Gresini.

“Alex pushed very hard, he was very close in the last few laps,” said the winner.

“I tried to maintain a steady pace and I knew he was going to catch up with me.

“We’ll see if we can repeat this in the Grand Prix tomorrow (Sunday).”

Italian rider Fabio Di Giannantonio (Ducati-VR46) came third, followed by the Aprilia-Trackhouse duo of Ai Ogura and Raul Fernandez.

Championship leader Jorge Martin (Aprilia) was sixth and

GERMANY MOTOGP STARTING GRID

FRONT ROW
Marc Marquez (ESP/Ducati), Alex Marquez (ESP/Ducati-Gresini), Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/Ducati-VR46)

2ND ROW
Raul Fernandez (ESP/Aprilia-Trackhouse), Ai Ogura (JPN/Aprilia-Trackhouse), Fabio Quartararo (FRA/Yamaha)

3RD ROW
Franco Morbidelli (ITA/Ducati-VR46), Jorge Martin (ESP/Aprilia), Pedro Acosta (ESP/KTM)

4TH ROW
Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati), Jack Miller (AUS/Yamaha-Pramac), Joan Mir (ESP/Honda)

5TH ROW
Luca Marini (ITA/Honda), Diogo Moreira (BRA/Honda-LCR), Brad Binder (RSA/KTM)

6TH ROW
Enea Bastianini (ITA/KTM-Tech3), Toprak Razgatlioglu (TUR/Yamaha-Pramac), Alex Rins (ESP/Yamaha)

7TH ROW
Maverick Vinales (ESP/Red Bull), Cal Crutchlow (GBR/Honda-LCR)

moved 11 points ahead of Marco Bezzecchi, who did not start after breaking his collarbone in a heavy fall, an injury which will keep him out of Sunday's race.

Marc Marquez, who claimed his 19th Sprint victory, an all-time record, is fifth overall.

He clawed back eight points from Martin, who leads him by 32 points.

Today in the 11th round of the 22-race season, the Catalan will be aiming for a 13th victory on the German circuit, his 10th in MotoGP.

Victory would equal two records held by Italian legend Giacomo Agostini: most wins at a single event (13) and most victories at the same circuit in the premier class (10).



Ducati Lenovo Team's Spanish rider Marc Marquez (left) celebrates after winning the Sprint race with second placed BK8 Gresini Racing MotoGP Team's Spanish rider Alex Marquez ahead of the German Grand Prix at the Sachsenring racing circuit, in Hohenstein-Ernstthal near Chemnitz, eastern Germany, yesterday. (AFP)

The morning qualifying session was marred by the crash that ruled Aprilia's Bezzecchi out of the weekend action.

Two weeks after crashing at nearly 200 km/h (120 mph) in the

Netherlands without suffering any injuries, the Italian this time lost his back wheel at over 130 km/h and was thrown over his handlebars before bouncing several times in the gravel.

Bezzecchi, who had set the eighth-fastest time before crashing, broke his left collarbone, his team announced.

The 27-year-old will return to Italy for surgery.

CRICKET

England sweep India 4-0, secure World No. 1 rank

BUTTLER, BROOK EXHIBIT HIGH QUALITY KNOCKS

AFP
Southampton, United Kingdom

Jos Buttler's first international century in three years powered England to an emphatic 56-run victory over India at Southampton yesterday as they took over at the top of the T20 world rankings after completing a 4-0 series clean sweep.

The 35-year-old Buttler, one of England's all-time outstanding white-ball batsmen, was in superb form as he struck eight sixes in a blistering innings of 131.

Buttler's second T20 international hundred came during an England record partnership in the format of 233 with captain Harry Brook, who made 95 not out. The hosts made 257-3 - their second-highest total at this level.

India's hopes of avoiding a whitewash, in a match where the start was delayed after the tourists got stuck in traffic, were all but over at the break between innings.

Ishan Kishan made 56 but India ended on 201-8 after left-arm swing bowler Sam Curran took 3-36 as England completed another commanding win over the T20 world champions.

The teams will now contest a three-match one-day international series starting in Birmingham on Tuesday in what could be a last campaign in England for India batting great Virat Kohli, who has already retired from Test and T20 international cricket.

