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SPOTLIGHT

UEFA to boycott FIFA events: ‘World Cup not for sale’

‘Europe’s position is clear. We will never lend this model our legitimacy’

AFP
Paris, France

European football’s governing body UEFA said yesterday it would boycott the World Cup should FIFA press ahead with its private investor plan.

“No UEFA national teams will participate in any FIFA competition for so long as these proposals remain alive, unless this proposal has been abandoned in its entirety and binding assurances have been given that FIFA will never again open its governance or competitions to private ownership,” UEFA said in a statement.

“The World Cup cannot be treated as an investment product... No part of it should ever be surrendered to private investors. The World Cup is not for sale.”

On Tuesday, football’s world governing body FIFA announced plans to create a commercial subsidiary to run its biggest events, such as the World Cup and Club World Cup.

Under the proposal, private investors would be allowed to acquire stakes in the company but would remain minority shareholders, FIFA said.

It hopes to raise up to \$4.2bn based on a valuation of \$20bn for the FIFA Forward Enterprise (FFE) initiative.

If approved, the project could provide each of FIFA’s 211 member associations with a one-off payment of \$20mn in early 2027 and increase their funding allocation for the 2027-2030 cycle from \$8.0 million to \$20mn.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino described the initiative on Wednesday as a “golden opportunity to turbocharge the development of the game globally.”

But UEFA, whose president Aleksander Ceferin boycotted the World Cup final to show unhappiness with FIFA, argued: “This model has no place in world football.”

“Football’s future cannot be dictated by the expectations of those whose first duty is to maximise financial return.

“Nor can the interests of na-



A file photo shows UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin and FIFA president Gianni Infantino pose during the 50th Ordinary UEFA Congress at the Brussels Expo in Brussels on February 12, 2026. (Reuters)

tional associations, leagues, clubs, players and supporters become subordinate to investor returns. Football cannot mortgage its future for financial gain,” Ceferin said.

“Europe’s position is clear. We will never lend this model our legitimacy. No one has the moral authority to sell what they merely hold in trust for the next generation.”

The FIFA proposal has drawn criticism from not only UEFA but also several leading European federations and European Union officials, who view it as another step in the commercialisation of sport and have raised concerns over potential conflicts of interest.

The EU praised UEFA on Thursday for “defending the integrity of the game.”

“I welcome this UEFA statement and fully support its position,” European commissioner for sports Glenn Micallef said in a social media post.

“Proud to see Europe’s football associations leading on govern-

ance, standing firm on their principles,” he posted. The Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) have also expressed concern that the FIFA proposal was made public before all 211 member associations were fully consulted.

The Confederation of African Football (CAF) has urged its members to review FIFA’s diversive plan.

UEFA said in its statement yesterday that the World Cup was “one of football’s greatest sporting legacies.... built over generations by players, national teams and supporters across every continent.”

“It is both irresponsible and indefensible that a proposal of such significance for football was conceived in secret and brought to the brink of approval without any meaningful consultation with those entrusted with stewarding the game,” UEFA said.

“This is not merely a profound

failure of leadership but an abdication of FIFA’s duty as the custodian of world football.

“National associations around the world are now presented with an ultimatum - accept the irreversible capture of football’s greatest competitions or bear the consequences.

“This is not a ‘democratic decision’ but governance by intimidation - an act of coercion unworthy of an institution entrusted with the stewardship of the global game.”

UEFA added: “Nobody should be in any doubt - UEFA and its national associations will oppose these plans with absolute determination.

“There are moments when institutions are judged not by what they are prepared to accept but by what they refuse to compromise. This is one of those moments.

“Some things are simply too important to sell. The FIFA World Cup belongs to football. It always will. And so long as Europe has a voice, it will never be for sale!”

FOCUS

New identity, same vision: Gulf Football Federation unveils strategic rebrand

QNA

Doha

The Gulf Football Federation has unveiled a new visual identity and officially adopted the name “Gulf Football Federation,” replacing its previous title, the Arabian Gulf Cup Football Federation, as part of a strategic rebranding aimed at reflecting its long-term vision for the development of football across the region.

In a statement issued yesterday, the federation said the new identity is built around the values of trust, dynamism and modernity, underscoring its commitment to strengthening its position as a leading regional sporting organisation while creating a contemporary brand that represents the spirit of the game and the ambitions of Gulf football under a unified umbrella.

The federation said its new logo draws inspiration from the Gulf region’s identity, culture and heritage, while symbolising the rapid progress of Gulf football and inspiring future generations.



President of the Gulf Football Federation HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani

porting the continued success of the region’s national teams and clubs on the international stage.

“This new identity embodies our ambition to achieve unprecedented levels of excellence and success,” Sheikh Hamad added.

The federation’s president also highlighted the strategic partnerships established in recent years, saying they have played a key role in advancing Gulf football, driving the growth of the federation’s competitions, strengthening their



President of the Gulf Football Federation, HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, described the rebranding as a significant milestone in the federation’s evolution.

“We are at a pivotal moment in our growth journey, and it is essential that we adopt a new identity that reflects the transformative path we are preparing to embark on over the coming decades,” he said.

He reaffirmed that the federation’s long-term vision remains focused on enhancing the global profile of Gulf football and sup-

porting the continued success of the sport’s increasing popularity across the Gulf.

