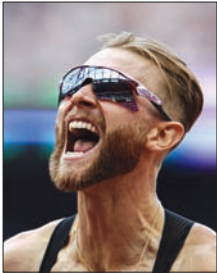


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Brook urges
England to follow
ever-green
Root's example



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SPORT

PREVIEW

It's Messi's Argentina vs Spain's machine in smoggy New Jersey

The final is about far more than lifting the trophy; it is layered with compelling personal twists

Reuters
New York

Argentina and Spain were supposed to settle a score in Qatar earlier this year, in the Finalissima between the champions of South America and Europe, before US-Israeli strikes on Iran forced the match to be cancelled.

Today in New Jersey, beneath a stubborn blanket of choking smog that has shrouded the eastern United States, they will finally meet with far more than ceremonial silverware at stake.

The World Cup final offers football's grandest stage a deliciously odd pairing: Argentina, all pulse, fire and Lionel Messi, against Spain, the European champions who appear to treat chaos as an administrative error and have turned control into something close to an art form.

It is South America v Europe, passion v precision, a match threaded with curious personal history, from the touchline to La Masia, where Barcelona's greatest graduate, Messi, will face teenager Lamine Yamal, the academy's dazzling young heir.

Argentina are back in the final four years after their cathartic triumph in Qatar, when Messi finally lifted the trophy in a breathless win over France. Back then, with Messi aged 35, another World Cup final seemed fanciful. Now 39, he is still bending time, defenders and probability.

Argentina's campaign has been less a smooth title defence than a pilgrimage through suffering. With 17 members of their 26-man squad having been part of the 2022 triumph, Lionel Scaloni's side have reached the final the hard way: beating Cape Verde in extra time and surviving nerve-shredding clashes with Egypt, Switzerland and England.

They have played at times like a team with their hearts on the toe of their boots, powered by Messi's goals, assists and flashes of sorcery. Each intervention has added another page to the never-ending

argument over whether he or Brazilian Pele is the greatest footballer in history.

For Argentinian goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez said he gets emotional when he reflects on the collective efforts that have gone into their success.

"Honestly sometimes I cry to myself thinking about what we have achieved," he said.

"My message to my teammates is that they should enjoy this moment, prepare with a smile on our faces. This is something we will remember forever."

If Argentina have had the air of Rocky Balboa staggering through another round, Spain have arrived looking more like cool operators who know where the exits are.

Unbeaten in 37 matches, Spain can win their second World Cup, after 2010, and break the international unbeaten record set by Italy between 2018 and 2021.

They arrived in North America as the bookmakers' favourites after winning the European Championship and have largely carried themselves like a side that sees pressure not as danger, but as a meeting already scheduled.

Their route has seemed carefully mapped, as if everything before the semi-final was part of the warm-up. Under Luis de la Fuente, who has coached many of the squad since their teenage years in Spain's youth system, they have developed a level of collective un-



Spain captain Rodri (left) Lionel Messi of Argentina. (AFP)

derstanding that can make opponents feel trapped in a beautifully lit room with no doors. France will understand that feeling well.

Spain's passing and positional play can suffocate, but within the machinery there is wild invention too, and most of it comes

from Lamine.

The winger, who enchanted the European Championship as a 16-year-old, has spent his short career shredding age records and expectations. Since making his Barcelona debut at 15, he has invited comparisons with the most

famous product of La Masia - the man facing him today.

Messi and Lamine are also linked by one of football's strangest viral images: Messi, as a young Barcelona player, pictured bathing baby Lamine. What once looked like a quaint curiosity now feels like an omen drafted by a particularly playful scriptwriter.

When asked whether Messi's talent had been passed on to Lamine that day, like the Midas touch, Lamine's father replied:

"Who's to say it wasn't the other way round?"

The connections continue on the bench. Scaloni will face De la Fuente, who was his tutor on the Spanish Football Federation coaching course nearly a decade ago. The pupil now meets the teacher with the World Cup at stake.

The final may also be shaped by the conditions. The New Jersey pitch has not been kind to possession teams, with coaches and players complaining about its quality during the tournament.

That could complicate Spain's rhythm and invite Argentina into the kind of broken, emotional contest they relish.

The weather may add another layer of intrigue.

A hot and humid day is expected, with temperatures around 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit), and it will be only Spain's second match in an open-air stadium at this World Cup.

Wildfire smoke from Canada has also blanketed parts of the U.S. Midwest and Northeast with hazardous air, raising concerns with more than 80,000 fans expected at the final.

For Spain, the task is to keep the match clean, controlled and played to their patterns. For Argentina, it is to turn discomfort into theatre one more time.

However, Spain captain Rodri is bracing for a "physical" battle with reigning champions.

Rodri told a packed press conference in Manhattan that Spain will aim to ignore any possible "provocations" by their South American opponents and instead concentrate on imposing Spain's gameplan.

Rodri, the 2024 Ballon D'Or winner who has excelled at the heart of Spain's midfield during the World Cup, said he expects the final to be unlike any other game the European champions have faced.

"I think Sunday's match will be quite different," the Manchester City star told reporters.

"It will be a more physical one, and we must be prepared. But I believe that if we are known for something in this national team, it is that we know how to play different games based on the moment.

"So we can adapt to having to defend, counter-attacking, to attacking. We are a very complete team, and that is why we are here."