Following India's late arrival, fans hoping to see teenage batting star Vaibhav Sooryavanshi in action discovered the 15-year-old had been dropped.

Buttler ensured there were plenty of batting fireworks to entertain the crowd, driving over mid-on for the first six of the match. Brook was dropped on three when Shivam Dube lost the flight of a skyed chance.

The England captain made In-



Man of the Series England's Harry Brook holds the trophy as England players celebrate their series win after the fifth Twenty20 International against India at Utilita Bowl in Southampton yesterday. (AFP)



England's Jos Buttler raises his bat and helmet as he walks after losing his wicket, caught by India's Shreyas Iyer off the bowling of Shivam Dube in Southampton, Britain, yesterday. (AFP)

dia pay with successive sixes off Prince Yadav. Buttler completed a 51-ball century in style by pulling Axar Patel over square leg for six.

After successive sixes off Dube, he was caught by Iyer at mid-off

for 131. Brook had settle for 95 not out. Sooryavanshi's replacement, Sanju Samson, pulled Josh Tongue for two sixes, but chipped Curran's first ball to Jacob Bethell as he fell for 27.

India captain Shreyas Iyer put on 55 for the third wicket alongside Kishan, but was dismissed by spinner Liam Dawson

Kishan made fifty but his exit to a brilliant catch from Phil Salt, on the run from deep midwicket, off leg-spinner Adil Rashid, ended any lingering India hopes of victory.

Tilak Varma made 53, but was one of three catches taken by Buttler in a memorable match for England's wicket-keeper.

England captain Brook said yesterday: "We had a lot of fun. Ran well, hit boundaries and complemented each other. We've got ourselves to World No. 1, which was a game after a couple of games. All boys are delighted and we deserve to celebrate."

BRIEF SCORES
England 257 for 3 (Buttler 131, Brook 95*) **beat India 201 for 8** (Kishan 56, Tilak 53, Curran 3-36) **by 56 runs**

BANGLADESH WIN FINAL ODI AGAINST ZIMBABWE BUT LOSE THE SERIES

HARARE: Bangladesh's Tanzid Hassan fell narrowly short of a century as he guided his team to a seven-wicket victory over hosts Zimbabwe yesterday in their third One-Day International. Tanzid scored 94 before skying the ball for a catch at long on as he tried to hit a match-winning six at the Harare Sports Club. But his 151-run first-wicket partnership with

Soumya Sarkar saw Bangladesh most of the way home as they chased down Zimbabwe's 199 off 48.1 overs and secured victory with 84 balls to spare. The home side were put in to bat with Wessly Madhevere top-scoring 75 and Brad Evans hitting 50 after losing early wickets cheaply, with Shoriful Islam taking 4-44. It was a consolation win for Bangladesh, who

lost the opening two games of the three-match series. The two countries will now play a three-match Twenty20 series in Bulawayo, starting on Wednesday.

BRIEF SCORES
Bangladesh (Tanzid 94, Soumya 69, Masuku 2-33) **beat Zimbabwe** (Madhevere 75, Evans 50, Shoriful 4-44) **by seven wickets**

Qatar's Saif Mohammed wins gold at Asian meet



Qatari team athlete Saif Mohammed clinched the gold medal in the pole vault event yesterday at the Asian U23 Athletics Championships, held in Ordos, China. Mohammed cleared a height of 5.54m, recording the best mark of the competition in this category, to finish in first place and secure Qatar's fifth medal at the championships. His victory came after Hatem Hamed secured gold in the 800m race, Zakaria Ibrahim also claimed gold in the 3,000m race, Ahmed Jabrin earned silver in the shot-put event, and Salah Younes won bronze in the 100m race. Qatar are participating in the championships with a group of promising Olympic-category U23 athletes.

SPOTLIGHT

Five-wicket Gaud stars before India run riot in women's Test at Lord's



India's Kranti Gaud appeals for the wicket of England's Sophie Ecclestone during their Women's Test Match at Lord's Cricket Ground, London, Britain, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
London

Kranti Gaud took five wickets before Smriti Mandhana once more piled on the runs against England as India continued to dominate the inaugural women's Test at Lord's yesterday.