Concluding his remarks, Sheikh Hamad expressed his appreciation to the federation’s member associations for their continued support since its establishment and wished them continued success.

“As we embark on this new chapter with confidence and ambition, we express our appreciation for the efforts of all member associations in supporting the federation’s journey since its establishment,” he said.

Saudi to host Asian Champions League finals

Saudi Arabia will organise the next three editions of the Asian Champions League Elite finals after the Asian Football Confederation’s executive committee confirmed the country’s provisional hosting rights had been made permanent yesterday. The Saudis have hosted the first two editions of the event, which sees the quarter-finals, semi-finals and final played in a centralised venue, since the continent’s premier club competition was restructured ahead of the 2024-2025 season. The upcoming edition of the tournament, which features the domestic champions of the leading competitions from around the region, will see the league phase expanded from 24 to 32 teams. The qualifying rounds will start on August 11 with the draw for the league phase to be held in Kuala Lumpur on August 18.

FOOTBALL

Japan to host AFC U-23 Asian Cup 2028

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Executive Committee officially ratified a series of major hosting and regulatory decisions, including the confirmation of Japan as the host of the 2028 edition of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup, which will serve as Asia’s qualifiers for the Los Angeles 2028 Summer Olympics.

Japan secured the hosting rights following a competitive bidding process that included submissions from Jordan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Qatar, and Uzbekistan as well as the United Arab Emirates, who subsequently withdrew earlier this year.

While all final bidders met the minimum requirements, Japan was selected based on its world-class facilities, minimal operational risk, and in the spirit of ensuring geographic

diversity and the strategic rotation of major Asian football tournaments. In addition to approving the Competition Regulations of the AFC U23 Asian Cup Japan 2028, the Committee also endorsed a strategic realignment of the youth tournament roadmap to optimise Continental hosting resources.

Under the updated plan, the hosting rights for the AFC U17 Asian Cup 2027 have been transferred to the Uzbekistan Football Association (UFA).

Concurrently, the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) has been officially awarded the hosting rights for the subsequent AFC U17 Asian Cup 2029.

Several structural reforms were passed to elevate the competitive integrity across the AFC’s club competitions. Starting from the 2026/27

season, the AFC Champions League Elite will follow a set of updated core principles in its match scheduling in accordance with the newly expanded competition format featuring 32 participating clubs.

Each club will now play two matches against the clubs from each pot, as decided by the draw which will now utilise four pots instead of two.

To guarantee absolute sporting fairness, the final League Stage matchdays will now feature simultaneous kick-offs in both the East and West regions respectively.

Additionally, new qualification rules for the AFC U20 Asian Cup will guarantee previous tournament hosts a slot in the Qualification Phase if they enter as a non-host. Conversely, any Member Association that fails to enter or

withdraws from the tournament will face mandatory relegation to the Development Phase in the subsequent edition.

Meanwhile, to maintain a complete 32-team qualification field, open slots will be assigned to the highest-ranked teams relegated to the Development Phase in the preceding cycle. However, should any team withdraw following the AFC’s final entry confirmation, the tournament will proceed without a replacement.

Finally, following the successful delivery of the 2024/25 and 2025/26 editions, SAFF’s provisional hosting rights for the AFC Champions League Elite Finals that was confirmed in December 2023 have been made permanent for the 2026-27, 2027-28, and 2028-29 seasons. (the-afc.com)



SPOTLIGHT

Root named England Test captain, Fleming is coach

ENGLAND CRICKET BOARD MAKE TWIN ANNOUNCEMENTS AHEAD OF PAKISTAN TEST SERIES

AFP
London

Joe Root was reappointed as England's Test captain yesterday, with ex-New Zealand skipper Stephen Fleming named as head coach as the team embark on a new era.

The announcement from the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) follows the sacking of Brendon McCullum as Test coach and the shock retirement of former skipper Ben Stokes from international cricket earlier this month.

McCullum, who remains in charge of England's white-ball teams, lost his job after a 2-1 home series loss to New Zealand in June, which followed a disastrous Ashes campaign in Australia.

Root will resume his role as skipper in the three-match series with Pakistan starting next month but Fleming is not scheduled to arrive until later in the year.

Yorkshireman Root holds the record for captaining England in the most Tests (65) and to the most wins (27).

He skippered the team from 2017 to 2022 and took the role on an interim basis at the Oval during the recent series against New Zealand.

The 35-year-old is second behind India's Sachin Tendulkar on the all-time Test scoring list, with more than 14,000 runs.

"It is a great honour and privi-



Joe Root will return for a second spell as England's permanent Test captain. (Reuters)

lege to be asked to be England men's Test captain again," said Root. "The Test captaincy is a difficult but hugely rewarding job and, after enjoying a brief taste of it again working with Baz McCullum last month, I am excited to lead this next generation of players forward."

'Exceptional leader'

Root described Fleming, 53, as an "exceptional leader with a great knowledge of the game".

Marcus Trescothick will be interim head coach for the Pakistan

series, which starts at Headingley on August 19, ahead of Fleming's arrival later this year. The ECB said Fleming, who led Chennai Super Kings to five Indian Premier League titles, was one of the "most highly regarded coaches in world cricket".

Fleming, who retired as a player in 2009, made 111 Test appearances for New Zealand.

