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CRICKET | Page 2

Stokes reveals
England
coaching
ambition



FOOTBALL | Page 4

‘No decision’ on
Mudryk future
after Chelsea
return: Alonso

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Wednesday, August 5, 2026
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GULF TIMES

SPORT

TENNIS

Swiatek fends
off Bejlek to
reach third round
in Toronto

Page 3

FOOTBALL

Infantino’s problems mount as Wenger and key ally turn on him

Wenger was appointed in 2019 by Infantino as chief of global football development

AFP
Paris

Pressure on FIFA president Gianni Infantino intensified , with opposition emerging from within world football’s governing body as well as from external critics over his since-abandoned proposal to open the World Cup to private investment.

Former Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, appointed in 2019 by Infantino as FIFA’s chief of global football development, said in a statement that “the decision to withdraw the project was absolutely necessary and beyond question”.

His remarks followed hot on the heels of an extraordinary internal email to FIFA staff, in which secretary-general Mattias Grafstrom appeared to distance himself from Infantino on the issue. Previously seen as close to Infantino, Grafstrom describes the fiasco surrounding the plan as “a sad and reproachable series of events”.

He adds: “Individuals, unstable moments and unfortunate episodes come and go. The institution, its mission and its responsibility towards world football continue.”

FIFA had floated the plan last Tuesday, saying it could raise up to \$4.2bn based on a valuation of \$20bn for a new commercial subsidiary, called the FIFA Forward Enterprise (FFE), which it proposed would run events such as the World Cup and Club World Cup.

By Saturday it was dead in the water as Infantino announced the humiliating climbdown after widespread condemnation, as UEFA wielded the nuclear option of boycotting all FIFA competitions, including the World Cup.

Far from calming the waters or shoring up his presidency, Infantino has been swamped with criticism of his style of leadership and a previously smooth path to being re-elected unopposed to a fourth and final term next March in Rabat now looks a very rocky one indeed.

That is a problem down the road. For now, he has others to confront.

Even though he had withdrawn the scheme, UEFA issued a letter through their lawyers in the US threatening legal action over what they had scathingly described as a “shabby, backroom, opaque deal”.

Both Grafstrom and Wenger as well as chief operating officer Kevin Lamour, who



Gianni Infantino has been heavily criticised by FIFA’s chief of global football development Arsene Wenger (left) and secretary-general Mattias Grafstrom (second right). (AFP)

had slammed the plan on Friday, are mentioned in the letter as being knowledgeable about the FFE and instructed to keep all “relevant materials”.

“Dear Mr Infantino. UEFA hereby gives formal notice that it is actively considering legal action, arbitration, and/or regulatory complaints (together, the ‘Proceedings’) arising out of and in connection with the FFE plan proposed by FIFA and all related matters as further described below,” their lawyer Andrew Levander said in the letter sent last Friday.

“You and FIFA are required to take immediate steps to identify, locate, and preserve all documents and electronically stored information described in this Notice that are in your or FIFA’s possession, custody, or control. These obligations arise independ-

ently of any internal retention policy you or your organization maintain and supersede any routine document destruction or deletion policies that would otherwise apply.”

Several of UEFA’s member associations – Wales, Finland, Sweden and Serbia – have withdrawn their letters of support for Infantino and the English FA is strongly rumoured to be on the verge of also joining them.

However, it is the damning remarks by both Wenger and Grafstrom – who shadowed Infantino throughout the World Cup – that will twist the knife further. Their criticism only adds to the impression that Infantino has lost the confidence of even his closest FIFA collaborators.

One of the most devastating blows to In-

fantino’s plan was the resignation on Friday of his special advisor Carlos Cordeiro, who is also close to US President Donald Trump.

Despite what UEFA’s lawyer wrote regarding keeping material pertinent to FFE, Wenger claims to have only learned about it through the media. “I was not involved in this strategic plan,” the 76-year-old Frenchman said.