Seam bowler Gaud led the way with a miserly 5-37 in 17 overs to become the first woman to gain a coveted place on the Lord's dressing room honours board for a Test performance as England were dismissed for 170 in reply to India's first-innings 285.

Come the close of the second day of four, India were 154-1 in their second innings - a huge overall lead of 269 runs.

Elegant left-hander Mandhana, carrying on from her sublime first-innings 83, was 69 not out after sharing an opening stand of 88

with Shafali Verma (33). The hosts will need to rewrite the record books if they are to achieve an unlikely win, with the highest successful fourth-innings chase in a women's Test the 198 posted by Australia against England at Sydney's Bankstown Oval in 2011.

After 142 years of men's Test cricket at Lord's, this fixture represents another landmark in the evolution of the women's game.

And the 22-year-old Gaud will join the likes of Indian men Bhagwat Chandrasekhar, Bishan Bedi and Kapil Dev on the away dressing room honours board at Lord's that lists bowlers who have taken five or more wickets in a Test innings at the ground.

BRIEF SCORES
India 285 and 154 for 1 (Mandhana 69*, Bhatia 39*) **lead England 170** (Jones 52, Gaud 5-37) **by 269 runs**

TENNIS

Noskova braves Muchova assault to win Wimbledon

THE NEW CHAMPION BANKED THE WINNER'S PRIZE OF \$4.8MN



Czech Republic's Linda Noskova celebrates with the trophy after winning her final match against compatriot Karolina Muchova at Wimbledon in London yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Linda Noskova won her first Wimbledon title in astonishing style yesterday as the tearful Czech recovered from wasting five match points to beat Karolina Muchova in one of the most dramatic finals in All England Club history.

Noskova, seeded ninth, appeared to be on the brink of a devastating loss when she broke down in tears after squandering those match points in the second set of a Centre Court classic.

But the 21-year-old somehow regained her composure in a final with more twists than a Hollywood blockbuster.

Summoning incredible resilience, Noskova clinched her maiden Grand Slam crown with a remarkable 6-2, 5-7, 6-3 victory over her 10th seeded compatriot.

Quite how she was able to avoid a complete meltdown in the aftermath of her mid-match collapse will go down in the annals of Wimbledon lore.

In two hours and 28 minutes of unrelenting drama, Noskova showed the heart of a champion to establish herself as the youngest woman to win Wimbledon in 15 years.

The third tour-level title of Noskova's career emulated the success of her compatriot Petra Kvitova, who was the same age when she won the first of her two Wimbledon crowns in 2011.

It was a full circle moment for Noskova, who was inspired to take up tennis by the Wimbledon success of her childhood idol Kvitova.

Fittingly, Kvitova was watching from the royal box as Noskova celebrated her breakthrough victory.

For the third time in the last four years, a Czech woman won Wimbledon following Barbora Krejčíková in 2024 and Marketa Vondroušová in 2023.

Noskova, who banked the winner's prize of £3.6mn (\$4.8mn), has emerged as one of the rising stars of the women's game during her remarkable



Linda Noskova (left) poses with the winner's trophy, the Venus Rosewater Dish, after beating Karolina Muchova at Wimbledon. (AFP)

WIMBLEDON SINGLES CHAMPIONS SINCE 2021

2026 Linda Noskova (Czech Republic) beat Karolina Muchova (Czech Republic) 6-2 5-7 6-3
2025 Iga Swiatek (Poland) beat Amanda Anisimova (U.S.) 6-0 6-0
2024 Barbora Krejčíková (Czech Republic) beat Jasmine Paolini (Italy) 6-2 2-6 6-4
2023 Marketa Vondroušová (Czech Republic) beat Ons Jabeur (Tunisia) 6-4 6-4
2022 Elena Rybakina (Kazakhstan) beat Jabeur (Tunisia) 3-6 6-2 6-2
2021 Ash Barty (Australia) beat Karolina Pliskova (Czech Republic) 6-3 6-7(4) 6-3

run at the All England Club.

Like Kvitova, Noskova has been a quick learner on grass, having only played her first match on the surface in Birmingham in 2023. She has won more matches on grass than any other player on the WTA Tour in the past two years.

Even so, she had never been past the quarter-finals of a Grand Slam prior to arriving at Wimbledon two weeks ago.