"The ambition is always to win now," said Fleming. "But equally, it's about ensuring the team is well placed for the medium and long-term future."

He added: "I'm particularly looking forward to working with Joe Root as captain - a generational talent who has achieved so much already.

"There is still plenty more to come from him, and I'm excited to support him so he can enjoy and thrive in the role in what is a different context to his first stint."

Managing director of England men's cricket Rob Key hailed Fleming as one of the most highly respected figures in cricket.

"I believe he is the best person to guide a team stacked full of po-

tential and turn that talent into a world-class outfit that can not only achieve success but sustain it," Key said. Key said Root was "passionate about leading this team into a new era".

The two appointments draw a line under the ultra-attacking 'Bazball' era of McCullum and Stokes, which started in 2022.

The two men injected new energy into a floundering Test team that had won just one match in 17 under Root.

England won 10 out of their first 11 Tests under the pair but gradu-

ally lost momentum, crucially failing to win a series against Australia or India. Stokes made his dramatic retirement announcement during the third Test against New Zealand at Trent Bridge.

He had been dropped for the second Test after breaking a team curfew at a London nightclub, the latest in a series of off-field incidents involving England players.

McCullum denied rumours of a rift with his skipper after previous reports of tensions between the two men during the 4-1 Ashes defeat in Australia.



Former skipper Stephen Fleming will take over as coach for the South Africa series. (AFP)

ANNOUNCEMENT

India's 85-Test veteran batsman Rahane retires

AFP
New Delhi

India's Ajinkya Rahane announced his retirement from international cricket yesterday, bringing the curtain down on a career highlighted by his leadership during a remarkable 2021 Test series victory in Australia.

The middle-order batsman played 85 Tests, 90 one-day internationals and 20 Twenty20 matches, but fell out of favour with selectors after a drop in form and last played for India in 2023.

"I've always relied on timing in my batting, and I've always understood its importance," Rahane, 38, said in a video posted on Instagram.

"Today, I feel the timing is right for me to move on and announce my retirement from international cricket and all formats."

Rahane scored 5,077 runs in Tests, including 12 centuries, and built a reputation as one of India's most reliable batsmen in overseas conditions.

More than half of his Test appearances came away from home, where he often thrived against pace and bounce on challenging pitches.

The defining chapter of his career came on the four-Test tour of Australia 2020-21 where, as a stand-in, he captained a depleted India to a remarkable 2-1 series triumph.

Rahane took the reins when captain Virat Kohli returned home on paternity leave after an opening defeat in Adelaide, where India suffered a humiliating collapse to 36 all



Ajinkya Rahane retired after playing 85 Tests, 90 ODIs and 20 T20Is, finishing with an unbeaten record as India's Test captain. (AFP)

out, their lowest Test total. He led India to an eight-wicket victory in the second Test at Melbourne to square the series.

A draw in Sydney and a successful fourth-innings chase of 328 at Brisbane's Gabba saw Rahane's India home by three wickets for just their second Test series win on Australia soil.

"Since the time I made my debut as a first-class cricketer, Indian cricket has grown tre-

mendously, and I feel so proud to have been a part of it over the last 20 years," Rahane said.

"While my chapter as an Indian cricketer comes to an end, my journey with the game doesn't: I look forward to helping the next generation." The International Cricket Council wrote on X: "The curtain falls on an illustrious international career of one of India's most dependable batters."

FOCUS

Captain Shanto backs injury-hit Bangladesh

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said yesterday he had "complete faith" in his injury-hit squad ahead of a two-Test series in Australia, saying those selected have the ability to compete.

Several key players, including fast bowlers Nahid Rana and Shoriful Islam, are recovering from injuries.

Wicketkeeper-batter Litton Das is also yet to recover from a calf injury sustained during the home one-day series against Australia in June.

"Nahid Rana, Shoriful and Litton Das are obviously important players," Shanto told reporters

before the team's departure. "But those who are in the squad have also been playing for many years. I have complete faith in the team that is going to Australia and believe we can play good cricket."

The series marks Bangladesh's first Test tour of Australia in 23 years, with their last visit in 2003.

Shanto said the tour was an opportunity not only to challenge one of the world's strongest teams on their home turf but also to earn Australia's respect and secure more Test matches there in future.

"Our main goal is to play good cricket there and earn respect," he said. "If we can play competitive cricket, they'll definitely invite us again in the future."

Bangladesh leave for Australia today and will play a four-day warm-up match against Cricket

Australia XI before the opening Test in Darwin on August 13.

The second Test begins in Mackay on August 22.

Amateur player suspended in finger-clicking trickery furore

An English amateur cricketer at the centre of allegations of finger-clicking trickery has been suspended and will not play "for the foreseeable future", his club said yesterday.

The fielder, dubbed "Clicky Ponting" on social media in a punning nod to former Australia captain Ricky Ponting, allegedly tricked umpires by clicking his fingers to make the sound of a ball nicking the bat as deliveries were missed and caught by the keeper.

The video footage went viral on social media and made international headlines.

Saltburn Cricket Club, run by volunteers, said in a statement it was treating the allegations "with the utmost seriousness."

"The player at the centre of the complaint has been suspended and will not play again for the club this season or in the foreseeable future, pending the outcome of this investigation."

It said initial discussions between club officials and the North Yorkshire and South Durham league had already taken place.

