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SPORT

PREVIEW

Spain bank on midfield control to contain French Fab Four

BAENA SAYS SPAIN HAVE TRAVELLED ABOUT 16,000KMS MORE THAN FRANCE BEFORE THE SEMI-FINAL



France's head coach Didier Deschamps during a training session. (AFP)

Reuters
Dallas

France may arrive with a fearsome front four and enough attacking firepower to make defenders sleep badly, but Spain's plan for their World Cup semi-final is rather more territorial: keep the ball, dictate the rhythm and make the danger flow the other way.

Winger Alex Baena said Spain obviously respected one of the tournament's most potent teams, spearheaded by an attacking line of Kylian Mbappe, Michael Olise, Ousmane Dembele and either Desire Doue or Bradley Barcola. But the Spaniard insisted they would not spend today's clash simply waiting for the storm.

"The four up front are having a great tournament and we will have to keep an eye on them. But we will try to make them watch us more than we watch them," Baena told reporters yesterday.

"Our strength is having the ball, having a lot of possession to attack and to make sure they attack us as little as possible. Hopefully, tomorrow it will be like that too."

That line neatly captured Spain's approach when they came out victorious in the Euros and Nations League semis against Didier Deschamps' team. Baena said possession would again be Spain's first form of defence and their clearest route to control, but warned that history would not do any tackling for them.

"It is true that we come from two matches in which we beat them, and that suited us, but every match is a world of its own," he said.

"They are having a spectacular tournament."

The subplot to Spain's tactical confidence is a travel schedule that has left them covering considerably more ground than France before the semi-final.

Spain opted to stay in Chattanooga, Tennessee in the group stage, where no World Cup matches were played and had to travel to three different



Alex Baena of Spain speaks to the media before a training session at Cotton Bowl in Dallas. (AFP)

time zones for their matches while France have kept their base in Boston throughout and will play their first match outside the Eastern Time zone, having travelled some 16,000 kilometers less than their opponents. However, full back Pedro Porro played down concerns over fatigue.

"From the outside you see it, but in our day-to-day life we travel up and down and we don't see the kilometers we do," Porro said. "We have been able to recover for this match."

Baena was more open about the strain. "It is true that we are a little tired from so much travel," he said. "We have travelled much more and done more kilometers than them and, in the end, when you get close to the end, you notice it a bit."

"But I think we are all fine, with a lot of excitement and a lot of desire. It is respect for one of the best teams in the tournament and in the world," he said.

"We hope it will be a very, very even match and that it will be decided by small details."

France are one victory from extend-

ing one of the most extraordinary eras of World Cup dominance, with a third successive final and a fifth appearance in the showpiece match in eight tournaments within reach when they face Spain. To get there, Didier Deschamps' side must overcome the team who have repeatedly blocked their path in recent years and whose defence has been breached only once at this tournament. They reached the World Cup final in 1998, 2006, 2018 and 2022, winning twice, and victory in Dallas would send them into a fifth final in eight tournaments.

It would also make them the first nation since Brazil between 1994 and 2002 to appear in three consecutive World Cup finals. That consistency has been built around Deschamps's ability to renew his team without sacrificing its competitive identity. The side who won in 2018 was founded on defensive solidity and ruthless transitions; the 2022 finalists leaned heavily on Mbappe's brilliance. This version appears deeper, more adventurous and less dependent on a single route to victory.



Spain coach Luis De La Fuente during training yesterday. (Reuters)

FIVE CLASSIC FRANCE V SPAIN CLASHES BEFORE WORLD CUP SEMI-FINAL

France and Spain will meet in a heavyweight World Cup semi-final showdown today, with Les Bleus bidding to reach a third straight final and La Roja still in contention to follow their triumph at Euro 2024 by claiming the biggest prize of all. Ahead of that game AFP Sports looks at five of the best past encounters between the nations:

Arconada's howler, France's first title
1984 European Championship final: France 2 Spain 0

The first competitive meeting of the European neighbours came in Paris in the Euro 84 final, as a France team inspired by Michel Platini claimed their first major international title. The game at the Parc des Princes hinged on a Platini free-kick just before the hour mark which Spain goalkeeper Luis Arconada let squirm through his grasp and in to give France the lead. It was Platini's ninth goal in five games at the tournament, and set them on the way to victory. They had Yvon Le Roux sent off late on but Bruno Bellone then sealed their triumph. France were European champions,

France's forward Kylian Mbappe takes part in a training session at the Southern Methodist University in University Park in Texas yesterday. (AFP)



and Spain would not reach another tournament final until they won Euro 2008.

French fightback in Hanover
2006 World Cup, last 16: Spain 1 France 3

The only meeting of the teams at a World Cup before this year came in Germany in 2006, as they faced off in the last 16 in Hanover. A strong Spain team topped their group with three wins out of three, while France laboured through as runners-up in their section after being held by Switzerland and South Korea. Spain went ahead through a David Villa penalty, but Franck Ribery equalised before half-time. Patrick Vieira then put France in front as extra time loomed, and Zinedine Zidane clinched the victory. Raymond Domenech's France ended up losing the final on penalties to Italy, while Spain were left bruised by another major tournament in which they fell short of their potential - they bounced back to win the 2010 World Cup, though, in between back-to-back Euro triumphs in 2008 and 2012.