Lifting the Venus Rosewater Dish was hard to imagine for Noskova when she faced match point against Sorana Cîrstea in the third round.

Noskova is only the third woman to win Wimbledon after saving a match point earlier in the tournament, joining Venus Williams (2005) and Serena Williams (2009).

Noskova is also the first woman since Maria Sharapova in 2004 to clinch a tour event on grass, in Berlin in June, and then win Wimbledon in the same year.

With her love of baking, penchant for lucky charms and unusual rituals - besides the piercing in her nose, she has matcha tea served by a friend every morning during the tournament - the quirky Noskova is a colourful addition to Wimbledon's list of champions.

She has a painful Wimbledon memory - in 2024, she entered the tournament shortly after her mother had died of cancer.

Now she has a happier one to ease a little of that pain.

In the first Open era Grand Slam final between two Czech women, the pair are long-time friends, it was Noskova who took the first set with ease.

But that didn't begin to tell the story to come.

Noskova wobbled spectacularly, wasting four match points and allowing Muchova to break back when she served for the match in the second set.

Putting her fingers in her ears to block out the crowd's stunned reaction, Noskova squandered another match point as Muchova held to level at 5-5.

Noskova covered her head in a towel and appeared to wipe away tears before Muchova closed out the set.

She stormed off court before the deciding set, taking a break that proved decisive.

From the depths of despair, she broke early in the set and finally sealed her victory before collapsing to the turf in disbelief.

FACTBOX ON CHAMPION NOSKOVA

LONDON: Factbox on Czech Republic's Linda Noskova, who beat compatriot Karolina Muchova 6-2 5-7 6-3 in the Wimbledon final yesterday to win her maiden Grand Slam title:

Age: 21

Nation: Czech Republic

WTA ranking: 12

Seeding: 9

Grand Slam titles: 1 (Wimbledon 2026)

ROAD TO FINAL

First round: beat Ella Seidel 6-4 6-3

Second round: beat Camila Osorio 6-3 4-6 6-2

Third round: beat Sorana Cîrstea 6-2 3-6 7-6 (9)

Fourth round: beat Madison Keys 6-4 7-6 (2)

Quarter-final: beat Elise Mertens 6-3 7-5

Semi-final: beat Marta Kostyuk 6-4 6-4

EARLY LIFE

• Noskova made her WTA qualifying debut in Prague

in 2020. She won the 2021 French Open girls' singles title and finished the season with a 38-9 win-loss record, capturing four ITF Circuit titles, including a W60 event in Prerov, Czech Republic.

CAREER TO DATE

- Started her professional career on the ITF circuit in 2022, winning six titles.
- She broke into the top 100 on August 1, 2022, after a semi-final run in Prague, becoming the youngest player in the rankings by overtaking Coco Gauff.
- In a breakthrough 2023 season, Noskova finished runner-up at Adelaide 1 as a qualifier, losing to Aryna Sabalenka, and at Prague, where she lost to Nao Hibino. She also reached the quarter-finals in Lyon and the third round at Indian Wells and Cincinnati, breaking into the top 40 on October 9, 2023.
- Noskova reached her first Grand Slam quarter-final at the 2024 Australian Open, where she upset then

world number one Iga Swiatek in the third round before losing to Dayana Yastremska.

- She also won her maiden WTA singles title at Monterrey in the same year, defeating Lulu Sun in the final. She also reached the semi-finals in Prague and Brisbane.
- In 2025, she reached three tour finals - her first WTA 1000 final in Beijing, where she lost to Amanda Anisimova, plus Prague and Tokyo - made her top 20 debut and ended the season at a career-high year-end No. 13.
- This was Noskova's eighth career WTA singles final.
- Noskova is the fourth player since 2020 to reach their first Grand Slam singles final at Wimbledon, joining Elena Rybakina, Ons Jabeur and Amanda Anisimova.
- She defeated Muchova in the Wimbledon final on Saturday to become the youngest player to win Wimbledon since Petra Kvitova in 2011.

CYCLING

In-form Merlier wins eighth stage of Tour de France in bunch sprint

AFP
Bergerac, France

Belgian Tim Merlier dominated a bunch sprint finish for the second day running to claim victory in the eighth stage of the Tour de France yesterday.