The league said on Tuesday it had received a formal complaint "regarding alleged incidents in a Division Two game on Saturday 25th July 2026."

Saltburn said it had been a distressing and stressful experience for all concerned and asked for 'personal boundaries' to be respected.

COMMENT

Stokes should return for one more Ashes, says Australia coach

AFP
Sydney

Australia coach Andrew McDonald says Ben Stokes has "a lot of good cricket left in him" and believes England's new Test coach should lure him of international retirement for the Ashes.

The all-rounder called it quits in extraordinary fashion during the third Test against New Zealand at Trent Bridge in late June, making his exit public on the fourth afternoon.

The bombshell announcement came after he returned to duty following the fall-out from a London nightclub incident also involving teammate Gus Atkinson earlier that month.

Brendon McCullum was sacked soon after as England's red-ball coach, with British media reporting this week that another New Zealander, Stephen Fleming, is poised to take over.

McDonald, whose side travel to England for the latest instalment of the Ashes next year, said Stokes still had plenty to offer and his return would be an ideal storyline for the series.

"The fairytale would be that he comes back out of retirement and takes on one more Ashes and builds a lot of hype on the way in," McDonald told Australian radio station SEN late Wednesday.

"If you're looking at promoting that series, that's probably the angle that you would want, that he comes out of retirement.

"To me, he's still got a lot of good cricket left in him," he added.

"It'll be a fascinating watch. I think that whoever the new head coach that comes in potentially

has a conversation with him."

Stokes, who is still playing at domestic level for Durham, is only 35.

By comparison, Australia could field as many five players in their Test against Bangladesh next month who are older - Nathan Lyon (38), Steve Smith and Scott Boland (both 37), Mitchell Starc (36) and Josh Hazlewood (35).

"We don't know why Ben left. I don't think there's been anything on the record around the definitive reason as to why," added McDonald.

"He may have just called it a day on Test cricket, and that's it, so there might be a full stop there.

"Or there might be an opportunity for that new head coach to potentially twist his arm and bring him back in."

Meanwhile Australian pacer Hazlewood yesterday said in an interview that he wishes to play more cricket alongside key fast bowler Boland.

"I'd love to play more with Scotty," Hazlewood said during a training camp in Brisbane yesterday. "We're obviously a little bit similar, but I think there's still a lot of differences in our bowling. Every time he's come in, he's done unbelievably well. His career just keeps getting better and better the older he gets," he said in an interview posted on [cricinfo.com](https://www.cricinfo.com)

"I think there's enough opportunities in the next 12 months, 18 months for us to play a lot of cricket hopefully together, that'd be a nice one to tick off.

"But I think as four quicks, we've got Ness (Michael Neser) and Doggy (Brendan Doggett) there as well. So I think we'll have to lean on all six at some point in the next sort of 18 months."



COMMONWEALTH GAMES

Veteran Le Clos sets record medal count

Reuters
Glasgow

Veteran South African swimmer Chad le Clos won a 21st Commonwealth Games medal late to overtake Australia's Emma McKeon as the most decorated athlete in the Games' history.

The 34-year-old swam the butterfly leg as South Africa took bronze in the men's 4x100 medley relay for his third of the 2026 Games after silver in the mixed 4x100 medley and bronze in the men's 4x100 freestyle relay.

His record tally is made up of seven golds, five silvers and nine bronzes across the last five Games, starting in Delhi in 2010 at the age of 18 where he earned five medals, and then followed by seven medals in Glasgow in 2014.

He continued with five more on the Gold Coast in 2018 and one in Birmingham four years ago.

"It was emotional, but I think

those first two medals (in Glasgow 2026) were just a little bit more just because I had to get over the hump and tonight I just had to stay cool and bring it home," he said after Wednesday's relay.

"The way the boys and girls swam ...they swam their hearts out.

"They kept saying 'we're doing this for Chad' before they walked down and it just means the world to me."

Le Clos is also an Olympic champion.

He stunned the sporting world when he pipped Michael Phelps by 0.05 seconds to win the 200m butterfly gold at the 2012 London Games.

At the time, American icon Phelps was a 14-time Olympic champion and he had not lost in the event since 2001.

Le Clos won medals at the Olympics in Rio in 2016 and has since competed in Tokyo and Paris.

He has previously said he hopes to qualify for his fifth Olympics in

Los Angeles in two years' time.

Meanwhile the grandson of former Ugandan president Idi Amin saw his bid for Commonwealth boxing gold end in disgrace as Aziz Abdul was disqualified for a headbutt in his quarter-final on Wednesday.

Amin famously declared himself the "King of Scotland" in 1976, having developed a fascination with the country with his remark inspiring an Oscar-winning film, "The Last King Of Scotland".

Aziz arrived in Glasgow declaring his dream of becoming "the new king of Scotland".

But he was jeered out of the ring after a tempestuous bout against England's Damar Thomas in the super-heavyweight division.

Despite landing three sweeping left hooks in the opening round, a short, stabbing left by Thomas earned a plainly displeased Aziz a standing count.

Aziz swung wildly throughout the second and was deducted his second point for persistently



Bronze medallists South Africa's Pieter Coetze, Michael Houlie, Chad le Clos and Ruard van Renen celebrate on the podium after the men's 4 x 100m medley relay final at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. (AFP)

punching Thomas in the face as they exited a clinch. Finally, with the fight already lost on the scorecards, Aziz received his third and final warning midway through the

final round, when he flicked up his head to butt Thomas on the chin, drawing boos from the crowd.