Mbappe wins Nations League
2021 UEFA Nations League final: Spain 1 France 2

There have been a series of meetings between the teams in a tournament context in recent years, beginning with the 2021 Nations League final in Milan. In front of a restricted crowd due to the Covid pandemic,

Mikel Oyarzabal gave Luis Enrique's Spain the lead just after the hour mark. Karim Benzema, the Real Madrid striker who had recently been brought back into the international fold after over five years in the wilderness, equalised from Kylian Mbappe's assist. Mbappe then grabbed the winner as France won the second title of Didier Deschamps' reign as coach, after the 2018 World Cup.

Yamal's stunner
Euro 2024 semi-final: Spain 2 France 1

The France team at Euro 2024 was different to the side that has lit up this World Cup. They reached the last four by scoring three goals in five games - one was a penalty, the other two were own goals. Randal Kolo Muani became the first France player to score in open play at the tournament when he gave them the lead early in the semi-final against Spain in Munich. But Lamine Yamal equalised with a wonderful strike, four days before his 17th birthday. Dani Olmo then got what proved to be the winner a few minutes later, and Spain went on to defeat England in the final.



Spain's Lamine Yamal during a training session in Dallas yesterday. (Reuters)

Nine-goal thriller
2025 UEFA Nations League semi-final: Spain 5 France 4

France had started their transformation into a much more exciting team when the sides last met, in the Nations League semi-finals in June last year in Stuttgart. Spain were 4-0 up early in the second half thanks to goals by Nico Williams, Mikel Merino, a Lamine Yamal penalty, and Pedri. Kylian Mbappe pulled one back from the spot but Yamal got Spain's fifth, before France rallied and strikes by Rayan Cherki and Randal Kolo Muani either side of a Dani Vivian own goal made the scoreline more respectable. Spain went on to lose the final on penalties to Portugal. Spain also won 5-3 in the gold medal match at the 2024 Olympics - Manu Kone, Michael Olise, Jean-Philippe Mateta, Desire Doue, Rayan Cherki, Pau Cubarsi and Alex Baena all played in that game, and are in line to feature this time too.

COMMENT

McCullum feels sorry for England defeats

AFP
London

Brendon McCullum has apologised for the unsuccessful end of his reign as England's Test coach, saying "it's time for someone else to have a go" while insisting it is "romantic" his tenure and that of former captain Ben Stokes ended in the same match.

McCullum, who will remain in charge of England's limited-overs set-up, was axed from the red-ball role he had held since 2022 after overseeing seven defeats in the team's last nine Tests.

The former New Zealand captain was said to have "stood down" in an England and Wales Cricket Board statement released Sunday but McCullum had no qualms in admitting Monday he had been dismissed.

"Yeah, I got a tap on the shoul-

der," he told reporters in Birmingham on the eve of the first one-day international against India at Edgbaston.

"I was disappointed but at the same time I fully respect the decision. We're in a results business and fundamentally our results weren't good enough. It's time for someone else to have a go.

"We didn't always get it right. For that, I put my hand up."

England's recent 2-1 loss at home to New Zealand, which culminated with the international retirement of Test captain Stokes, marked the end of his reign as red-ball coach.

But the writing was on the wall for the 44-year-old McCullum following a woeful 4-1 Ashes reverse in Australia concluded in January which saw the England squad accused of fostering a drinking culture.

That extended England's mediocre record in showpiece series



against the other members of the so-called 'Big Three', losing away to Australia and India and drawing 2-2 against both countries on home soil.

"We just weren't quite able to win those big series, against India

and Australia, the two marquee series," said McCullum.

"We just weren't able to get the results and for that I guess I can only say sorry. I was the leader of that group. I was in charge of the team culturally, in charge of the

team results-wise as well."

McCullum added: "If you don't get the results, being a results business, fundamentally you get replaced. I've been around this game for 20-odd years and I know if you aren't getting the results, someone else needs an opportunity.

"I put my hand up for that and accept it wasn't good enough."

McCullum heads into the three-match ODI campaign against India buoyed by England's 4-0 clean sweep of the T20 world championships.

But by reverting to separate coaches for Test and white-ball cricket, England risk a repeat of the clashes over player availability between Andy Flower and Ashley Giles from 2012-14.

Flower, a three-time Ashes-winning coach who led England to number one in the Test rankings in his previous reign, has been touted as McCullum's red-ball successor.

"Once the new coach comes into

play we will sit down and unpick a lot of this stuff," McCullum said. "I'm sure that will be a collaborative process."

McCullum also said it was fitting his last Test in charge also marked the end of Stokes's time on the international stage, with the all-rounder dramatically announcing his retirement from England duty during the series finale against New Zealand at Trent Bridge less than two weeks ago.

The duo came together four years ago and were the driving forces behind England's aggressive 'Bazball' approach to Test match cricket.

"I got some nice messages from Stokesy, actually," McCullum told the BBC. "I guess, in a romantic kind of way there's something about Stokesy and me going out together.

"We started it together and we go out together, and I have no problem with that."

CRICKET

Bold India crush England in first women's Test

SEAM BOWLER GAUD IS NAMED PLAYER OF THE MATCH

AFP
London

Sneh Rana and Deepti Sharma shared the last four wickets as India completed a 270-run thrashing of England to win the first women's Test at Lord's yesterday.