Merlier seemed out of contention when he was caught out of position in the last few hundred metres but launched a long range charge to reel in all of his rivals and beat Ethiopian Biniam Girmay into second with Dutchman Olav Kooij third.

It was Merlier's fifth stage victory in his third Tour appearance and also brought him to within 15 points of Dane Mads Pedersen in the sprinters' green jersey competition.

"If you win one, you can win a second, and I'm happy," said Merlier. "Three (sprint) stages, I won two. (It's) definitely my Tour de France."

The eighth stage in the Dordogne region, known for its 1,000 castles and ancient cave drawings, had always looked destined to finish with a bunch sprint.

Belgian Liam Slock tried to upset the formbook, setting off alone with 40km left after spending most of the day in a three-man breakaway. But he was caught 1.3km from the line and while former world champion Mathieu van der Poel did his best to set up Alpecin-Premier Tech team-mate Jasper Philipsen for the victory, Merlier simply proved too strong once again.

"It didn't feel like this," said Merlier when it was suggested to him that he was the sprint boss.

"I needed to fight for my position all the time until the last minute.



Soudal Quick-Step team's Belgian rider Tim Merlier sprints to the finish line to win the 8th stage ahead of NSN Cycling Team's Eritrean rider Biniam Girmay (second right) and Decathlon CMA CGM Team's Dutch rider Olav Kooij (left) during the 113th edition of the Tour de France yesterday. (AFP)

"Just before the corner, I was a bit boxed in, and then they almost crashed. "I thought it was over, so I gave it a try to come back off the guys who did the lead out.

"I was coming with so much speed."

THREE-MAN BREAKAWAY

He had been caught the wrong side of a gap when Van der Poel dragged another six riders clear of the others, but the Belgian simply turned on the power, with Girmay in his wheel, and charged through to win.

Kooij, who won the first sprint finish in Wednesday's fifth stage, darted out from behind Philipsen but could not match the acceleration of Soudal Quick-Step's Merlier.

The last two sprint stages had seen one-man and two-man breakaways but this time, three riders headed off up the road together.

One of those was Slock, who

made headlines - and went viral on social media - last month when he claimed his first victory in the professional ranks.

He crashed metres from the line as he lost control of his bicycle while celebrating early during the Gippingen Grand Prix in Switzerland.

However, he had enough momentum to slide over the line on his side and claim that precious victory, with his own Lotto-Inter-marche team joking about it when posting a video of his unconventional finish on social media.

Slock was joined by Czech Jakub Otruba, who had been in the breakaway on Friday with Baptiste Veistroffer, and Frenchman Thibault Guernalec.

They had a lead of over two minutes at one point but on the 2.2km Cote du Buisson-de-Cadouin, Otruba accelerated first and then Slock left him in his wake before forging on alone with 40km still to race.

HORSE RACING

Fakhira claims Gr.1 (PA) Criterium Des Pouliches at La Teste

By Sports Reporter
La Teste, France

Four-year-old filly Fakhira underlined her class with a determined victory in the 1900m Gr.1 (PA) Criterium Des Pouliches - Yas Racing at La Teste, enhancing her growing reputation among the leading Purebred Arabian fillies.

Open to Purebred Arabian fillies and mares aged four years and older, the prestigious contest attracted a quality field of seven runners. Fakhira's success improved her impressive career record to three wins from four starts.

Trained by Thomas Fourcy, ridden by Christophe Soumillon, and carrying the colours of Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari, Fakhira built on the promise she showed during an unbeaten three-year-old campaign, when she won both of her starts over 2000m and 2100m.

Her latest Group 1 triumph further confirms her considerable talent and establishes her as one of the standout performers in the Purebred Arabian ranks.

Fakhira had already hinted that a major success was within reach when making a highly encouraging seasonal return at Chantilly, where she finished a creditable third against the colts in the Gr.1 (PA) Qatar Derby des Pur-Sang Arabes de 4 Ans. Dropping back to face fillies and mares, the talented four-year-old fully capitalised on that promise, producing a determined performance to secure her first Group 1 (PA) success.

Breaking smartly from the gates, Fakhira was settled comfortably in fifth as Bianca De Ghazal set the pace. The early stages unfolded at a measured



Jockey Christophe Soumillon guided Fakhira to Gr.1 (PA) Criterium Des Pouliches win at La Teste in France.