"This referee's decision is not right and I am not happy," Aziz

fumed to reporters afterwards.

"Of course it's unfair. When you watch the previous fights of England, their boxers create a lot of fouls."

TENNIS

De Minaur beats Tsitsipas to set up Hewitt clash

'I would expect him to be in his son's box, and rightfully so'

AFP
Washington

Alex de Minaur launched his Washington Open title defense with a 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 victory over Stefanos Tsitsipas to set an all-Australian clash with teen Cruz Hewitt.

Tsitsipas, the former world number three from Greece, had won 12 of their prior 13 encounters, but de Minaur shrugged off a shaky start to turn the tables.

After surviving a break point in the fourth game he handed Tsitsipas a break with back-to-back double-faults.

The Aussie fought back with two breaks of his own and survived another break point in the 10th game to pocket the first set.

Tsitsipas broke first again in the second set and held on to force the third. But de Minaur took advantage of an unforced error by Tsitsipas to seize an early break and held on for the win.

"It's no secret my head-to-head isn't the greatest against him. He's gotten the better of me many, many times," said de Minaur.

"I'm happy with how it went today... played the match on its own merits, and ultimately found a way in a tricky, tricky match."

De Minaur next faces 17-year-old qualifier Hewitt, the son of Aussie great Lleyton Hewitt who captured his first-ever ATP Tour victory earlier this week.

De Minaur joked that he won't be offended if his country's Davis Cup captain - former world number one Lleyton Hewitt - is rooting against him.

"I would expect him to be in his son's box, and rightfully so," de Minaur said.

In their men's matches, third-



Alex de Minaur of Australia serves during the Mubadala Citi DC Open match against Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece in Washington, DC. (AFP)

seeded American Taylor Fritz reached the quarter-finals with a 6-3, 6-4 victory over Poland's Kamil Majchrzak.

Women's third seed Naomi Osaka also punched her quarter-final ticket, advancing when American Ashlyn Krueger retired while trailing 6-3, 3-1.

Japan's Osaka, a four-time Grand Slam champion coming off a quarter-final appearance at Wimbledon, cut a confident figure on the Washington hardcourts.

But she admitted it was hard

to stay focused with Krueger still hindered after receiving treatment on her right ankle while trailing 4-1 in the first set.

"It's a tough situation, and I hope that she gets better ASAP," Osaka said.

She'll next face Italian Elisabetta Cocciaretto, who toppled eighth-seeded American Emma Navarro 6-3, 4-6, 6-3.

Filipina rising star Alexandra Eala dumped out defending women's champion Leylah Fernandez to reach the quarter-finals.

Eala, 21, defeated the seventh

seed from Canada 6-2, 7-6 (7/1), battling back from 5-1 down in an epic second set.

It continues a breakout season for Eala, who stunned Iga Swiatek at Wimbledon last month to become the first Philippines player to reach the last 16 of a Grand Slam.

"Everything's kind of a blur right now. I really made an effort to stay in the moment, and I was ready for anything that could have happened," Eala, now ranked 28th in the world, told reporters yesterday.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Qatar drawn into strong groups in 3×3 Basketball at 2026 Asian Games

The draw for the men's and women's 3×3 basketball competitions at the 20th Asian Games produced balanced groups, placing Qatar against tough opponents in the opening round, including a highly anticipated Gulf clash with Bahrain in the men's event.

The 20th Asian Games will be staged in Nagoya, Japan, from September 19 to October 4, 2026, bringing together Asia's top athletes across multiple sports in pursuit of medals and continental glory at the region's largest sporting event.

In the men's competition, Qatar was drawn into Group C alongside Indonesia, Chinese Taipei, and Bahrain, setting up a much-awaited Gulf showdown between Qatar and Bahrain, with both teams eager to advance to the next rounds.

Group A features Mongolia, the Philippines, Kazakhstan, and Sri Lanka; Group B includes China, Iran, Malaysia, and Hong Kong; while Group D comprises Japan, Singapore, Korea, and Thailand.

On the women's side, Qatar was placed in Group A with China, Kazakhstan, and Sri Lanka. Group B consists of Japan, Chinese Taipei, Iran, and Uzbekistan; Group C includes Mongolia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Macau (China); and Group D features Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and Korea.

Qatar's 3×3 basketball team boasts an impressive record, having established itself as one of

Asia's leading squads in recent years with consistent performances at regional, continental, and global levels. The team achieved a historic silver medal at the 3×3 basketball competition of the "Hangzhou 2022" Asian Games (held in 2023 in China), adding a major continental honor to Qatar's basketball achievements.

Qatar continued its success by winning the gold medal at the 4th Gulf Games "Doha 2026," defeating Bahrain in the final 20-11 after a dominant campaign. The team also captured gold at the Asian Beach Games "Sanya 2026," overcoming Thailand 21-10 in the final held in China.

On the global stage, Qatar won the FIBA 3×3 World Cup in Moscow in 2014 and the FIBA U18 World Cup in 2016, while also recording strong results in the FIBA 3×3 Nations League (Asia-Pacific) and climbing the international rankings.