Grafstrom, for his part, tried to cheer up the staff by congratulating them on their work while admitting it had been “an extraordinary and challenging week”.

For Infantino, the challenge threatens to grow, and his stated purpose when he ditched the plan, to unite football, seems unlikely to be realised while he remains president.

Jordan FA chief accuses Infantino of ‘blackmail’ over endorsement

Jordan Football Association President Ali bin Hussein launched a public attack on FIFA President Gianni Infantino, accusing him of “blackmail” and claiming FIFA offered to help solve the kingdom’s problems in exchange for his endorsement.

Bin Hussein alleged that FIFA verbally communicated during the World Cup that endorsing Infantino “would go a long way to helping our FA out” after months of the world football governing body refusing assistance on various matters.

“We pride ourselves in Jordan in upholding ethical values. We did not endorse him before and certainly will not now,” Bin Hussein wrote on X. “But the whole situation amounts to blackmail and we refuse to give in to that.”

His rebuke comes as Infantino faces growing opposition within hierarchy after the FIFA president was forced to abandon a controversial proposal to sell off a stake in the World Cup.

Soccer confederations and national associations rejected the idea following a hard September 19 deadline imposed by the Swiss official.

FIFA had argued that selling the minority stake in its commercial operations would raise billions of dollars to fund global sports development.

FIFA Secretary General Mattias Grafstrom and Arsene Wenger were among executives who distanced themselves from Infantino, with Bin Hussein saying there was a problem with the leadership.

The Jordan FA chief outlined a number of grievances facing his association as a small nation with a “minimal budget.”

These included fans paying “exorbitant prices for tickets” while still being denied visas for the World Cup in the United States and outstanding reward money for players’ participation in the 2025 Arab Cup, a FIFA-organised tournament.

Adding to Jordan’s woes, Bin Hussein complained about being taxed by the US government through FIFA for World Cup participation – costs not faced by teams based in Canada and Mexico.

“We are being taxed by the US government through FIFA for our participation. Money that should go to players and staff,” he added. “This was not the case for those who played and set up camp in Canada and Mexico. But we happened to be in the USA so now we face these huge costs in taxes for having participated.”

Jordan qualified for the World Cup for the first time but exited in the group stage.

Alkrar secures Al Rayyan Cup, HM Alchahine claims Doha Cup

Deauville, France: Unbeaten colt Alkrar maintained his perfect record with a determined victory in the Group 1 (PA) Al Rayyan Cup (Prix Kesberoy), while HM Alchahine produced a devastating late burst to land the Group 1 (PA) Doha Cup (Prix Manganate) during a stellar afternoon of Purebred Arabian racing at Deauville, France..

Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) Chairman Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiya and QREC Board Member Khalifa bin Mohammed al-Attiyah presented the trophies for the two QREC-sponsored races.

Alkrar, trained by Francois Rohaut, ridden by Christophe Soumillon and owned and bred by Al Wasmiyah Racing, claimed his first Group 1 (PA) success over 2,000m after edging Balsam by three-quarters of a length in the four-runner contest for three-year-old Purebred Arabians.

Settled in third for much of the race, Alkrar moved alongside the



leader approaching the home straight before finding extra under pressure to seal his third victory from as many starts. Zahim finished third.

HM Alchahine then showcased his trademark finishing kick to claim the fourth Group 1 (PA) victory of his career in the 2,000m Doha Cup for four-year-olds and older. Trained by Mme Jean-François

Bernard, ridden by Cristian Demuro and owned by Helal Alalawi, the six-year-old was held up at the rear before unleashing a powerful run down the outside in the straight.

He swept past the field to beat Lafan by one and a half lengths, with early leader Romeo At holding on for third after setting the pace for much of the race.



Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Chairman Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiya and QREC Board Member Khalifa bin Mohammed al-Attiyah presented the trophies for the two QREC-sponsored races.