At the centre of it all stands Messi, trying to ensure that what could be his last World Cup match ends not as a farewell, but as one final act of mastery.

PRIZE-MONEY	
Champions:	\$50mn
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4th place:	\$27mn
5th-8th place:	\$19mn
9th-16th place:	\$15mn
17th-32nd place:	\$11mn
33rd-48th place:	\$9mn

SCALONI HAILS 'LEGEND' MESSI BEFORE FINAL

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni urged fans to make the most of seeing Lionel Messi lead his team out in another World Cup final at the age of 39 as the holders aim to retain the trophy when they take on Spain this weekend.

"He has made history. He is a legend," Scaloni said of the former Barcelona player, who has already helped Argentina win a World Cup and back-to-back Copa America titles in the last five years.

Messi's international career has enjoyed a remarkable late renaissance - a decade ago he briefly retired from the Argentina team at the age of 29 after a Copa America final loss to Chile, his fourth defeat in a final for his country. Messi and Scaloni hugged on the pitch at full-time after Wednesday's 2-1 semi-final win over England, with the Argentine captain calling that victory "pure history".

"It fills me with pride because he is the best player in the history of football," Scaloni said of Messi, who has scored eight goals at this World Cup, which is his sixth, and is the tournament's all-time top scorer with 21.

"To have been able to get to a final in the way that he has in this moment, at the age of 39, I think it is incredible. That is why I said we should enjoy having him, because look at what happened with Diego (Maradona) and how we ended up missing him.

"We still have Leo and we should appreciate that. He is the historic figure and the legend, as are all these players who have given us these marvellous years."

Argentina had gone 28 years without winning a major international title before lifting the Copa America in 2021 to spark this current golden era.

"They have done things that a few years ago were unthinkable. It was not easy to get here and to compete at this level over so many years," he said ahead of today's final at the MetLife Stadium just outside New York City.

"We might win and I hope we do but in any case the journey to get this far has been incredible."

Scaloni said he could not answer whether the game would definitely be Messi's last at a World Cup, but it seems highly unlikely he will continue until the next one in 2030.

Argentina will have to beat the reigning European champions if they are to become the first nation in 64 years to win back-to-back World Cups.

"They are a great team. Everything worries me about them," Scaloni said.

MESSI TO GET 'SPECIAL ATTENTION': DE LA FUENTE

Luis de la Fuente said Spain planned to pay "special attention" to Lionel Messi in Sunday's World Cup final but ruled out trying to man-mark the Argentina captain.

De la Fuente told reporters at a press conference that he knows from experience the challenges of using man-to-man marking against the eight-time Ballon D'Or winner. The Spain coach recalled an experience from when he was coaching Sevilla's youth team while Messi was playing junior football for Barcelona, underlining how it was impossible to keep him quiet for the whole match.

"I first encountered him when I was coaching the Sevilla youth team," he said.

"We went to Barcelona, and I had heard great things about a kid named Messi.

"So we assigned a player to mark him man-to-man, but in the 70th minute, I substituted the marker because he was on a yellow card. The score was 0-0, and in the span of 15 minutes, Messi scored four goals against us."

"So we won't use man-to-man marking this time. We have to stay alert and pay special attention, certainly," de la Fuente added.

Messi, 39, has produced a series of vintage performances for Argentina to carry them into Sunday's final, which will almost certainly be the veteran's last appearance in the World Cup.

"Messi is one of a kind," de la Fuente said. "An example for young athletes in terms of his attitude and behaviour, especially given the spectacular World Cup he is playing at his age."

De la Fuente strongly pushed back at suggestions that Argentina may resort to skullduggery or street-wise tactics in an attempt to disrupt Spain.

"Oh, please, no, no, no," de la Fuente said. "I would never dare to say that. I have the utmost admiration for this national team.

"They've won the World Cup, two Copa Americas, the Finalissima... and they are led by a close friend of mine. I have nothing but admiration and more admiration for them.

"I believe that both Spain and Argentina will have a game plan where talent and good football will rule over everything else."

De la Fuente said his team was prepared to adjust for the extended half-time interval for today's final. The break is expected to be nearly double the usual 15 minutes to accommodate a star-studded half-time show.

CRICKET

Lord’s ODI will not be Rohit’s last: BCCI

Reuters
London

India's team management has thrown its weight behind struggling opener Rohit Sharma amid speculation back home that today's third one-day international against England at Lord's could be his last.

The 39-year-old managed a laboured 26 off 47 balls on Thursday as England won the second match in Cardiff to level the three-match series.

Rohit has now gone 11 ODIs without a hundred and his poor run of form raises questions about his place for next year's World Cup, which South Africa will host along with Zimbabwe and Namibia.

Indian cricket board (BCCI) secretary Devajit Saikia, however, dispelled the rumours surrounding Rohit's retirement and affirmed that he remains part of the team's ODI plans.

"There are lot of speculations going on in media about Rohit Sharma's future. I

want to firmly assert that there has been no such discussion that Rohit will be playing his last match at Lord's on Sunday," Saikia told the Press Trust of India.

"Rohit is a regular member of the Indian ODI team and he will continue to represent the country as long as he is in the scheme of things. In other words, Lord's ODI won't be his last match."

The *Indian Express* newspaper earlier said the 39-year-old former India captain has been informed that the selectors have decided to "move on".

Batting coach Sitanshu Kotak, however, said white-ball stalwart Rohit was "too good" a player to feel any pressure.