England, set a record-breaking target of 457 for victory, were dismissed for 186 shortly before lunch on the final day of four.

Rana took 4-42, removing Amy Jones for 54 and finishing the landmark match when she bowled Sophie Ecclestone for 50.

Fellow spinner Sharma chipped in with the wickets of Issy Wong and Lauren Bell as England crumbled in front of a crowd that included India men's cricket great Sachin Tendulkar.

India were dominant in all aspects of a game being played 142 years, and 150 matches, after Lord's staged its first men's Test and decades on from the first women's game of any kind at the London ground - a 1976 one-day international between England and Australia.

Victory meant India finished their tour with joyous memories of Lord's, having been knocked out of the T20 World Cup in the group phase at the 'Home of Cricket' by eventual champions Australia.

England, by contrast, struggled to adapt to the demands of the longer format in a match that started just days after their T20 World Cup final loss to Australia at Lord's on July 5.

Their second-heaviest Test reverse, in terms of runs, and fourth defeat in five Tests was not the way England would have wanted to send off Tammy Beaumont and former captain Heather Knight in the veteran batters' final appearance before international retirement.

The match was a personal triumph for India's Kranti Gaud and Yastika Bhatia, the first women to take five wickets and score a century respectively in a women's Test at Lord's.

Gaud took a superb 5-37 in England's first-innings 170 and wicket-keeper Bhatia's 113 - her first century in any international format - was the cornerstone of



India players celebrate with the trophy after winning the one-off Test match against England at the Lord's Lord's Cricket Ground in London yesterday. (AFP)



Former India cricketer Sachin Tendulkar with Smriti Mandhana and Harmanpreet Kaur before the start of day 4 at Lord's yesterday. (AFP)

India's imposing second-innings 341-7 declared. India captain Harmanpreet Kaur praised her top order, with opener Smriti Mandhana hitting fifties in both innings

"In this Test match, the way they batted was outstanding to watch," said Kaur at the presentation ceremony.

"Bhatia is a great batter. I had a really strong feeling for her - that's why we put her in the eleven - and I'm really happy with the way she played."

Seam bowler Gaud was named player of the match after also taking 2-54 in the second innings.

"Growing up I never imagined something like this would happen but the moment the Test

started I wanted to get my name on the honours board," said Gaud. "I stuck to what the coaches told me. My strength is to hit the right length and the ball moved and did its bit."

Defeat left England still searching for their first win in a home women's Test since 2005.

"I'm disappointed all round, really," England coach Charlotte Edwards told Sky Sports.

"You come into such a historic Test match and occasion, which has been absolutely amazing. To then not play anywhere near our best over the four days..."

The former England captain added: "A lot of credit has to go to India. I thought they were exceptional. They were really dis-

ciplined with bat and ball." Nat Sciver-Brunt, the current England skipper lamented a lack of time between formats but said: "As cricketers we have to be prepared for that and recover as best we can before preparing for a Test match."

England resumed in dire straits at 130-6. The highest successful fourth-innings chase in any women's Test is Australia's 198 against England in Sydney in 2011.

England's slim hopes of success rested with wicket-keeper Jones, 52 not out after completing her second fifty of the match. Jones, however, had added just two runs to her overnight total when she pulled Rana to mid-wicket.

The tourists, in rare blemishes, dropped a couple of catches but the end was not long in coming to the vocal delight of India fans basking in another sun-drenched day at Lord's. Although yesterday's crowd was sparse, the overall attendance across the four days of 37,846 was a new record for a women's Test.

BRIEF SCORES
India 285 (Mandhana 83, Harmanpreet 58, Deepti 57) **and 341 for 7 dec.** (Bhatia 113, Mandhana 70, Richa 50*, Ecclestone 5-118) **beat England 170** (Jones 52, Gaud 5-37) **and 186** (Jones 54, Ecclestone 50, Rana 4-42) **by 270 runs**

MODERN-PENTATHLON

Russian athletes can represent their country again, says UIPM

Reuters
Moscow

Russian athletes will be allowed to represent their country in modern pentathlon competitions from next month after the sport's governing body (UIPM) lifted restrictions on their participation yesterday.

The move follows the International Olympic Committee's decision to provisionally lift the suspension of the Russian Olympic Committee last week.

The IOC banned the ROC in 2023 after the national body took over sports groups in occupied areas of Ukraine following Moscow's invasion of the country.

"Athletes and teams from Russia will have free rein to represent their country in UIPM Sports from next month, following the UIPM Executive Board's decision to lift all restrictions against their participation," the body said in a statement.

The executive board members had met online on Wednesday and voted in favour of lifting restrictions on Russian athletes and teams, the statement added.

"The IOC has made it clear that Olympic sport is moving into a new era where athletes will no longer be punished for the actions of their governments. Our (board) followed the IOC's guidance closely before voting in favour of the reinstatement of Russia," said UIPM President Rob Stull.

The decision takes effect from the sport's European championships, starting in Istanbul on August 3.

Athletes from Belarus, who were also banned by the IOC over the country being used as a staging ground for the war, were allowed by the UIPM to represent their country again in the sport in May.

The modern pentathlon decision comes after the governing body of table tennis also announced yesterday that they were allowing Russian athletes to return to international competition.