CRICKET

Stokes rules out return but eyes coaching role

STOKES SURPRISED BROOK WAS NOT MADE TEST CAPTAIN

AFP
London

Ben Stokes has revealed his ambition to coach England in the future, but ruled out any chance of ending his shock retirement from international cricket.

Stokes quit as England Test captain and retired from the international stage after a 2-1 Test series defeat by New Zealand in June.

The all-rounder had been dropped for the second Test against New Zealand after he and team-mate Gus Atkinson broke a team curfew in a nightclub incident following the opening match of the series.

Stokes said his turbulent four-year reign as captain had left him exhausted.

He famously reversed his one-day international retirement to play in the 2023 World Cup and England managing director of men's cricket Rob Key last week said he "wouldn't be surprised" if Stokes were to return to Test action.

But Stokes, 35, said he is "definitely" not coming back to the Test arena while speaking on the *'For the Love of Cricket'* podcast.

"I'm doing my level three coaching now while I'm still playing, because when the day comes that I'm not playing anymore, I'd love to be able to have all that stuff signed off and done," Stokes said.

On his coaching plan, Stokes added: "I know what I want to do in terms of staying within the game, which is to be a coach.

"And would I love to be coach of England one day? Absolutely. I just really like the idea of being in some form of leadership away



A file photo shows Ben Stokes with with coach Brendon McCullum. (Reuters)

from playing."

Joe Root has been reappointed as England's Test skipper after Stokes' exit, with Harry Brook - who has served as vice-captain - overlooked for a promotion.

Brook was given Stokes' endorsement but the white-ball captain's nightclub incident in New Zealand, hours before leading England in an ODI, continues to cast a large shadow over him.

Stokes remains surprised that Brook was passed over, saying: "If you think someone's going to be a good captain or a good leader, then just give them it.

"Even when I missed that Test match, I was like, 'Why is Brooky

(not the captain?) - he's vice-captain! And I sort of got it. I understood the reasoning why they were saying it.

"But I was still like 'what message is that sending to him?' He's vice captain. And then the captain is not playing, but he's not captain. What?

"I had no leadership or captaincy experience when I took over."

On Root, who previously held the role from 2017 to early 2022 but struggled for results during the pandemic, Stokes added: "I love Rooty and I wish him nothing but success. I hope he achieves amazing things in his role as captain.

"He's going to really enjoy working with (Fleming). He's a great man, I've worked with him before. I told Joe, I said my only worry is just you.

"And that's all I really care about now, just because I have seen what he went through and how much he put himself through for someone.

"He's just always put the team first, like he always comes second. And that's just my only concern with it is just obviously knowing what he went through last time he was in charge of the team because I don't want to see that ever happen again because I care for Joe a lot, but I wish him all the success in the world."

SPOTLIGHT

Pakistan appoint South Africa's Smith as batting coach

Reuters
London

Former South Africa first-class cricketer Michael Smith has been appointed batting coach of the Pakistan men's team across formats on a two-year contract, the country's cricket board (PCB) said in a statement yesterday.

The 46-year-old will join the Pakistan squad ahead of their three-match test series against England, which begins in Leeds on August 19.

Before moving into coaching, he played 89 first-class matches, 72 List-A games and 16 Twenty20 matches from 2003 to 2013. Smith has previously worked with Pakistan Super League franchises Islamabad United, Karachi Kings and Multan Sultans on their coaching staff. He has also served as batting coach for Australia's Hobart Hurricanes and Cricket Tasmania, and held coaching consultancy roles with South Africa's KZN Inland and Eastern Province.

Prior to Smith's appointment, former Test batter Asad Shafiq was appointed as Pakistan's interim batting coach in April 2026 for the Bangladesh Test series. Shafiq is currently also accompanying the Pakistan

team for its two-match Test series in the West Indies. Before Shafiq's interim appointment, Shahid Aslam had been serving as Pakistan's batting coach since replacing former Test captain Mohammad Yousuf in the role in November 2024.