"Yes, he didn't get runs, but I don't think that makes any difference," Kotak told reporters after Thursday's loss, dismissing suggestions that Rohit was struggling.

"On a particular day, many batters don't get the momentum they are looking for, and that can happen. You might see a completely different innings from Rohit Sharma at Lord's."

"Rohit probably didn't get balls in his areas and didn't get going."

"That's what I felt. So I wouldn't say he was struggling."

Rohit is the only batter to have scored three 200-plus scores in ODIs, including a 264 against Sri Lanka, which remains the highest score by a batter in this format.

He has already quit Test cricket and T20 Internationals.

Meanwhile India bowling coach Morne Morkel has backed Rohit Sharma to overcome his lean run in the ongoing ODI series against England.

"Rohit, as I said earlier, it is hard work with a new ball up front. We have seen that in the entire series. The ball is moving around. So batting up front, it is not easy. No doubt Rohit will work it out. He has done it in the past."

"He is experienced. And he just brings that calmness to the batting line-up. So without a doubt, no worries and concerns at all with the way he is going about things," Morkel said in the pre-match press conference yesterday.



India's Rohit Sharma walks on to the pitch ahead of the second one-day international against England at Sophia Gardens in Cardiff, Wales. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

Follow Root's example, Brook urges England

'He (Root) has played nearly 200 ODIs, he's still trying to learn'

AFP
London

England white-ball captain Harry Brook has urged his side to learn from Joe Root as they seek to complete a one-day international series win against top-ranked India.

Root followed his unbeaten 76 in England's defeat in the first ODI with a superbly-paced 99 not out as they won in Cardiff on Thursday to level the three-match series ahead of today's finale at Lord's.

England's victory in Cardiff followed a run of 16 defeats in their previous 20 ODIs.

That dismal sequence has raised questions about how competitive a team seemingly wedded to aggressive batting will be at next year's 50-over World Cup in southern Africa.

The 35-year-old Root - who has scored 7,752 runs in 191 ODIs with 20 hundreds - said he sympathised with younger players coming into the England side as changes to the domestic schedule meant they do not have "the wealth of experience and understanding of 50-over cricket".

But Brook, a Yorkshire teammate of Root insisted even the very best players are always looking to improve.

"I personally think you're always learning," Brook told reporters at Lord's yesterday.

"He (Root) has played nearly



England's Harry Brook (left) and head coach Brendon McCullum leave following the warm-up before the start of the second one-day international against India at Sophia Gardens in Cardiff, Wales. (Reuters)

200 ODIs, he's still trying to learn, he's still trying to get better as a player and he's England's greatest-ever batter."

When it was suggested to Brook that England had become over-reliant on Root, he said: "Root has been such a good player for so many years and it's awesome to have him on the side."

"We probably have depended on him quite a little bit in recent times in ODI cricket and Test cricket."

"Hopefully, the boys can learn

from what he's doing, myself included, and realise how easy he's making batting look, to be able to just rotate the strike."

"If we can add a little bit of Joe Root into our batting as a collective team, then we'll definitely be in some strong positions."

England are searching for a new Test coach. Brendon McCullum, who is still in charge of their white-ball teams, was sacked from the role after a recent 2-1 series loss against New Zealand.

That reverse meant England

had lost seven of their last nine Tests.

Asked what England needed from their new Test coach, Brook said: "That's a good question. That's up to the coach to decide."

"We want to put ourselves in strong positions as much as we possibly can to be able to dominate the game."

"Test cricket is a long game, five days, and we could probably be slightly more consistent than we have been over the last couple of years."

COMMENT

Sobers 'stood out' among the greats: West Indies legend Holding



Legendary West Indies captain and all-rounder Sir Garfield Sobers (right) shares a joke with Australian captain Steve Waugh at a function in Brisbane on November 21, 2000, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the famous tied Test between the two teams.

AFP
Paris, France

The late Garry Sobers "stood out" even among cricket's greats but remained humble despite his standing in the game, former West Indies bowler Michael Holding told AFP yesterday.

The Barbados-born Sobers, who has died at the age of 89, featured in 93 Tests between 1954 and 1974, amassing 8,032 runs and taking 235 wickets.

Holding, 72, never played with Sobers but said he was struck by the way he was revered in the game.

"Among the great cricketers he stood out," the former paceman told AFP by phone from his Cayman Islands home.

"Look at his numbers, and they are impressive but he too was impressive. I know other cricketers whose numbers are good but who I would not be impressed by."

Holding, who was part of a fearsome West Indies pace attack in the 1970s and 1980s, said: "People who played against him said he was number one."

"Ian Chappell, whom I saw on a regular basis when we worked for Channel 9 in Australia, said 'Mikey do not worry about the question, Is Garry Sobers the best all-rounder? He was more than that - he was the best cricketer that ever lived!'"

"Those are big words coming from someone who was a former Australian captain and lived in Australia, the country that Don Bradman came from."

Holding, who took 249 wickets in 60 Tests, said he had enjoyed Sobers' company.

"It was always good to be around Sir Garry," he said. "One thing I noticed is he never spoke about himself. There are so many cricketers who do and start with 'In my time!'"

"He did not like to talk about the game a lot unless he was asked a question. He was a very humble man."

Sobers averaged an impressive 57.78 with the bat and 34.03 with the ball in Test cricket.