Connections of Fakhira celebrate after the chestnut filly won the Gr.1 (PA) Criterium Des Pouliches win at La Teste in France.

tempo, with the leader dictating the race while the remainder of the seven-runner field held their positions, waiting to make their moves. The pace began to lift approaching the home turn, but Fakhira was still travelling powerfully, with Christophe Soumillon yet to ask for her full effort. Up front, Bianca De Ghazal continued to dictate proceedings, while Geneva ranged alongside the leader to mount a serious challenge.

Straightening for home, Fakhira cruised into contention before sweeping to the front inside the final 300 metres, still travelling with plenty in hand. Geneva refused to yield on her outside,

while TS Waseema (Mister Ginoux) launched a sustained challenge along the inside rail. The trio battled all the way to the finish in a thrilling climax. Showing both determination and class, Fakhira responded gamely when challenged, finding extra in the closing strides to deny Geneva by a head. TS Waseema stayed on well to complete the podium in third.

Bred by Sheail bin Khalifa al-Kuwari, Fakhira is by Al Mamun Monlau out of Falsafah, who won over 1200 metres in Qatar as a four-year-old. She is also a half-sister to Al Safinat and Najashee, adding further depth to an accomplished pedigree.

FOCUS

Garcia's tenure in doubt after Courtois substitution

'Since the start of the World Cup, I've said that only players who are 100% physically fit are allowed to play'



Belgium's head coach Rudi Garcia gestures on the touchline during the World Cup quarter-final against Spain at the Los Angeles Stadium in Inglewood on Friday. (AFP)

Reuters
Atlanta

Belgium coach Rudi Garcia came under a barrage of fire for replacing first-choice goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois in Friday's World Cup quarter-final loss to Spain, adding to questions about his future.

Courtois felt he could continue despite a twinge in his leg, but Garcia insisted he come off as he was not 100% fit. Senne Lammens went on as his replacement after 71 minutes but spilt a low strike by Pau Cubarsi, allowing Spain substitute Mikel Merino to pounce in the 86th minute and secure a 2-1 victory on Friday. Garcia's insistence on taking off Courtois attracted the ire of Belgian analysts, like commentator Peter Vandenbempt.

"You substitute the best goal-

keeper in the world during a World Cup quarter-final because he can no longer kick long balls... astonishing! I simply cannot fathom it," he said on Belgian radio.

"The only explanation is that Garcia clings to rigid principles. Not 100% fit? Then you're out. But surely someone like Courtois knows what he is and isn't capable of?" Garcia, however, explained his philosophy clearly.

"Since the start of the World Cup, I've said that only players who are 100% physically fit are allowed to play. That applies to Thibaut as well. We needed his long balls - first to Charles (De Ketelaere), then to Romelu (Lukaku). We didn't want Thibaut's injury to get worse. So, I have no regrets about the decision to substitute him."

Garcia's decision is sure to be among the issues discussed when his contract is reviewed before the

end of the month, when his deal expires. The 62-year-old Frenchman, who won the Ligue 1 title with Lille in 2011, was appointed at the start of 2025 and tasked with breathing new life into the team after the tenure of Domenico Tedesco, which was described as toxic and soulless.

GARCIA ACHIEVED HIS OBJECTIVES

Staying in the top tier of the Nations League was Garcia's first task, successfully achieved as was World Cup qualification. The target of reaching the last eight was also a tick behind the coach's name. Garcia's record in 20 internationals is 12 wins, six draws and two defeats.

Belgian federation officials will have to decide, however, whether Garcia is the right man to continue as they look to create a side to contend for the 2028 European

Championship. There have been many questions about his tactics, substitutions and management style and the disappointment of the narrow loss to Spain did not help his cause.

Belgium had an inconsistent World Cup, scrambling more than once to advance to the last eight, drawing with Egypt and Iran before beating New Zealand to top their group.

They pulled off a narrow escape against Senegal in the last 32 where Garcia had taken off his leading players with the team 2-0 down, but whether his substitutions, or Senegal's defensive howlers, contributed to their comeback is debatable.