Hundred heroine Bhatia says its's 'unbelievable' to be on Lord's honours board

London: Yastika Bhatia said it felt "unbelievable" to have gained a coveted place on the Lord's honours boards after becoming the first woman to score a Test century at the 'Home of Cricket'. Bhatia's 113 on Sunday was the cornerstone of India's second-innings 341-7 declared that left England needing a mammoth 427 to win the inaugural women's Test at Lord's. Bhatia's innings, her maiden international century, was all the more creditable as it took place just six months after she endured surgery for an anterior cruciate ligament injury in her left knee. And the 25-year-old also had the additional responsibility of keeping wicket at Lord's amid soaring temperatures in London. "I think it's unbelievable," Bhatia told reporters after stumps. "Six months ago, I was in a very different place. And if you would have told me then I would have my name on the honours board, I wouldn't have believed it." Bhatia spent part of her innings battling alongside fellow left-hander Smriti Mandhana, who was dismissed for 70 after scoring 83 in India's first innings. As well as admiring the opener's qualities as a batter, Bhatia said Mandhana had also provided important guidance in her rehabilitation after also suffering an ACL injury.

"I had a conversation with her and she just looked at me and she said this is going to be the turning point in your career. "We also met when I was in rehab and a little nervous But she said 'you are a sincere kid, you are a good human - just keep doing the hard work and your time will come'." But Bhatia stressed it had been a long road back to full fitness. "I had to start from scratch," she explained. "Each muscle you train, all the muscles around the knee you have to train. "And then slowly, slowly progress will happen, not like in one or two days. So it's very frustrating missing out on big tournaments and just doing rehab." Bhatia, who thanked her family for their support, said it was wicket-keeping training that rekindled her love for cricket. "Just catches I did, not even batting, first I did keeping. So I was very happy. That day I was like a little kid smiling whole day that I did keeping after four months... And I felt the love of the game again after that." Bhatia had one moment of good fortune when to the first ball of Sunday's play and still on her overnight 39 not out, a delivery from Lauren Bell brushed her off stump without dislodging the balls. But from then on she was in complete command.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Long-serving Fleming quits IPL's Chennai Super Kings after 18 years as coach

AFP
New Delhi

Former New Zealand skipper Stephen Fleming is leaving his IPL team Chennai Super Kings after 18 years as coach, the franchise said yesterday. Fleming, 53, joined Chennai as a player in the inaugural edition of the T20

tournament in 2008 and took charge as coach the following year.

He forged a formidable partnership with long-time skipper MS Dhoni, with Chennai becoming one of the most successful IPL franchises with five titles. "The Super Kings and Head Coach Stephen Fleming have mutually decided to part ways," the franchise said in a statement.

"Together, we shared one of the most

successful and enduring partnerships in IPL history. The legacy you've built will continue to inspire us. With immense respect and gratitude, Thank you, Stephen."

Under Fleming's leadership, Chennai entered the Indian Premier League playoffs a record 12 times, while also being part of 10 IPL finals.

Fleming also guided the team to two Champions League T20 trophies. Fleming

had been under fire in the last few years after CSK failed to qualify for the Playoffs in the last three seasons since it's title-winning campaign in 2023. "Eighteen years is a lifetime in sport, and I leave with nothing but gratitude," Fleming was quoted as saying in the statement.

"My time with Chennai Super Kings has been the privilege of my coaching career. I am proud of everything we have achieved.

"Together, we celebrated unforgettable victories, overcame difficult moments, and built memories that will stay with me forever," he said. Fleming, a left-handed batter, scored 7,172 runs at an average of 40.06, including nine centuries, in 111 Tests for New Zealand between 1994 and 2008. He also played 280 one-day international and five T20 matches for the national team.

CYCLING

Vingegaard and Pogacar ready to rekindle rivalry

Arch-rivals primed for fresh assault on riders in Tour de France



UAE Team Emirates - XRG's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar cycles in a lone breakaway in the final kilometers to win the 6th stage of the 113th edition of the Tour de France. (AFP)

Reuters
Capdenac-Gare, France

The Tour de France returns to the mountain resort of Le Lioran today, where Denmark's Jonas Vingegaard claimed his last stage victory on the race and his last over Slovenia's Tadej Pogacar two years ago.

After the first rest day of this year's Tour, the peloton faces a 166.6-km ride between Aurillac and Le Lioran, featuring 3,800 metres of elevation, on France's Bastille Day holiday.

"This certainly brings back memories. Vingegaard and Pogacar had an epic battle here last time," Tour racing director Thierry Gouvenou said.

In the 11th stage of the 2024 edition, the Dane sealed his fourth stage win on the Tour in spectacular fashion.

Initially dropped by Pogacar with 30km to go, the Visma-Lease a Bike rider

caught his rival on the next climb with less than 15km remaining and shockingly out-sprinted him at the finish.

"It's, of course, very emotional for me," Vingegaard said at the time. "I would never have thought this three months ago."

Earlier that year, the twice Tour de France champion had suffered a broken collarbone, multiple fractured ribs, a pulmonary contusion and a collapsed lung during a devastating crash during the Tour of the Basque Country.

"I think that day and that victory really show what kind of character he is," Visma-Lease a Bike sports director Marc Reef said. "He came back from such an injury and even in the stage itself he got dropped but fought back to win in the end."