US player Reddy gets eight-year ban for match-fixing

US international Akhilesh Reddy has been suspended for eight years after being found guilty of match-fixing charges, the International Cricket Council (ICC) said on Monday.

Reddy was charged in November with breaching three counts of the sport's anti-corruption code during the ongoing franchise-based Abu Dhabi T10 League, and was provisionally suspended.

Reddy, 26, was found guilty by a tribunal of attempting to fix or improperly influence matches, trying to get another player to participate in the same activities and deleting data and messages from a mobile device relevant to the investigation.

"The ban is backdated to 21 November 2025," the ICC said in a statement, adding that Reddy's attempt to influence another player to participate in corrupt activities did not succeed. Reddy last played for the U.S. in April 2025.

Itauma v Hrgovic heavyweight fight upgraded to IBF title clash

A heavyweight fight between Britain's Moses Itauma and Croatian Filip Hrgovic in London on August 29 will now be for the vacant IBF world title, organisers said on Tuesday. The title was vacated by Ukraine's Oleksandr Usyk in June.

"Moses Hrgovic just got bigger. IBF World heavyweight Championship on the line, a new king will be crowned in London on August 29," Queensberry Promotions said on X.

Itauma, 21, has an unbeaten professional record with 12 knockouts in 14 wins. Hrgovic, 34 and a 2016 Olympic bronze medalist, has 20 wins and one defeat.

Promoter Frank Warren told the BBC that Cuban Frank Sanchez, the IBF's top-ranked challenger, had agreed to step aside and face the winner of the Itauma v Hrgovic fight at the O2 Arena.

"We paid (Sanchez) some money. We said whoever wins the fight, you're not losing out and you'll get the opportunity to fight for the title against the winner," he said.

Warren said should Itauma beat Hrgovic and Sanchez there could then be an all-British double title battle in 2027 with WBO champion Daniel Dubois or challenger Fabio Wardley following a rematch between the two.

Russian Murat Gassiev is the WBA champion and Germany's Agit Kabayel holds the WBC title.

EUROPEAN AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS



Gold medallists Neutral Athletes Team poses on the podium for the team technical artistic swimming event during the European Aquatics Championships at the Olympic Aquatics Centre in Saint-Denis, France. (AFP)



Silver medallist Viktoria Mihalyvari Farkas (left) of Hungary, gold medallist Ginevra Taddeucci (centre) of Italy and bronze medallist Linda Caponi of Italy pose in front of the Eiffel Tower during the medal ceremony for the women's 10km open water swimming event during the European Aquatics Championships in the Seine River in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

CYCLING

Reusser wins time trial to take yellow jersey in Tour de France Femmes

Reuters
Paris

Reigning world time trial champion Marlen Reusser aced yesterday's individual time trial in Tour de France Femmes to win stage four and took the yellow jersey from Sigrid Haugset.

Swiss rider Reusser finished the 21-km ride from Gevrey-Chambertin to Dijon in 27 minutes and 30 seconds, taking a 14-second lead over former champion Demi Vollering of the Netherlands in the general classification. Vollering finished third on the day behind compatriot Lieke Nooijen, who was four seconds slower than Reusser.

Norwegian Haugset (Uno-X Mobility), who had taken the yellow jersey with a spectacular solo victory on Monday, was more than three minutes slower than Reusser and dropped to fourth in the overall tally, behind third-placed Celine Kerbaol of France.

"I'm super, super happy ... it's the first Tour de France that I really saw as my goal of the year that I really targeted," said 34-year-old



Movistar Team's Swiss rider Marlen Reusser celebrates on the podium after winning the individual time-trial, the 4th stage of the Women's Tour de France in Dijon, France, yesterday. (AFP)

Reusser. As Visma-Lease a Bike rider Nooijen threw down the gauntlet by clocking 27:34, Reusser started fast, crossing the intermediate point 20 seconds earlier than Nooijen. It came down to the wire as Reusser pushed through the final km and managed to finish four seconds faster. Vollering (FDJ United-Suez), who was already

under way, made a frantic push in the final km but ended up 18 seconds slower than Reusser.