In women's competition, Qatar achieved a historic milestone by securing the bronze medal at the 4th Gulf Games "Doha 2026," its first medal in the event, after defeating Kuwait 11-9 in the third-place playoff.

These achievements highlight the remarkable progress of Qatari 3×3 basketball and strengthen the team's ambitions ahead of "Aichi-Nagoya 2026," where Qatar aims to continue its journey and add another prestigious accomplishment to its decorated record.

THITIKUL LEADS FROM HISTORY-CHASING RYU AT BRITISH OPEN

Thailand's Jeeno Thitikul made the perfect start to her quest for a first major at the women's British Open with a record-setting 64 to sit two shots clear at seven under par.

The world number two's opening round is the lowest score ever recorded in the women's Open at Royal Lytham & St Annes.

Thitikul sank four birdies in five holes between the 4th and the 8th and picked up more shots at 11, 13 and 15 in a bogey-free round. History-chasing Ryu Hae-ran is looming in a share of second place as the South Korean goes for a third consecutive major.

The 25-year-old has enjoyed a whirlwind few weeks, winning the PGA Championship at Hazeltine National Golf Club in Minnesota in June before adding the Evian Championship in France earlier this month.

She made a seamless switch to links golf at Royal Lytham & St Annes, on the coast of northwest England, making four birdies in her first seven holes.

After a bogey on the par-four 15th, she recovered to birdie two of the final three holes.

"Before I got the major win it was so much pressure and I just wanted to get a win in a major," said Ryu.

"But these days it's more calm. So that's why these days my golf is pretty good. I feel free."

US world number one Nelly Korda, who was grouped with Ryu and 2024 British Open champion



South Korea's Ryu Hae-ran lines up a putt on the 5th green on the first day of the 2026 Women's British Open Golf Championships. (AFP)

Lydia Ko, finished at two-over par. Korda, 28, is also seeking her third major of the year after claiming the Chevron Championship and the US Open.

The 2026 season is the first in golf history in which two players, male or female, have won multiple majors.

Only six golfers have won three of the game's biggest prizes in a single year, with South Korea's Park In-bee the most recent in 2013.

Three-time major winner Ko is at level par as she aims to follow in fellow New Zealander Ryan Fox's footsteps after he won the men's British Open earlier this month at Royal Birkdale.

FOCUS

Djokovic set to make return at Cincinnati Masters

AFP
Paris

Former world number one Novak Djokovic said yesterday he would make his return to competition at the Cincinnati Masters next month, almost a month after he crashed out of the Wimbledon semi-finals at the hands of Jannik Sinner.

The August 13-23 tournament in Cincinnati marks the 39-year-old's first appearance there since his 2023 title.

"I am very happy to announce that I will be in Cincinnati this year, for the first time since 2023," Djokovic said on the tournament's social media. "That year I played one of the top three Masters 1000 finals of my career."

"I really look forward to coming back, playing in front of you again, and seeing all the

fans from around the world. See you soon!"

The Serb, currently ranked fifth in the world, joins a dream line-up ahead of the US Open including Wimbledon winner Sinner, world number two Alexander Zverev and no.3 Carlos Alcaraz, who has been nursing a wrist injury since April. After Cincinnati, Djokovic is expected at the August 30-September 13 US Open, where he will bid for a 25th major title.

TOMIC CONTINUES RESURGENCE IN MEXICO

The Bernard Tomic resurgence continued in spectacular fashion last night at the Mifel Tennis Open by Telcel Oppo.

Competing as a No. 171-ranked lucky loser at the hard-court ATP 250 event in Los Cabos, the 33-year-old Tomic upset fourth seed Karen Khachanov 6-2, 6-4 to reach his first tour-level quarter-final since 2019. Tomic, a

four-time ATP Tour champion who reached his career high of No. 17 in the PIF ATP Rankings in 2016, converted four of eight break points he earned to ease past Khachanov, according to Infosys ATP Stats.

By racing past home qualifier Alex Hernandez for the loss of just one game in the first round and now upsetting Khachanov, Tomic has built on the recent success he has enjoyed at ATP Challenger level.

The Australian lifted his biggest title since 2018 just 11 days ago at the Lincoln Challenger and revealed after that win that he had been contemplating retiring this season, but that he would "have to reassess a few things now".

Tomic's victory against World No. 28 Khachanov was his biggest by ATP Ranking since he defeated then-No. 13 Fabio Fognini to claim his most recent ATP Tour title in Chengdu in 2018.

FIBA U-18 ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Hosts Qatar finish runners-up in Gulf qualifiers

Bahrain claimed the title after recording four consecutive victories

By Sport Reporter
Doha

Qatar finished runners-up in the Gulf qualifiers for the FIBA U-18 Asian Championship after falling to Bahrain 77-45 in the final at Al Gharafa Indoor Hall yesterday.

Despite the defeat, Qatar successfully achieved its primary objective by securing qualification for the FIBA U-18 Asian Championship, which will be held in Ahmedabad, India, from August 13 to 23, 2026.

Bahrain claimed the title after recording four consecutive victories to finish top of the standings with eight points. Qatar placed second with seven points, while Saudi Arabia secured third place and the bronze medal with six points. Oman finished fourth with five points, and Kuwait came fifth with four points.