He can also point to highlights, however, like their 4-1 demolition of co-hosts the U.S. and the introduction of players like Nathan Ngoy and Nicolas Raskin who enjoyed impressive tournaments.

Courtois 'proud' as sun sets on Belgium's 'Golden Generation'

Thibaut Courtois said he was proud of Belgium's fabled "Golden Generation" on Friday as their final shot at winning a major title ended in a World Cup quarter-final defeat to Spain. Courtois was forced to watch from the bench as the sun set on the World Cup careers of veteran team-mates such as Kevin De Bruyne and Romelu Lukaku at the SoFi Stadium.

Real Madrid goalkeeper Courtois, 34, De Bruyne, 35, and Lukaku, 33, were part of the lavishly talented crop of Belgian players that rose to the pinnacle of FIFA's rankings for multiple years at different times over the past decade. But a gifted player pool that also included Eden Hazard, Vincent Kompany and Marouane Fellaini came up short in major tournaments, with their best performance a third-place finish at the 2018 World Cup.

Friday's agonising 2-1 loss, which followed a blunder by substitute goalkeeper Senne Lammens after Courtois came off injured in the 71st minute, marked a familiar story for Belgium.

"To be a golden generation you have to win some gold and then you can be called that," one commentator has said of the Red Devils.

But talking to journalists after the loss Courtois was adamant that Belgium's old guard could look back at their tournament record with pride, pointing out that in several cases, notably the 2018 World Cup and 2021 European Championship, they had been eliminated by

the eventual winners.

"In the big tournaments, almost always we have done well," Courtois said. "We're very proud of everything we did till now. Obviously we get a lot of criticism like 'The golden generation never won anything, and so on.' "But we are Belgium. We're not England. We're not Spain. We're not France. We are a small country of not even 12mn people that in big tournaments is showing amazing things. In 2018 (World Cup) I think we were playing the best football in that tournament. So there are things to be proud of. It's really easy to criticize and say, 'Yeah, you didn't win anything.' But look at all big names in football. Not everyone has won a big tournament, and we always tried it. I think we can be proud."

While several members of the team who started on Friday are well into their 30s, Courtois is confident that Belgium will continue to produce young talent into the future.

"We have great youth academies that are working well... there's young talent coming up, and the guys that are younger now will get stronger the next years.

"And I'm hoping that for the Euros or the next World Cup, we'll get stronger. I think we have the spirit."



Thibaut Courtois of Belgium acknowledges the fans after the 1-2 loss to Spain in World Cup quarter-final at Los Angeles Stadium on Friday in Inglewood, California. (AFP)

TRAGEDY

SA midfielder Adams dies at 25

AFP
Johannesburg

South African midfielder Jayden Adams, who represented his country at the ongoing World Cup, died yesterday at the age of 25, Sports Minister Gayton McKenzie said.

"It is with profound shock and a heavy heart that I have learnt of the passing of Jayden Adams," McKenzie said in a statement.

The minister did not disclose a cause of death. "South African football has lost one of its brightest young talents," he said.

The Confederation of African Football (CAF) also paid tribute, saying on X: "Football has lost one of its own."

Police said they had opened an investigation after the body of a 25-year-old man was found at a house in Schotschekloof, a suburb in central Cape Town, on Saturday morning.

"Circumstances surrounding this incident are under investigation," Western Cape police spokesperson FC van Wyk told AFP. Adams played in all three of South Africa's group-stage matches at the World Cup, as Bafana Bafana reached the Round of 32 for the first time, but did not feature in the knockout defeat by Canada.

He was also part of the South Africa squad that finished third at the 2024 Africa Cup of Nations in Ivory Coast. Born in Cape

Town, Adams came through the Stellenbosch FC academy and became the club's first youth graduate to sign a professional contract in August 2020.

He went on to make 139 appearances for the Cape Wine-lands side and helped them win the Carling Knockout in 2023 before joining Mamelodi Sundowns in January 2025.

At Sundowns, the midfielder added a Premiership title and a CAF Champions League crown to his list of honours.

His death comes less than a month after the passing of his grandmother, on the eve of South Africa's Group A match against Czechia at Atlanta Stadium.

"Jayden started in the match against Czechia and gave his all while carrying the burden of losing his grandmother," the South African Football Association said at the time.