Two years on, Pogacar holds a commanding lead in the general classification, two minutes 42 seconds clear of Vingegaard, who wore the yellow jersey briefly in the race's opening days.

Reef believes the stage still carries emotional significance for both riders.



UAE Team Emirates - XRG's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar wearing the overall leader's yellow jersey douses himself with water to cool down during the 9th stage of the Tour de France. (Reuters)

"It means a lot for Jonas to finish there again but it also means something for Pogacar, I think, because he was beaten by Jonas over there," he said. "For sure, something will happen in the GC."

Tour racing director Gouvenou expects no other scenario.

"Knowing Pogacar and his thirst for revenge, the tactic will be simple: go all out for the stage win," he said. "His team will do everything to set him up to avenge his last defeat to Vingegaard in Le Lioran."

But the UAE Team Emirates-XRG leader, who has already secured two stage wins in this edition, played down talk of vengeance.

"It's a different stage. I'm not seeking any revenge or whatever. It was a good day at the time," the four-time Tour de France winner said.

Bastille Day would fire up the home competitors, Pogacar predicted, saying: "We can expect big fights for stage victory from French riders."

GOLF

South Korea's Tom Kim emerges from pack to clinch Scottish Open

Reuters
London

South Korea's Tom Kim likes how he handled the pressure Sunday and the reward that came with it.

Lee shot a final-round 6-under-par 64 without a bogey and emerged from a crowded field to win the Genesis Scottish Open at North Berwick, Scotland.

"I played probably as good as I could down the stretch with pressure, and I executed when I needed to," Kim said. "Very proud of myself for just being calm out there."

He finished at 17-under 263 for a two-shot victory over Australia's Min Woo Lee, who posted a final-round 67 at The Renaissance Club.

Kim's fourth PGA Tour victory marked his first since the 2023 Shriners Children's Open. He notched three birdies on each nine to break free from the pack.

Lee used a third-round 66 to share the lead with Scotland's Robert MacIntyre and England's Matt Fitzpatrick going to the final 18 holes. Kim, Michael Thorbjornsen and defending champion Chris Gotterup stood one shot back.

Lee couldn't catch up because of Kim's steady play. Still, there were reasons for Lee to be satisfied.

"I'm just happy with the week and obviously a win would have been nice," Lee said. "But it was one of the first weeks that I was just happy with myself mentally."

Several golfers had a full day because of the third round's fog-related suspension, which meant some contenders played more than 27 holes on Sunday.

"It was a lot of work," Kim said.

Kim pointed to his second shot on the par-4 16th hole as perhaps one of the best shots he has hit in his career. It set him up for a 6-foot putt that resulted in his final birdie of the tournament.

Johnny Keefe (67 in the final round), MacIntyre (69), Fitzpatrick (69) and Japan's Keita Nakajima (67) shared third place at 13 under.

Based on the result, Keefe and



Thorbjornsen played their ways into the Open Championship for the coming week.

"Not only a great result but also getting into The Open is just tons of fun," Keefe said.

Thorbjornsen made birdies on three of the last five holes.

"Things were looking good up until this round where I struggled a little bit on the front nine but yeah, again, really, really happy with the way I finished," Thorbjornsen said.

MacIntyre was bidding for a victory in his home country, but he said too many putting failures prevented that.

Still, it was a special weekend.

"Having a chance to win with the whole crowd behind you is unbelievable," MacIntyre said.

"... Super excited to play more links golf, and enjoy the weather," MacIntyre added.

Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy recovered from a third-round 73 to shoot 64 and climb back to a tie for seventh place at 12 under. Thorbjornsen closed with a 69 and joined McIlroy at 12 under.

"Obviously there was some good in there today but there was some bad, as well," McIlroy said. "So I'm going to need to work a little bit over the next couple days to be ready for Thursday."

McIlroy tried to make it interesting by playing the first seven holes of the final round in 5 under.

Gotterup had a difficult stretch, shooting 71 in the final round and finishing tied for 11th at 10 under. He was only one shot off the lead when the day began, though like many others he had plenty of work remaining in the third round.

TENNIS

Sinner savours Wimbledon win after French Open shock

Reuters
London

Jannik Sinner said his successful Wimbledon title defence felt all the more sweet after his surprise early exit from the French Open last month, as he credited the long hours and hard work in the build-up to the grasscourt Grand Slam for his triumph.

The 24-year-old arrived at the All England Club a fortnight ago needing to answer his doubters after a second-round loss to the unheralded Juan Manuel Cerundolo in the blazing heat of the Parisian summer.

He skipped the traditional grasscourt tune-ups, opting instead for intensive training blocks that included sessions on hard courts, and gradually played his way into form before beating Alexander Zverev in Sunday's final.

"Every Grand Slam is different. Different story, different environment, different feelings before the tournament," Sinner told reporters about the emotions he felt after claiming his fifth major title.

"For me, this one means a lot, because it was tough after Paris. Last year was also tough. But coming here, I tried to put myself in the best position to be as competitive as possible.

"We put in a lot of workdays in Monaco, very, very long. Definitely sacrificing a lot of my time and everything to be in this position. Having this achievement, it means a lot to me. Yeah, it was an amazing day today."

Sinner is in the midst of a spectacular run of form having won all five Masters titles contested this season, losing only three matches. However, two of those defeats were at this year's first two majors, hence his Grand Slam drought stretched back to his triumph at the All England Club 12 months ago.