Haugset appeared to be struggling with exhaustion as she failed to capitalise on her two-minute cushion in the overall rankings. The race continues today with a 140-km hilly ride from Macon to Belleville-en-Beaujolais.

Australia's Cooper steps down from leadership group after CWG no-show

Former world champion Isaac Cooper has voluntarily stepped down from the leadership group of Australia's swim team for missing a team meeting and the final night of Commonwealth Games competition, governing body Swimming Australia said yesterday.

Cooper's withdrawal from the role comes four years after the sprint specialist was sent home from a training camp for the Games in Birmingham for misuse of prescription medicine and wellbeing issues.

Cooper, who helped Australia win the 4x100m medley gold medal at Glasgow, had failed to meet team expectations and had stood down from the team's "Athlete Leadership Group", Swimming Australia (SA) said in a statement.

"We look forward to watching Isaac compete at this month's Pan Pacific Championships." Cooper, 22, was not competing on the final night of the swimming in Glasgow, but Australia's management expect their athletes to support teammates by attending. The Sydney Morning Herald

newspaper reported Cooper was out drinking in Glasgow on the final night of competition, citing sources with knowledge of the situation. SA declined to comment.

Cooper and his management did not provide immediate comment when contacted by Reuters. Cooper won the 50m backstroke gold medal at the 2024 world championships in Doha and earned Olympic bronze at the 2020 Tokyo Games as a 17-year-old in Australia's mixed medley relay team.

SPOTLIGHT

Filipina Eala lives up to the hype with Washington triumph

Reuters
Washington

Few young players on the WTA Tour have experienced the level of expectation and support Alexandra Eala has received since she earned a place on the elite women's circuit, and on Monday the Filipina showed what all the fuss is about by winning the Washington Open. Eala capped her breakthrough run by rallying to defeat top seed Jessica Pegula 4-6 6-4 6-0 in a rain-interrupted final that began on Sunday, becoming the first woman from her country to claim a tour-level singles crown. Along the way, the 21-year-old beat Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen, last year's winner Leylah Fernandez, second seed Elina Svitolina and four-times Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka, victories which will mark her out as a dangerous outsider for the

upcoming U.S. Open. "It's an incredible milestone for me," Eala told reporters. "At the beginning of the week, there's no way I'd have thought that I'd be holding this trophy. These things creep up on you, and I hold these moments really close to me. "It was a very steep hill. Coming into the tournament, I knew that the competition was super strong and my draw was quite tough. Every match was a different set of obstacles. I'm really proud. "I ended the tournament in better shape than I started. Each match I kept improving and kept learning things about myself. So it definitely gives me a lot of confidence. "It's really nice to see all the things I've been working on off court or during training being implemented in matches." Eala's progress has been closely watched since her U.S. Open junior triumph in 2022. Reaching the Eastbourne final last year

and making the fourth round at Wimbledon last month signalled steady improvement. As Eala's reputation grew, so too did her following, with large groups of Filipino fans packing the stands at tournaments around the world to back a player many see as a pioneer for tennis in their country. Her popularity was evident in the final of the WTA 500 event on Monday, with Eala's opponent Pegula impressed by the level of support on show. "It's amazing that you guys showed up and again, to all the Filipino fans that came out, you are helping grow tennis around the world," she said. "I appreciate that being a female athlete and being in tennis, we love to see that grow." Eala can expect that support to continue at this week's Canadian Open in Toronto before she heads to New York for the U.S. Open beginning on August 30.