Mexico's Erik Lira and South Africa's Jayden Adams fight for the ball during the World Cup Group A match in Mexico City on July 3, 2026. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

African results justify slots increase

AFP
Johannesburg

When four-time World Cup winners Italy failed to qualify for the 2026 tournament, then head coach Gennaro Gattuso lamented that Africa had so many places at the global showcase.

"Africa deserves fewer World Cup slots," he said, referring to the number of automatic qualifying places allocated to that continent rising from five to nine in an expanded 48-nation event.

It became 10 when the Democratic Republic of Congo won an inter-continental play-off and returned to the World Cup after 52 years. Was Gattuso, a midfielder in the Italian 2006 World Cup-winning team, correct? Was Africa over represented in the United States, Canada and Mexico?

Apart from a disastrous showing by Tunisia, who axed coach Sabri Lamouchi after their first group game and lost all three matches, African flag-bearers proved competitive, justifying their presence. The other nine representatives reached the knockout stage, five as group runners-up. The other four were among the eight best third-placed teams. That represents 90% success, the highest among the FIFA regions, followed by South America (83.33), Europe (81.25) and Asia (22.22). Europe did surge to the fore in the knockout phase with six quarter-finalists. Africa and South America had one each.

African teams were less successful in the round of 32, with seven eliminated. Egypt made the



Egypt's Mohamed Salah and team-mates celebrate after Hossam Abdelmaguid scores the penalty past Australia's Mathew Ryan to win the shootout at Dallas Stadium in Arlington, Texas on July 3. (Reuters)

round of 16 and Morocco became the first African team to reach the quarter-finals twice. A worrying trend was conceding late goals, with star strikers Lionel Messi, Harry Kane and Erling Haaland among those benefitting.

Messi levelled as Argentina turned a two-goal deficit against Egypt into a 3-2 triumph. Kane struck twice as England edged DR Congo and Haaland netted the winner for Norway over Ivory Coast. A spectacular collapse saw Senegal surrender a two-goal advantage with five minutes remaining against Belgium to lose after extra time.

Many Africans believed Senegal would be the best performers of the 10 qualifiers, but they flopped, losing three of four games and scraping into the round of 32 as the eighth best third-placed side. In the aftermath of the Teranga Lions' exit there were hints of in-

ternal strife. Midfielder Pape Gu-eye said he would not represent his country again until coach Pape Thiaw was dumped.

Egypt led Argentina 2-0, having had another goal controversially disallowed, with 12 minutes left. But a dramatic turnaround led to an Enzo Fernandez header giving the title-holders a 3-2 victory.

Losing coach Hossam Has-san speculated that the officiating team for the game, headed by French referee Francois Letexier, may have been subjected to "external pressure" to favour Argentina. FIFA referees chief Pierluigi Collina responded: "Match officials make honest decisions and, just like players and coaches, they always try to do their best."

TV analyst and former French star Thierry Henry said. "African sides relax too early. People talk about talent and passion, but

when they go two goals up, the focus drops."

Ex-Sweden striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic added: "Several African teams that were leading found a way to lose. In a World Cup, that is not bad luck, that is bad game management." Morocco losing to France in the quarter-finals demonstrated that while African football is progressing, there is still a significant gap when facing the cream of Europe.

It took the Atlas Lions 83 minutes to have a shot on target and France goalkeeper Michael Maigman comfortably pushed away the speculative shot from Azzedine Ounahi. There were no excuses from Morocco coach Mohamed Ouahbi: "France are a really great side... they have rarely had as much talent as they do now."

Morocco have already qualified for the 2030 World Cup along with fellow hosts Portugal and Spain. While Morocco went furthest, last-32 losers Cape Verde enthralled millions of spectators and TV viewers, despite not winning any of their four matches.

The tiny archipelago off west Africa with a population of just over half a million people defied Spain in their opening match to force a 0-0 draw. Goalkeeper Vozinha made a string of superb saves to foil one of the title favourites. The worldwide impact was stunning. His Instagram following soared from 50,000 to 5 million. Cape Verde equalised twice before losing 3-2 to Argentina in a last-32 tie and their second goal, a looping cross-cum-shot from Sidney Lopes Cabral, should be a contender for the best of the tournament.