He also captained West Indies in 39 Tests between 1965 and 1972, winning nine and losing 10.

And his career was littered with extraordinary feats.

In 1958 he broke Len Hutton's record for the highest individual Test score by making 365 not out against Pakistan, a mark that stood for 36 years.

He was also the first player to hit six sixes in an over in a first-class match when he played for English

county Nottinghamshire. Holding said that while Sobers may have inspired young West Indians to take up the game, they would have been crazy to imagine it was possible to emulate him.

"Nobody could do what he did. If you did try, you would fall flat on your face," he said.

"You could look up at him on the pedestal and be proud he is from the Caribbean."

GAVASKAR PAYS RICH TRIBUTES TO SOBERS

Former India captain Sunil Gavaskar paid tribute to Sir Garfield Sobers after the West Indies great passed away on Friday.

"This is probably the saddest day for the game of cricket. The greatest cricketer to walk the earth has left us. No words can ever do justice to Sir Garfield Sobers, the cricketer."

"He was everything we dream of becoming when we pick up the bat or the ball as kids," Gavaskar said, as quoted by news agency PTI.

"Memories keep flooding back and that's what I will hold close to my heart forever. Rest in peace, Sir Garfield. You will stay eternally in our hearts," he added.

SIR GEOFFERY BOYCOTT LEADS ENGLISH TRIBUTES

Sir Geoffrey Boycott wrote in the *Telegraph*: "Anyone who saw him in his pomp will have wonderful memories of a great batsman, the greatest all-rounder, an icon, a once-in-your-lifetime, exceptional cricketer. And, even more important, a lovely man."

He added: "I just loved the way Garry walked out to bat. He was like a panther with a purposeful, loping and confident walk. He didn't say anything. He did not need to. There was no ego. His walk let the opposition know he was there for business."

Kishore Shallow, president of Cricket West Indies, described Sobers as "a son of Barbados whose extraordinary journey became part of the story of our region and whose brilliance carried the name of the West Indies with distinction across the world."

Shallow continued: "In the story of cricket, there are great players. There are champions. Then, there are those rare individuals who redefine the very meaning of greatness."

"Sir Garfield Sobers was the greatest cricketer the world has ever seen."

"His mastery of batting, bowling and fielding was unparalleled, but his true significance reached far beyond the boundary ropes," Shallow added.

Bethell hails 'incredible' Sobers for turning point in England career

LONDON: England all-rounder Jacob Bethell thanked the "incredible" Garry Sobers for the key role he played in forging his career following the death of the West Indies legend.

Sobers, widely regarded as cricket's most outstanding all-rounder, died aged 89 on Friday, sparking a flood of tributes from all over the cricket world to the Barbadian.

Bethell, who grew up in Barbados, got to know Sobers as a boy and the former West Indies captain wrote a reference to help him obtain a sports scholarship to Rugby School, Birmingham.

That set Bethell, now 22, on a path that has seen the batting all-rounder become a mainstay of both England's Test and white-ball teams.

"I met him in Barbados, you know when I was about 11 or 12 maybe even slightly younger than that, my uncle was quite close to him," Bethell told reporters at Lord's yesterday.

"He (Sobers) came down to watch me play (cricket) and I think liked what he saw," added Bethell on the eve of the third one-day international against India - when England will wear



black armbands in memory of Sobers.

"The legend that he was, he had a presence about him and he you know when he came and watched he wanted you to do well."

Bethell added: "The major helping point for me personally was helping me get over to England. You know, he wrote a reference for me in terms of backing me to come over here, so I think that went a long way towards getting me into school here and furthering my career

over here. That helped me a lot to get over here and do what I'm doing now."

Bethell, recalling how he had played golf with the "larger-than-life" Sobers at the Sandy Lane course in Barbados, added: "He was a very humble guy, that everybody gravitated towards."

"Every time he walked into anywhere, the place would just come alive."

"It was unbelievable to be able to spend a bit of time with him and be around someone of that calibre... Wherever he walked he

was seen as a legend."

While much too young to have seen Sobers play, Bethell knew from an early age he was an exceptional cricketer.

"I've watched so many YouTube videos and seen what he was like as a player. I never got to watch him live obviously, but to see the flair he had - he'd do everything, bowl both ways, spin and seam, catch everything in the slips. He was incredible," he said.

Roston Chase, Hayley Matthews and Shai Hope, the three captains of the West Indies, remembered Sobers for his "brilliance, humility, and commitment", reflecting on an influence that extended far beyond the boundaries of the cricket field.

"Sir Garry's journey from Barbados to becoming the greatest cricketer the world has ever seen remains one of the most inspiring stories in the history of our game," the three skippers said in a joint statement.

Former West Indies captain Brian Lara wished ing strength to his family to bear the irreplaceable loss.

"Rest easy, legend. Your legacy will never be forgotten," Lara said.

FORMULA 1

Antonelli celebrates dad’s birthday with Spa pole

Antonelli takes Mercedes’ 10th pole in 10 rounds; Verstappen qualifies second after tow help from Hadjar

Reuters
Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium

Formula One leader Kimi Antonelli celebrated his father’s birthday by taking pole position for today’s Belgian Grand Prix with Red Bull’s Max Verstappen alongside on the front row and Mercedes teammate and title rival George Russell right behind.

McLaren’s reigning world champion Lando Norris was third fastest, but has a 10-place grid drop, promoting Russell with Ferrari’s Charles Leclerc, winner of the previous race at Silverstone, next to him in fourth.