In the championship match, Bahrain made a strong start, taking the opening quarter 20-14 before extending its advantage with a dominant 25-9 second quarter. Bahrain also won the third period 17-14, while Qatar was unable to close the gap in the final quarter, which ended 15-8 in Bahrain's favour.

Qatar had already guaranteed its place at the continental championship before the final after recording three consecutive victories in the qualifiers. The hosts opened their campaign with an 80-76 win over Saudi Arabia, followed by an 81-53 victory against Kuwait, before defeating Oman 80-67 to confirm qualification.

Following the final, Qatar Basketball Federation President Mohammed bin Saad Al-Mughaisib crowned Bahrain with the championship trophy and gold medals, while Secretary-General Saadoun Sabah al-Kuwari presented Qatar with the silver medals.



Al-Mughaisib praised the team's achievement, stressing that qualification for the Asian Championship had been the federation's main objective.

"The team fulfilled its mission by reaching the Asian Championship, which was our primary target before the qualifiers," he said.

"Our focus now is to prepare the squad in the best possible way for the continental competition so

they can represent Qatari basketball at the highest level."

He also congratulated the players, coaching staff and team administrators for their commitment, performances and fighting spirit throughout the tournament.

Al-Kuwari commended the overall standard of the Gulf qualifiers, describing the tournament as a showcase for the region's emerging basketball talent.

"The competition highlighted a new generation of players capable of serving Gulf basketball in the future," he said. "We witnessed strong competition among all participating teams, reflecting the continued development of the sport across the region. We are pleased with Qatar's performance and successful qualification, and we congratulate Bahrain on winning the title."

FOOTBALL

Howe set to leave Newcastle, with Jaissle to take over

AFP
London

Newcastle manager **Eddie Howe** is reportedly set to make a shock exit from St James' Park, with Al-Ahli boss Matthias Jaissle expected to take charge of the Premier League club.

Jaissle would be a surprise choice to replace Howe, given his lack of experience at the top level.

The 38-year-old, a former Germany Under-21 international, was forced to end his playing career due to injury at the age of 25.

Jaissle's first managerial job came with Austrian side Liefering, whom he led to a second-placed finish in the second tier, the club's joint best-ever position.

He took charge at Red Bull Salzburg in 2021, winning successive Austrian titles as well as the Austrian Cup.

Jaissle joined Al-Ahli in 2023 and led the Saudi club to AFC Champions League titles in 2025 and 2026.

In his five years at Newcastle, Howe revitalised a club that had struggled for decades.

He replaced Steve Bruce in November 2021 and won the League Cup in March 2025 -- beating Liverpool in the final to clinch the club's first major trophy since 1969.

The former Bournemouth boss also led Newcastle to Champions League qualification in 2023 and 2025.

But hampered by star striker Alexander Isak's protracted move to Liverpool, Howe came under pressure as the Magpies finished 12th in the Premier

League last season, with 17 defeats in their 38 games.

Newcastle reached the Champions League last 16 but were hammered 8-3 on aggregate by Barcelona.

The club have since been depleted by the close-season departures of Italy midfielder Sandro Tonali to Tottenham and England forward Anthony Gordon to Barcelona.

Speculation continues over the future of Newcastle captain Bruno Guimaraes, who has been linked with a move to Premier League champions Arsenal.

Howe's final match in charge was a 4-1 defeat to Championship side Bristol City in a pre-season friendly on Wednesday.

The Englishman took charge at Newcastle after they were bought by a Saudi-led consortium, ending the turbulent reign of former owner Mike Ashley and propelling the club into the ranks of the super-rich.

The Magpies were second from bottom of the Premier League, five points from safety, but finished the season in mid-table.

The new owners were not shy of stating their long-term ambitions, targeting the Premier League title within 10 years.

Howe was not able to achieve that lofty goal, but he departs widely admired for lifting Newcastle out of their decades-long malaise.

Former Newcastle striker Alan Shearer paid tribute to Howe on X, posting a picture of the outgoing Magpies boss holding up the League Cup with the caption: "Thanks Eddie. You gave us this day."

Newcastle start their Premier League campaign at home to Liverpool on August 23.



Atletico complain to FIFA over Barca's Alvarez approach

Barcelona have received a complaint from Atletico Madrid filed with FIFA over allegedly tapping up Julian Alvarez, a source from the Catalan club told AFP yesterday. Argentina striker Alvarez said during the World Cup it would be "the best thing for everyone" for Atletico to let him leave, amid strong Barca transfer interest. Atletico believe Barcelona made prohibited contact with the 26-year-old attacker to encourage him to force his departure. Barca president Joan Laporta said at the start of July his side had made an offer to Atletico for Alvarez which they would leave on the table for as long as they see fit. Spanish media reported Atletico have also filed a complaint to the Spanish football federation (RFEF), but the RFEF did not respond to an AFP request for comment. Atletico rejected an offer of 150mn euros (\$172mn) from Real Madrid for Alvarez in June, widely viewed as a gambit by Los Blancos chief Florentino Perez to complicate a potential deal for Barca and fulfil a pledge made in his election campaign. Barcelona are hoping to replace veteran striker Robert Lewandowski, who left at the end of last season, by adding Alvarez to their squad. Alvarez joined Atletico from City in 2024 for a deal worth up to 85mn euros.