While he savoured Sunday's hard-fought win, Sinner said there was no feeling of relief af-



Italy's Jannik Sinner (left) holds the winner's trophy after the Wimbledon final against Germany's Alexander Zverev on Sunday. (AFP)

ter defeating a determined Zverev 6-7(7) 7-6(2) 6-3 6-4 in three hours and 46 minutes on Centre Court.

"Sometimes you have a tournament with a good outcome, and sometimes you just don't. There is no failure if you don't win a Grand Slam," Sinner added.

"Now I have five in my whole life. But it's five days of so many other days. You just want to enjoy it."

"Today was a very tough day. If I lose, it's still a great day. I never take things for granted."

French Open champion Zverev might have lost the fourth Grand Slam title clash of his career but Sinner said the German's game was improving and that was a great sign for the men's tour.

"That's exactly what's good, because you have always someone who's pushing you to the limit," Sinner said.

"We hope that Carlos Alcaraz is coming back (from injury), as well, because tennis needs him. Having Novak Djokovic still around, having all the young players coming, it's really nice."

"At the same time, you always need to work hard and have moments like this."

ZVEREV SAYS ATTACKING APPROACH CAN HELP
Wimbledon runner-up Alexan-

der Zverev rose to second in the ATP world rankings yesterday and while Centre Court conqueror Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz are the dominant forces in men's tennis, the German believes his new attacking strategy can help him close the gap.

The 29-year-old went toe-to-toe with world number one Sinner on Sunday, snapping a run of 14 lost sets to the Italian to lead the final before losing 6-7(7) 7-6(2) 6-3 6-4.

It was his 10th loss in a row to Sinner but unlike most of the other nine, this one was a real fight.

ILL-TIMED FALL
Had it not been for a fall at 3-3 in the third set on his only break point of the match, Zverev may well have become the first German man to win the singles title at the All England Club since Michael Stich in 1991.

Zverev's French Open triumph last month was his first Grand Slam title at the 41st attempt, although some will point to the fact that Sinner lost in the second round and Spanish seven-time major winner Alcaraz was absent with an ongoing wrist injury.

The new-found belief that the win over Flavio Cobolli at Roland Garros injected into Zverev was evident at Wimbledon where a far more attacking approach, espe-

cially with his forehand, fired him to his best-ever run at the grass-court Slam. "I've said it at the beginning of the year, and I've stuck to it. That's the tennis I want to play. That's the game style I want to play," Zverev told reporters.

"There were matches in the beginning of the year where I was struggling a bit more with this style, but I was consistently doing it. The more I do it, the better I'll become."

"I won a Grand Slam for the first time in my career in Paris. I made it to the finals here for the first time in my career. Of course, something has to be working."

Zverev's first serve percentage hovered around 80% for much of the final against Sinner while his forehand, once regarded as too passive, was used to destructive effect to rock the Italian.

"When I have the opportunity, I hit it. Whether I make it or miss it, that depends on the day. But I definitely go for it," he said to reporters.

"That's my goal, that's my aim for this year, that's my aim for hopefully the rest of my career."

CHALLENGING ALCARAZ AND SINNER
While Sinner and Alcaraz have 12 Grand Slam titles between them, Zverev believes he can challenge them for the game's big prizes.

"I think I've been pushing those guys. I haven't beaten them this year, but I've pushed them to the limits, I would say," Zverev said.

"Alcaraz in Australia, Jannik maybe here."

"Even though it was four sets, I think it was a very close four sets, which could have gone five as well," he added.

"There was always this conversation who will be the third guy, the search for the third guy. Kind of the last couple years, I've always been the third guy, but I was just far away from those two. If I get closer to them, if I can be in the mix, competing and winning the big tournaments, it would be great."

SPIETH SAYS HE HAS MORE MAJORS LEFT IN HIM

LONDON: Jordan Spieth refuses to accept the form that led him to win three of golf's major titles has been lost forever.

The American won the US Masters, US Open and British Open in a purple patch from 2015-17, leading many observers to suggest it was just a matter of time before he joined the select band of players who have completed a career Grand Slam of golf's four most prestigious championships.

But while the US PGA has continued to remain elusive for Spieth, so has any other major title.

This week, however, Spieth has another chance to end that drought in a British Open being staged at the Royal Birkdale course near Liverpool - the scene of his 2017 triumph in golf's oldest major championship.

The intervening nine years have been tough for the former world number one, with injuries and a loss of form meaning Spieth has won just two tournaments since the last of his three majors.

But the 32-year-old hasn't given up hope of adding a fourth major to his name.

"I'll never believe that until I'm

at a point in my career where my health or whatever would be that, because if you give up on reaching your ceiling then I don't see a point in playing any more. I'll do everything I can to be the very best in the world because I know I can be. I have been. It's nice to have the blueprint."

Spieth's best finish this year is eleventh although there were signs of a reawakening at the Masters when he tied for twelfth, seven strokes behind the champion Rory McIlroy.

"If you are capable of leading in every (statistical) category, then you are capable of doing great things: even this season I've been able to lead in each of the different categories," he said. "There are things I can do significantly better now than when I was number one in the world, therefore there should be nothing to stop me in my own head to believe that I can reach that again. I'm 32, I'm not 42. At 42 you'd really have to sacrifice a lot of things to try and do that. I don't feel like I have to. I'm always comparing myself a bit to myself at my best, but not to try to be the exact player."