Alexandra Eala of the Philippines reacts after defeating Jessica Pegula of the USA in the Washington Open final at William HG FitzGerald Tennis Centre in Washington. (AFP)

TENNIS

Swiatek fends off Bejlek to reach Toronto 3rd round

'It was quite a weird game I've got to say. Not easy to finish it'

AFP
Toronto

Former world number one Iga Swiatek survived some nervy moments to launch her US Open build-up with a 6-0, 6-3 victory over Sara Bejlek in her second-round opener at the Toronto WTA 1000 yesterday. In her first match since her Wimbledon title defense ended with a third-round exit, Poland's Swiatek was rolling through the first nine games, appearing in total control with a double-break for a 3-0 lead in the second. But her Czech opponent dug in, using off-speed balls and some well-judged volleys to disrupt Swiatek's rhythm, winning two straight games before Swiatek pulled off a great escape - fending off nine break points in a 22-minute sixth game to hold serve for a 4-2 lead. "It was quite a weird game I've got to say," Swiatek gold Tennis Channel. "Not easy to finish it. There was much more running, much more different change of rhythm and different solutions that we used during that game. "I felt like we both were kind of changing the rhythm and the pace all the time, so sometimes it was hard to adjust to it. I'm happy that I stayed in the game and stayed solid because I felt at the end it got pretty physical." Swiatek has slipped from third in the world at this time last year to her current eighth. Her Wimbledon disappointment came just four weeks after the four-time French Open champion bowed out in the last 16 at Roland Garros. In fact, Swiatek has yet to reach a Tour-level final this season and is hoping a late surge over the North American hard court campaign capped by the US Open will



Iga Swiatek of Poland plays a forehand return against Sara Bejlek of Czechia in Toronto. (AFP)

prevent her from finishing the calendar year without a title for the first time since 2020 - the year she won the first of her six Grand Slam titles at Roland Garros. She took some of the extra time after Wimbledon to work on technical aspects of her game, saying she's been working on her rhythm and not rushing on the court. "I feel like for sure in practices I already have these new habits in me. Sometimes during the match you've just got to focus even more

to not let these old patterns come back." World number one Aryna Sabalenka was due to open her campaign late night with a second-round clash against Japanese qualifier Moyuka Uchijima. Sabalenka is also looking to bounce back on the hard courts of North America after falling in the quarter-finals at Roland Garros and in the round of 16 at Wimbledon. The Belarusian star has domi-

nated on the surface this year, winning 23 of her 24 matches on hard courts - the lone defeat her loss to Elena Rybakina in the Australian Open final. In other early matches, ninth-seeded Ukrainian Elina Svitolina rallied from a set and a break down to beat Spain's Jessica Bouzas Maneiro 6-7 (5/7), 7-6 (7/4), 6-4. Ukraine's French Open finalist Marta Kostyuk was also in action, taking on Canadian wild card Katherine Sebov.

GOLF

Defending champ Young excited for Wyndham

Reuters
Los Angeles

What a year it's been for Cameron Young since the 2025 edition of the Wyndham Championship, where he will begin play tomorrow as the defending champion. He won by six strokes last year at Sedgefield Country Club in Greensboro, NC, for his first PGA Tour victory following seven runner-up finishes. "It was a great week. I obviously played some fantastic golf," Young said yesterday in his pre-tournament news conference. "You know, I had kind of righted the ship in terms of my play before that week, but I think it really showed through winning the tournament, especially by six. "Since then I've continued to play some good golf. I'm happy to be back here. It's a place that I've enjoyed playing and just ready to get the week on." Young, 29, has doubled his number of career victories this season, one of four PGA Tour players to win multiple events this year. He came out on top at The Players Championship in March and the Cadillac Championship in May. In 16 events this season, he hasn't missed a cut. He has five finishes in the top five, including at the Masters Tournament and The Open Championship. He is No. 3 in the world in the official golf rankings and No. 3 in the FedEx Cup standings. If he lifts the Wyndham Championship trophy on Sun-