Mercedes have taken pole for all 10 races so far this season and 19-year-old Italian Antonelli has provided six of them.

“Nice birthday present for your old man,” his race engineer Peter ‘Bono’ Bonnington said over the team radio.

“Yeah, happy birthday dad,” replied the happy Italian.

ITALIAN HUNGRY FOR SIXTH WIN

“It was not a very straightforward session, the track changed a lot,” Antonelli told reporters later. “But tomorrow is another day and obviously I have Max starting next to me so it’s going to be important to get a good start and then be ahead



Mercedes’ Italian driver Kimi Antonelli competes during the qualifying session at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit, in Spa, at the Belgian Grand Prix yesterday. (AFP)

into Turn Five.”

The Italian has won five races so far and leads Russell by 25 points in the championship. He is hungry for another win to stretch that advantage after failing to score in two of the last three races.

Norris had been on provisional pole after the first flying laps but then Verstappen and Antonelli went faster, the latter producing a one minute and 44.361 second

effort around the longest and second-fastest lap on the calendar.

“It is nice to be standing here, it is not nice knowing I have to go 10 places back tomorrow,” commented Norris.

“It is unfortunate that it is not where we will be starting tomorrow because it would be nice to have a little fight with these guys but we made the most of it.”

Verstappen had been given an

aerodynamic tow by teammate Isack Hadjar, who has an impossible 30-place grid drop for an engine and multiple component changes and is likely to start 21st due to other penalties.

The four-time world champion’s time was still 0.317 slower than Antonelli’s best.

“It was definitely helping me, otherwise I would not be standing here,” the Belgian-born Dutch



Mercedes’ Andrea Kimi Antonelli celebrates after qualifying in pole position with MotoGP rider Barry Baltus. (Reuters)

driver said of the tow. “Otherwise I think I would be like P6, or something.”

“Tomorrow I think I’ll be looking in my mirrors at the people around me, but at least today we had a really good result.”

Ferrari’s Lewis Hamilton, chasing a record sixth Belgian GP win, will start fifth with McLaren’s Oscar Piastri sixth and Racing Bulls’ British rookie Arvid Lindblad seventh in the team’s only upgraded car.

Hamilton had crashed in final practice, but his mechanics had the car ready for him to start qualifying.

“The boys did a mega job to fix my damage after P3 (third prac-

tice),” said the seven-time world champion. “The car was feeling amazing in P3 and I really felt confident, not that we’d be fighting for pole because I think Mercedes are too fast, but I definitely think with the car that we had in P3 we probably could have been third or something like that.”

Ferrari have won two of the last three races and are chasing leaders Mercedes in the constructors’ standings. Audi’s Gabriel Bortoleto qualified eighth with Racing Bulls’ Liam Lawson set to start ninth, despite failing to make the final phase, and Alpine’s Pierre Gasly 10th. Nico Hulkenberg’s Audi stopped on track in the second phase with a hydraulics leak.

ATHLETICS

Britain’s Kerr smashes long-standing mile record

Reuters
London

Josh Kerr shattered the 27-year-old world mile record at London Stadium yesterday as he made his “Project 222” a reality, shaving almost three seconds off his own personal best in the process.

The 28-year-old Briton, roared on by a capacity 60,000 crowd at the London Diamond League meeting, ran a time of three minutes 42.66 seconds to break Hicham El Guerrouj’s long-standing mark by 0.47 seconds.

As part of Project 222 Kerr had targeted a sub-223-second race, and with yesterday’s run he became the seventh Briton to hold the mile record and first since Steve Cram in 1985.

El Guerrouj set his world record in 1999 when Kerr was only a year old.

The 2023 world 1,500m champion said in March he would target the Moroccan’s record, building 222-second ice-bath recoveries into his training.

“Going after records like that is not really anything about fitness, it’s about wrapping your mind around that time. That’s why this was called Project 222,” said Kerr, who was presented with a cheque for \$50,000 for breaking the record.

“I feel very lucky to push this forward and bring it back to the UK because I feel like that’s where



Britain’s Josh Kerr celebrates after winning the one mile event during the IAAF Diamond League at the London Stadium yesterday. (AFP)

the mile belongs. Hopefully it can stay for a while. I knew I had 3:42 in me. If I’m going to leave my mark on this sport as a British athlete..., I have to be able to do those performances. And those performances take every single part of you and every single part of your team. This feels incredible.”

Britain’s Keely Hodgkinson won her first outdoor race of the season, taking the women’s 800m in 1:56.21. “The only reason I came here today was because I wanted to win for the home crowd. I’m happy to get that out of the way,” said Hodgkinson.

SURPRISE WIN
America’s Brandon Miller pro-

duced a surprise win in the men’s 800m in a personal best of 1:42.19, with Olympic champion Emmanuel Wanyonyi back in fourth.

The Kenyan had been targeting David Rudisha’s 800m world record set in the same stadium at the 2012 Olympics after setting a new 1,000m mark in Monaco a week ago, but he faded badly and was well beaten by the 24-year-old Miller.

Armand Duplantis was forced to withdraw from the men’s pole vault competition at the London Diamond League meeting on Saturday.

Duplantis, the double Olympic champion, suffered a first-time failure at 5.85m but, after clear-

ing 5.95m, had strapping applied to his left thigh. He then chose to pull out with the European Championships on the horizon next month.