JOHNSON WINS TITLE IN OHIO, GETS RICHER BY \$525,000



Zach Johnson of the US poses with the trophy after winning the Kaulig Companies Championship 2026 at Firestone Country Club on Sunday in Akron, Ohio. Johnson's 2-under-par 68 was more than enough after he began the final round with a four-shot cushion. Johnson finished at 15-under 265 for the week. Johnson got richer by \$525,000 for his six-shot victory. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

APPOINTMENT

Bellingham's brilliance rises above Tuchel rift

'Maybe he doesn't know what it's like to play in those conditions'

Reuters
Kansas City, Missouri

There was a brief moment of tension in the aftermath of England's 2-1 World Cup quarter-final win over Norway on Saturday when Jude Bellingham pushed back against criticism from manager Thomas Tuchel.

"Yeah, well, whatever," the midfielder said after learning that Tuchel had described England's performance as "sloppy" despite their extra-time victory.

Bellingham, whose two goals sent England into the semi-finals, was quick to defend his team mates after another gruelling evening in punishing conditions.

The exchange offered a glimpse of the differing perspectives of a demanding coach unwilling to overlook flaws in England's display and a star player focused on the resilience that carried the team into the last four.

Tuchel surprised many with his blunt assessment after England battled past Norway in sweltering Miami conditions. While delighted to reach the semi-finals and full of praise for the players' mentality, the German said he was unhappy with almost every aspect of the performance.

"The result is fantastic. We are in the last four. It's amazing but I'm not happy with the performance," Tuchel said, describing England as sloppy, error-prone and fortunate to progress.

Bellingham, however, viewed events through a different lens.

The Real Madrid midfielder pointed to the draining heat and the quality of Norway's attacking threat, led by Erling Haaland and Martin Odegaard, suggesting the task had been tougher than Tuchel's post-match verdict im-



England coach Thomas Tuchel speaks with Jude Bellingham during a hydration break in the World Cup quarter-final against Norway in Miami on Saturday. (AFP)

plied. "Maybe he doesn't know what it's like to play in those conditions against Erling Haaland, Odegaard, (Antonio) Nusa, (Alexander) Sorloth," Bellingham told reporters. "That's not an easy team to play against."

It is not the first time friction between the pair has become public.

Tuchel caused controversy just over a year ago when he described elements of Bellingham's on-field behaviour as potentially "repulsive" to some viewers while discussing the player's fiery temperament.

The England manager later apologised, insisting the word had been used unintentionally and that there was no hidden criti-

cism of the midfielder. Questions also surfaced before the World Cup over Bellingham's role after Tuchel suggested places in his starting lineup were not guaranteed, even for England's biggest names.

Yet any debate over Bellingham's importance has been emphatically settled on the pitch, as England would not be preparing for a semi-final were it not for the 23-year-old.

He has repeatedly delivered in decisive moments, rescuing his side with two goals against both Norway and Mexico, and producing the kind of performances that have underlined his status as one of the tournament's outstanding players.

And Tuchel, despite his frustration with England's overall display, was unequivocal in his praise of Bellingham after the match.

"Enough said. He does it every single match," the coach said. "World class."

England's World Cup campaign continues with a heavyweight semi-final against champions Argentina on Wednesday in Atlanta. Successful tournament teams do not always need perfect harmony. They do, however, need players capable of deciding matches when everything else breaks down.

England have one in Bellingham, and as they move into the final four, that will matter more than any disagreement with his manager.

Bilic returns as Croatia head coach

AFP
Zagreb

Slaven Bilic will return as head coach of Croatia, the national football federation announced Monday, replacing Zlatko Dalic, who resigned after the country's World Cup exit.

Dalic stepped down last week after a tenure that included a runner-up finish at the 2018 World Cup. Croatia failed to move into the last 16 of this year's World Cup, losing 2-1 to Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal.

Former Croatian international defender Bilic previously coached Croatia between 2006 and 2012.

The 57-year-old, who also coached English clubs West Ham, West Bromwich Albion and Watford, was "unanimously appointed" as head coach, the Croatian Football Federation (HNS) said.

"It is not easy to succeed Zlatko, but we are convinced that Slaven is the right person for this role," HNS president Marijan Kustic said, praising Bilic's "extensive coaching and managerial experience".

Bilic recorded a higher winning percentage than Dalic during his last tenure, with 42 wins, 15 draws and eight defeats in 65 matches. But his side's best result was reaching the quarter-finals of the 2008 European

Championships, which they lost on penalties to Turkey. "I am extremely excited about this challenge, which I feel completely ready for as a more mature and experienced coach than I was in 2006, but with the same motivation and desire for Croatia to be strong, bold and successful," Bilic told a press conference.

Modric in spotlight

The Split-born Bilic said he took the post to "achieve a great result, above all at the European Championship" in 2028.

Asked about whether veteran captain Luka Modric would retire from international football, Bilic said the decision was up to the former Ballon d'Or winner, who will turn 41 in September.

"He is much more to Croatia than just the best player. Modric has been asked whether he is retiring since 2018 ... I would like him to continue playing for the national team."