day, he will become the first back-to-back winner at the tournament since Sam Snead in 1956. A confident Young said he wasn't sure about that but wasn't discounting that possibility. "I don't know," he said. "I've been playing some nice golf. I feel like I had a good chance to win the British Open a few weeks ago, had a nice chance at Rocket last week. So really, it's more of the same. I've played well. If I can putt anything like I did here last year, I think I'll give myself a good chance." What he wants is to play "three really good weeks of golf" in advance of the PGA Tour Championship. That season finale arrives after the Wyndham, the FedEx St. Jude and BMW championships and will be played Aug. 27-30 at East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta. He said Thursday that he's ready for the stretch run. "I feel like I'm playing well, so when that underlying sense is there, I'm just excited to go play," he said. "That's the fun part about this job is when things are going well, like the fruits of that are pretty cool. I love being in contention, love having chances to win golf tournaments and I just love competing, especially when I feel like I'm in a place that anything is possible. "That's kind of how I feel right now. Yeah, these four weeks, I'm just excited to kind of put my nose down and play. We'll evaluate it when the season's over. But I feel like I'm in a good place to play some good golf."



Celtic start new season with Dundee win

Celtic launched their defence of the Scottish Premiership crown with a 1-0 home win against Dundee on Monday, secured by Benjamin Nygren's second-half header. The Sweden midfielder, Celtic's leading scorer with 21 goals in all competitions last season, opened his account for the new campaign when he nodded in Kieran Tierney's cross in the 52nd minute. Before kick-off, Celtic captain Callum McGregor unfurled the champions flag to celebrate the club's 14th Scottish title in 15 seasons and a fifth consecutive league crown. Celtic's domestic double under interim boss Martin O'Neill last season convinced the club to retain the 74-year-old on a permanent deal. But the board's parsimonious approach to the transfer market is a bone of contention for frustrated fans who continue to call for new recruits. O'Neill handed debuts to Colombian striker Camilo Duran and Kasper Høgh, the Denmark forward who cost a club-record £11 million plus add-ons from Norwegian side Bodo/Glimt. Celtic pipped Hearts to the title after a thrilling conclusion to last season, but they struggled to get going in the opening 45 minutes of the new campaign. The breakthrough came shortly after the restart when Tierney delivered an inviting cross from the left and Nygren headed beyond Dundee goalkeeper Owen Goodman. Celtic pushed for a second goal but were grateful to Viljami Sinisalo for a fine save he made to keep out Dundee substitute Ashley Hay's glancing header.

Tsitsipas comeback continues with Montreal first-round win

Former world number three Stefanos Tsitsipas regained some of the touch lost during a recent rankings slump, with the high-profile qualifier dispatching Martin Damm 6-4, 6-4 yesterday at the Montreal Masters. The 98-minute first-round win sends Tsitsipas into a match with Brazilian Joao Fonseca. The 53rd-ranked Tsitsipas, winner last month in Gstaad, said that a coaching change - he split from his father Apostolos for a second time - is paying off now that he is under the guidance of coaches from Patrick Mouratoglou's French academy. "It's a chapter that should have started a long time ago," Tsitsipas said. "I guess I was too patient with my time and too nice with handling certain things, to take so much time to proceed with the change. But it's how life works." "Certain things come at a certain time, I'm very Buddhist in that sort of philosophy. "Now we are here, and we are doing it the way I like it. I want it to be done. I want it to be done

with a coach that I am happy with right now ... someone that I trust." The Greek claimed the opening set against Damm and came back from a break down in the second to earn a 5-2 lead and the chance to serve it out. But the Czech managed to break back, forcing Tsitsipas to clinch victory two games later on a forehand winner. "I need to focus and concentrate, and that's what I was trying to do out there today, trying to keep it locked in as much as I could and not let any distractions get in the way," Tsitsipas, 27, said. "Tennis is about milliseconds, getting properly behind the ball and being constantly well positioned. I need to focus on how to do that in the best possible way. I felt in control up two breaks, but things got tough. I have nothing to regret, I was able to fight my way through the match. I took a good grip to close it out." Hubert Hurkacz a 2022 finalist in Montreal who is coming back from a knee injury suffered t Wimbledon, returned with a 7-5, 4-6, 6-2 win