Messi returns to training after World Cup break

Lionel Messi returned to training with his US club side Inter Miami on Wednesday, 10 days after losing the World Cup final with Argentina. The superstar forward was shown stepping onto the training field alongside his Miami teammate Luis Suarez in a video posted to social media by the Major League Soccer club. Since the 1-0 defeat by Spain in the July 19 final in New Jersey, Messi has spent time with his family in his hometown of Rosario, Argentina. "The pain is immense and it's going to take a long time for this wound to heal," the Argentine captain had written on social media the day after the game.

The 39-year-old had been chasing historic back-to-back World Cup titles with Argentina. He has not yet clarified whether he will continue playing for the national side.

During Messi's post-World Cup absence, his Inter Miami coach and long-time friend Guillermo Hoyos said there was no set return date for Messi or his club and international teammate Rodrigo De Paul. "They need the time," Hoyos, who is also from Argentina, said a week ago.

"A World Cup is a massive undertaking, there is physical and mental exhaustion. They deserve the space."

Both Messi and De Paul were permitted by MLS to skip Wednesday's All-Star Game in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The MLS fields a combined team of its top stars, this year against a team representing Mexican club sides.

Participation is typically required, with exemptions for injury. But Messi has never appeared in the game, earning a one-match ban for his absence last year.

This year he and De Paul were cleared to skip it due to the short turnaround from their World Cup duties.

The date for Messi's competitive return has not yet been announced. Inter Miami host Columbus Crew on Saturday, before kicking off their campaign in the Leagues Cup - a joint competition with MLS and Mexican teams - next Wednesday against San Luis.

QSL

Gharafa preparations on with Slovakia camp

Al Gharafa are continuing their preparations for the 2026-2027 season with a training camp in Slovakian capital Bratislava (July 16 to August 3), as part of the team's preparatory programme under the guidance of Portuguese Coach Pedro Martins.

The team is undergoing intense daily training sessions, focusing on physical, technical and tactical aspects. The aim is to improve the players' readiness and help them reach peak performance before the start of official competitions as well as to enhance the cohesion between new signings and the core of the squad.

Al Gharafa began their preparations in Doha on July 4 before moving to overseas camp, where they played friendly matches against Slovak clubs AS Trencin and Samorin as well as Saudi Arabian sides Al Hilal and Al Riyadh.

The 2025-2026 season proved productive for Al Gharafa as they finished fourth in Doha Bank Stars League with 36 points (11 victories, three draws and eight defeats). They scored 36 goals and conceded as many goals.

The Cheetahs then won the Amir Cup by beating Al Sadd in the final, retaining the prestigious trophy they won in 2024-2025 season by defeating Al Rayyan in the final. The achievement also secured Al Gharafa a berth in AFC Champions League Elite.

In terms of individual recognition, Al Gharafa defender Ayoub Al Oui won the Best Under-23 Player Award at 2025-2026 Qatar Football Association Awards.

Al Gharafa have strengthened their squad by recruiting Abdulrahman Faiz Al Rashidi, Mason Holgate and goalkeeper Ahmed Kone, while coach Martins' contract has been extended for two more seasons. They will be joining the ranks that include Yacine Brahimi, Fabricio Diaz, Ferjani Sassi, Jang Hyun-Soo, Florinel Coman, goalkeeper Khalifa Ababacar, Amro Seraj and Jamal Hamed.

Al Gharafa will kick off their 2026-2027 Qatar Stars League campaign against Al Shahania at Khalifa International Stadium on August 21 with ambitions to continue their success and compete strongly in domestic and continental tournaments.



CHELSEA SIGN FRANCE DEFENDER LACROIX FROM CRYSTAL PALACE

Chelsea signed France defender Maxence Lacroix from Crystal Palace in a deal worth a reported £52mn (\$69mn) yesterday. Lacroix agreed a six-year contract with the Blues and will link up with his new club for their pre-season preparations.

The 26-year-old has won seven caps for France and played for his country at the recent World Cup.

"I am really happy to be part of this beautiful club. Everyone knows the legend of Chelsea, its tradition of winning, and to be a part of that

is a proud moment," Lacroix said. "When I spoke with the manager, I saw that we have the same direction and desire for this club. We want to win. When you see the quality of the players here, everything we have around the club, it's something that we can achieve. The ambition is to lift trophies, and I can't wait to contribute."

Lacroix made 98 appearances for Palace after arriving from Wolfsburg in 2024. He won the FA Cup, the UEFA Conference League and the Community Shield during

his time at Selhurst Park. Lacroix is the latest close-season signing for new Chelsea boss Xabi Alonso after the British record £117mn swoop for Aston Villa forward Morgan Rogers and a £47 million move for Atalanta right-back Marco Palestra. Geovany Quenda and Emmanuel Emegha have joined Chelsea in transfers that were initially agreed in 2025. The Blues have also been linked with Brighton striker Danny Welbeck and Brentford midfielder Jordan Henderson.

Meanwhile Marcus Rashford thanked Barcelona for "special memories" as he prepares to return to Manchester United with his future still uncertain. The 28-year-old recently completed a season-long loan at Barca, where he scored 14 goals and provided 14 assists in 49 appearances in all competitions. Rashford helped Barca win the La Liga crown but the club opted against making the move permanent and instead signed his fellow England forward Anthony Gordon from Newcastle.