America’s Sam Kendricks took first place in his absence.

Saint Lucia’s Julien Alfred capitalised on a great start to win the women’s 200m in 21.66, edging out American Gabby Thomas - who denied her a sprint double at the Paris Olympics - by 0.15 seconds.

Kanyinsola Ajayi beat world champion Oblique Seville of Jamaica into second in the men’s 100m, equalling his own Nigerian national record of 9.84 seconds.

World record holder Karsten Warholm ran the fastest 400m hurdles this year - 46.61 - to dominate the field in the absence of Alison dos Santos.

American Rai Benjamin, a specialist 400m hurdler, won the men’s 400m flat in a personal best of 44.05 with Jakobe Tharp, 20, who set a world record last month, taking the 110m hurdles in 12.89.

Australia’s Nicola Olyslagers set a new world lead of 2.01m to shade Ukraine’s Yaroslava Mahuchikh in the women’s high jump. There was a shock in the women’s discus, with America’s Cierra Jackson improving her personal best by almost four metres with her final throw to set a Diamond League record of 71.72m and finished ahead of double Olympic champion Valarie Hinson.

GOLF

Burns seizes Open lead, DeChambeau shrugs off penalty to stay in mix



Bryson DeChambeau (right) of the US and Sam Burns shake hands after their third rounds on day three of the 154th Open at Royal Birkdale Golf Club near Southport in north-west England yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Southport, England

American Sam Burns seized a two-stroke lead in the third round of the British Open but compatriot Bryson DeChambeau shrugged off the furore over his two-stroke penalty with another well-crafted round at Royal Birkdale to stay in the hunt yesterday.

Ryan Fox rocketed into contention with the third record-equaling 62 in 24 hours on the bone-dry links before Burns emerged from an attritional afternoon to lead the pack.

US Open runner-up Burns followed his sizzling 62 on Friday with a five-under 65 to reach 10 under heading into today’s climax when he will try to bag his first major. When Burns bogeyed the last three holes in his first round 73 it seemed he might be heading home sooner than expected to be with his wife Caroline and newborn daughter Belle.

But the 29-year-old has caught fire since then.

“I’m going to have to go out and execute,” Burns said of today’s final round. “I know that I can accept the outcome, and life’s going to move on. I’ll get to go home and see my family.”

“I hope I’m taking some hardware with me, but if I’m not, that’s fine too.”

New Zealand’s Fox was on eight under along with South Korean Kim Si-woo while American Ryan Gerard and Australian halfway leader Lucas Herbert were on seven under. DeChambeau, who was punished after an inadvertent breach of R&A rules late on Friday following a second-round 66 and whose participation yesterday ap-

peared in doubt, again showed his new-found links course discipline.

The polarising American said that Friday’s controversy would ‘fire him up’ and he was cheered by the crowds as he carded a sixth successive sub-70 round in the Open.

However, a careless bogey at 18 left him four strokes off playing partner Burns.

“Props to him,” Burns said. “He came out and played a really nice round of golf today, and that takes a lot of grit to be able to come out and do that. So I was impressed.”

World number one Scottie Scheffler suffered a frustrating day and made only one birdie in a level-par 70 that left the defending champion six shots off the pace.

His putting gremlins continued and unless he does something incredible today, the Claret Jug is likely to be lifted by a 13th successive first-time champion.

“A little bit frustrating, but if I hole some putts tomorrow, I could shoot a really low round and move my way up the leaderboard,” Scheffler said.

Local favourite Tommy Fleetwood led the home challenge in front of packed galleries as the Englishman was tied for ninth on five under after a round of 69.

Prior to the 154th Open, only five rounds as low as 62 had been carded in the history of men’s majors with Brenden Grace’s effort at the 2017 Open, also at Birkdale, and those of Rickie Fowler and Xander Schauffele at the 2023 US Open and Schauffele and Shane Lowry at the 2024 PGA Championship.

That number has now been swelled to eight with Fox taking advantage of tranquil early conditions to emulate the feats of Burns and Herbert the previous day.

Pogacar rides to solo win on Tour de France stage 14 to increase lead

ODEREN, France: Four-time champion **Tadej Pogacar** launched the decisive attack on the steepest section of the Col du Haag climb to clinch another solo victory in yesterday’s 14th stage of the Tour de France, increasing his overall lead in the hunt for his third straight title.

His fourth stage win of this year’s race leaves him four minutes and 30 seconds ahead of second-placed Jonas Vingegaard, who finished fourth on the day behind Pogacar’s UAE Team Emirates-XRG teammate Isaac del Toro and local hero Paul Seixas.

“A really perfect day, we marked this stage since the beginning. I know it very well, it is beautiful and an incredible place for



cycling,” said Pogacar.

Yesterday’s stage, a 155.3km ride from Mulhouse to Le Markstein Felling, tested riders with mountains throughout the route, including three category one climbs, and spots where the competitors ran into rain.

The crowd at Grand Ballon, the first major climb of the day, cheered on Frenchman Valentin

Paret-Peintre (Soudal Quick-Step) as he beat Richard Carapaz to the peak, while the peloton trailed by nearly two minutes.

Four others joined Paret-Peintre and Carapaz in a breakaway group as the riders carefully navigated slippery and wet roads amid heavy rain during the descent from Col du Page.