With 44 caps for Croatia, Bilic's club career was mostly spent at Hajduk Split with stints in England at West Ham and Everton in the mid-1990s.

Bilic's last coaching position was at Saudi Arabia's Al-Fateh, during the 2023-2024 season.

Modric's Croatia lost the 2018 World Cup final to France in Russia.

Dalic also guided the nation to the semi-finals of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the last-16 at Euro 2020.



Slaven Bilic speaks during a press conference after being appointed Croatia's head coach in Zagreb yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Iraola vows to remain true to himself at Liverpool



Andoni Iraola, the new manager for English Premier League side Liverpool, poses as he meets the media at the team's training ground in Kirkby in Liverpool yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
London

Andoni Iraola said yesterday he wants to enjoy the "magic" linked with being the manager of Liverpool but is determined his Anfield appointment does not change him fundamentally.

The former Bournemouth boss is well aware of the magnitude of the position he holds, with Liverpool's demand for success exemplified by the fact he arrived in Merseyside as a result of the six-time European champions sacking Arne Slot a year after the Dutchman led the club to the Premier League title.

"Until I go through certain experiences I will not fully know but I'm here to experience those situations, I'm ready for it," said the 44-year-old Iraola in his first press conference as Liverpool

manager. "I understand this is a massive club. Everything that I'm going to say now, it's going to get the biggest scrutiny. You have to be very aware of the mistakes but I wouldn't like to be too careful."

"I would like to act quite normal: I'm not going live in my bubble - just training ground, home. I would like also to go to the city, experience the city - I know some places.

"But it's part also of the magic of being the Liverpool manager and I would like not to change too much," the Spaniard added.

Liverpool finished a disappointing fifth in the Premier League table last season, losing 12 matches, and Iraola understands the need to refresh his squad following the recent departures of Mohamed Salah and Andy Robertson.

"Obviously we've signed two players already (centre-back Jeremy Jacquet and winger Victor

Munoz) but we need more players, we know this. "As a coach, selfishly, I want the players here from day one ready to train for pre-season but understand football doesn't work like this. I know the club is working hard for those signings and I'm trying to help also."

Iraola, meanwhile, wants to restore trust with fans frustrated by the team's performances under Slot by providing the kind of attacking football not seen at Anfield since the end of Jurgen Klopp's reign in 2024.

"I would like to give them a team that they can feel proud of," he said.

"I think football - and especially Liverpool - is about connecting: connecting with the people, connecting with our supporters.

"We have to be a team that works hard, intense, aggressive, vertical so everyone can be identified and everyone can feel comfortable supporting this team."

PREMIER LEAGUE

Chelsea's new boss Alonso demands hunger and passion

Reuters
London

Chelsea manager Xabi Alonso said he wants to see greater hunger and a desire to improve from his players as he prepares for his first Premier League season in charge.

Chelsea finished tenth in the league last season following a disappointing, trophyless campaign and failed to qualify for European competition. "We need hunger, passion, we need to want to improve," Alonso told reporters yesterday.

"The Premier League is so competitive. We need to prepare ourselves, we need to be determined in the details, in how we want to play. But the most important bit is our game."

Alonso also addressed the future of winger Alejandro Garnacho, who has been linked with a move away from Stamford Bridge as the club look to reshape their squad. "There is interest in him from other clubs, so let's see how this develops. Hopefully it finishes in the best possible way for all parties," he said.

Garnacho struggled for form after his move from Manchester United, scoring one Premier League goal in 24 appearances last season. Alonso declined to discuss midfielder Enzo Fernandez's long-term future in detail but said he had spoken with the Argentina international and hoped to keep him at the club.

Chelsea have made only one major signing so far in the transfer window, bringing in right back Marco Palestra from Serie A side Atalanta on a deal running until 2023.

"He has many great qualities for modern football. He can play



Chelsea new manager Xabi Alonso poses with the club shirt in London yesterday. (Reuters)

in a back four or a back five, on the left. We need to keep working with him to adapt to the Premier League. He has a great mentality in terms of competitiveness and his hunger," Alonso said. Chelsea completed the sale of Brazilian midfielder Andrey Santos earlier on Monday. Alonso said Chelsea's absence from European competition next season would not significantly alter his plans for the new campaign.

"Small details, for sure, but the main focus for how we want to start in August does not change much," he said.

"We are working with the sporting directors. What we need to reinforce is clear, but we are working on it."

Alonso's appointment marks a return to English football for the Spaniard, who made 210 appearances for Liverpool before joining Real Madrid in 2009 and ended his playing career at Bayern Munich in 2017.

The Spaniard began his coaching career in Real Madrid's acad-

emy before taking charge of Real Sociedad's reserve side.

He spent seven months as Real Madrid coach, after an impressive stint with Bayer Leverkusen, before he left by mutual agreement in January following a poor run of results.

At Chelsea, he inherits a side seeking stability after a turbulent campaign in which they changed managers twice, with Enzo Maresca and Liam Rosenior both departing. Rosenior was sacked in April following a run of seven defeats in eight matches in all competitions.

The 44-year-old Alonso said one of his priorities was to establish a clear identity and unite the squad ahead of the new season.

"To be part of that process, how we want to play, how we want to approach a game, that's my goal," Alonso said. "That's what I am looking forward to with the whole squad."

Chelsea begin their Premier League campaign at Fulham on August 24.