Carapaz and his EF Education-EasyPost teammate Ben Healy took a wrong turn at the start of the ascent to Ballon d’Alsace, but managed to rejoin the leaders, as the peloton tried to make up a three-minute gap.

Paret-Peintre and Carapaz were again the first two to reach the summit at Ballon d’Alsace, but by the time they started the ascent

to Col du Haag, the peloton, being driven by Pogacar’s teammates, had reduced the gap to a minute and 20 seconds.

Carapaz launched an early attack during the 11.2km category one climb, and Tobias Johannessen followed closely. But about 2.5km below the summit, the general classification contenders caught the leaders.

Soon after, as the gradient reached 16% during the final two kilometres of the climb, Pogacar made his move and pulled ahead. The 27-year-old had a 30-second lead at the summit, and flew through the final 5km to the finish line, finishing 38 seconds before second-placed Del Toro.

SPOTLIGHT

Messi, Yamal come full circle in World Cup showdown

I took a picture with him when he was a baby ... the fact that we're both playing in the World Cup now is crazy'

AFP
East Rutherford, United States

Rob Woollard When Lionel Messi and Lamine Yamal line-up against each other in the World Cup final on Sunday it will mark the closing of an incredible full circle moment that has been two decades in the making.

In 2007, a 20-year-old Messi and Yamal, born in July of that year, posed together in a photo organised by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), the global agency which provides humanitarian and development to children and mothers worldwide. Yamal's family had entered and won a raffle to pose with a Barcelona player for a 2008 UNICEF calendar.

In one photo from the shoot, Messi is seen helping Yamal's mother, Sheila Ebana, give the smiling five-month-old boy a bath in a blue plastic tub.

"The photographer, Joan Monfort, has said that Lamine Yamal stole Messi's heart because he was always smiling," UNICEF Catalan's Laia Ruich said on the organ-

isation's website.

Fast forward nearly 20 years, and now Messi and Yamal are sharing football's greatest stage.

Spain star Yamal, the teenage prodigy who has followed in Messi's footsteps at Barcelona, has only just turned 19.

Argentina captain Messi, 39, will be playing in his third World Cup final in what is almost certainly likely to be his last appearance in the tournament.

"That photo is incredible," Messi said at a fan event in Manhattan on Friday. "I took a picture with him when he was a baby ... the fact that we're both playing in the World Cup now is crazy."

Messi said while he has a soft spot for Yamal given his association with his former club Barcelona, it will not detract him from the task in hand on Sunday - beating Spain. "I wish him luck because his success will be Barcelona's success, (but) we'll try to keep him from playing at his best.

"He's 19 years old and has his whole career ahead of him. I wish him the best, but we'll give it our all to ensure he doesn't become champion this time."

Photographer Monfort describes Messi and Yamal's first meeting and subsequent World Cup final date as "a true miracle of destiny."

"If you wrote this in a film it would not seem possible," Monfort told the BBC.

Even Yamal's Spain teammate, Mikel Merino, said Friday he initially believed the photo was an AI-generated hoax when he first saw it.

"The first time I saw it, I thought it was AI and that it wasn't even real," Merino said.

"It's unbelievable that two of the best players to have played the game - and hopefully Lamine, in the future, will be one of those - share a picture like that."

Messi and Yamal now both serve as UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors. "Growing up, all I had was a family, a ball, a park and a dream," Yamal said in June.

"Playing football gave me structure, a sense of belonging, and hope for the future.

"I know how important it is for children to have a safe place to play, so that they can simply enjoy being children."



FOCUS

None shall pass: Spain's defence ready to thwart Messi in World Cup final

AFP
East Rutherford, United States

If Lionel Messi and Argentina are to clinch back-to-back World Cup titles tod, they will have to find a way past one of the meanest defences in tournament history.

Spain's journey to the final in East Rutherford has been a triumph of collective spirit, with all parts of Luis de la Fuente's well-oiled machine contributing.

But while the silky midfield control of Rodri, Dani Olmo, Pedri and Fabian Ruiz has grabbed the headlines, the cornerstone of Spanish success has been their defence.

A back four of newly signed Real Madrid left-back Marc Cucurella, centre-backs Aymeric Laporte and Pau Cubarsi, and right-back Pedro Porro have conceded just one goal in seven matches.

Another clean sheet at the MetLife Stadium on Sunday would see Spain establish a new record for the fewest goals conceded in a World Cup-winning campaign, which currently stands at two and is shared by France (1998), Italy (2006) and Spain (2010).

Cucurella, 27, who rose to prominence in the Premier League with spells at Brighton and Chelsea before his move to Madrid was completed last month, takes pride in the Spanish back four's defensive record.

"Great teams are the ones that dominate both penalty areas," he said earlier in the tournament.

"Obviously, the fewer goals you concede, the better your chances of winning. Hopefully, we can keep this up. If we defend well, we'll be closer to winning."

Cucurella's relentless patrolling of the flank is matched by the skill of Spain's commanding centre-half pairing of the veteran Laporte, 32, and 19-year-old Barcelona prodigy Cubarsi.

Laporte, who was born in France and

spent five-and-a-half seasons at Pep Guardiola's Manchester City, has been awestruck by his young partner.

"He's a fantastic player. At 19, he's already played a lot of matches for Barca and the national team. Time will tell, but he's got real quality," Laporte said.

Cubarsi, for his part, has shown no sign of youthful nerves on the biggest footballing stage of all.

The lone blemish on his World Cup so far was when he was beaten by a Charles De Ketelaere header in the 2-1 quarter-final defeat of Belgium. "I like being imposing and aggressive," Cubarsi said. "I like making my presence felt because it's a position where you can't back down against anyone.

"You can't let yourself be taken out of the game. Above all, you need that character to be a difference-maker."

Laporte has become one of Spain coach de la Fuente's most trusted lieutenants during the World Cup, an assured presence at the heart of the defence who is often the starting point for attacks.

"He is one of the centre-backs who best executes the philosophy we have," de la Fuente said.

"It's a luxury to have him. He offers us great ball distribution, threads passes through the lines, and possesses real authority. He is a very complete player."

The other member of Spain's back four - Porro - has been a surprise package at the tournament.

Left out of the Spain squad that won the European Championship in 2024, Porro came into the World Cup after a harrowing season with Spurs, with the club narrowly escaping relegation from the Premier League.

But in North America, Porro has been superb in both defence and attack, scoring a beautifully worked second goal in the 2-0 defeat of France.

He is now dreaming of emulating his heroes from Spain's victorious 2010 World Cup-winning squad.

"In 2010, when we won the title, I was splashing around in the town square," he said.

"That World Cup... was spectacular, especially for the way it united the country. It would be great to do it all over again," he added.

(Clockwise from top) Pau Cubarsi, Marc Cucurella, Pedro Porro and Aymeric Laporte

Qatar's al-Marri joins World Cup final officiating team

Qatari referee Khamis al-Marri will be part of the officiating team for Sunday's FIFA World Cup final between Argentina and Spain, after being appointed as support video assistant referee (Support VAR) for the showpiece at New York New Jersey Stadium. Al-Marri will work alongside Germany's Bastian Dankert, who has been named the video assistant referee, and Colombian Nicolás Gallo, who will serve as assistant VAR, giving Qatar representation in one of football's biggest occasions.

On the field, Slovenian Slavko Vincic will referee the World Cup final, becoming the first official from Slovenia to take charge of the tournament's biggest match. The 46-year-old, who has previously officiated the UEFA Champions League final and UEFA EURO 2024 semi-final between France and Spain, said the appointment was an "incredible honour" and a dream come true. Vincic will be assisted by fellow



Slovenians Tomaz Klančnik and Andraz Kovacic, while Jordan's Adham Makhadmeh has been named fourth official and compatriot Mohammad Al-Kalaf reserve assistant referee. FIFA said the appointments were based primarily on performances throughout the tournament, with the officials selected to oversee the final after consistently impressive displays across the competition.

OPINION

Wenger accepts World Cup hydration breaks split opinion

AFP
New York

Arsene Wenger said yesterday he accepted that the hydration breaks used at this year's World Cup were not universally popular and said FIFA will assess whether to implement them in the same way in the future.

Wenger, FIFA's head of global football development, told a briefing on the eve of the World Cup final between Spain and Argentina: "Sometimes people didn't like it and we have to analyse after the World Cup what the impact was."

For this World Cup, FIFA brought in three-minute hydration breaks midway through each half - regardless of the weather, even for matches played in cool conditions or under a closed roof.

It said the motivation for their introduction was a commitment to player welfare, but critics also saw it as a way to generate more income by selling advertising during the breaks in action.

"It didn't look to me that it changed the results, but we are here to serve people that watch football and we will come to conclusions afterwards," Wenger added.

"In many games, especially when the stadium was covered, people were not happy with it but at the start of the competition it was decided to do it for everybody."



FIFA Chief of Global Football Development Arsene Wenger during the press conference. (Reuters)

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente defended the hydration breaks early in the tournament, citing the importance of player welfare in often hot conditions.

"It is difficult to sustain that level of physical exertion for long periods and I believe those breaks offer a brief respite to recharge and continue competing well," he said.

Meanwhile, former Arsenal manager Wenger insisted the expansion of the World Cup to feature 48 teams, up from 32 at the previous edition, had proven to be a success. "It was questioned before it started but we found it was ethically needed to give a chance to more teams. I am convinced it was the right decision and it was a great success," he said.

Al Wakrah to meet Qatar SC at Lusail Stadium in opener on August 20

Doha: The Qatar Stars League (QSL) has announced the schedule for the first half of the Qatar Stars League 2026-27 season which begins on August 20th. The dates and timings of matches for the first three weeks have been finalized. The schedule for matches from week four through week eleven will be updated after the final schedule for club competitions and the national team's matches is released.



In the opening match of the new season, Al Wakrah will meet Qatar SC at the Lusail Stadium on August

20th (Thursday) at 5:15pm while Al Rayyan will meet the newly-promoted Lusail at Ahmad Bin Ali at 7:30pm the same day. The opening week will also see Al Gharafa play Al Shahania on Friday (August 21) at 5:15pm at the Khalifa International Stadium while Al Arabi will meet Al Shamal at Al Thumama Stadium at 7:30pm. On Saturday (August 22), Al Duhail will play Al Sailiya at Al Bayt Stadium at 5:15pm followed by defend-

ing champions Al Sadd meeting Al Ahli at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium at 7:30pm. QSL said it continues to coordinate with clubs participating in continental and regional tournaments to ensure the league schedule aligns with their international commitments. The schedule for the second half of the season will be announced later, after the final schedule for the national team's matches is approved.