Stefanos Tsitsipas plays a backhand against Martin Damm of the United States during the Montreal Masters yesterday. (Reuters)

over Marcos Giron. Britain's Jakob Fearnley, who reached the final of a hard court Challenger last month, advanced past French veteran Adrian Mannarino 7-6 (7/3), 6-4, overcoming more than 30 unforced errors to book a meeting with 13th seeded Czech Jakub Mensik.

SPOTLIGHT

‘No decision’ on Mudryk’s Chelsea future: Alonso

Ukrainian has won an appeal against four-year ban for doping

AFP
Hong Kong

Chelsea manager Xabi Alonso said “no decision” had been made on Mykhailo Mudryk’s future but added the winger could play in pre-season after returning from a doping ban.

Ukrainian international Mudryk was suspended for four years after failing a 2024 drug test, but has won an appeal and was permitted on Friday to resume his football career.

The 25-year-old has not played since November 2024 and there have been rumours that Chelsea could sanction a loan move to bring him up to speed, or even a permanent transfer. Asked about those possibilities in Hong Kong ahead of his side’s friendly against Juventus, Alonso said: “No decision made.

“Everything has happened so quick, so the main thing is that we were thinking about the person, to feel that he was back in the group dynamic, part of the team. And we need to assess, but for sure... it is a special case with him, so we need to be sensitive.”

Mudryk’s ban came after testing positive for a low concentration of the prohibited substance meldonium.

He filed an appeal with the Court of Arbitration for Sport, and rule changes in the interim mean that if his test produced the same result now, he would not have faced charges.

Asked if Mudryk could play in Wednesday’s game against Juventus, Alonso answered in the affirmative. “Yesterday was more about the feelings, about the emotions to be back with the team, more than to assess the fitness level,” the Spaniard said.

“But yes, he could play. Maybe 90 minutes (is) too early. But he can be selected.”

Mudryk took part in an open training session at Hong Kong’s Kai Tak Stadium, drawing a loud cheer from fans when he found the net in a drill. Alonso said he was also “looking forward to welcoming” Jordan Henderson after the England midfielder signed from Premier League rivals Brentford on Monday.

However, “we need to assess because of the injury he had, how long it will take to be fit”

Henderson broke his arm in a freak injury sustained while celebrating England’s win over Mexico at the World Cup.



Chelsea’s Mykhailo Mudryk attends a training session ahead of pre-season friendly against Juventus at Kai Tak Stadium in Hong Kong. (AFP)

The 36-year-old has followed international teammate Danny Welbeck, 35, to Stamford Bridge, in a shift from the Blues’ long-held strategy of snapping up younger talent on lengthy contracts.

Juventus are looking to improve on last season’s disappointing sixth-placed finish in Serie A and announced the signing of Bosnian teenager Kerim Alajbegovic on Sunday alongside the return of French striker Randal Kolo Muani to the club. “To have new players in our team, we are very (happy) about them. We have needed them for a long time,” manager Luciano Spalletti told a news conference. “We know they are strong, and we just need to

make them settle,” he said.

Chelsea’s pre-season tour so far has comprised two friendlies in Australia - a see-saw 6-4 win over Western Sydney Wanderers and a 2-1 defeat to London rivals Tottenham.

After Juventus, they play Italian giants AC Milan in Jakarta and Johor Darul Ta’zim in Malaysia before heading home for a final warm-up against Spain’s Real Sociedad.

They face Fulham at Craven Cottage in their opening league game on August 24.

Juventus travel to Australia for friendlies against fellow Italians Inter Milan and Palermo before kicking off the Serie A season with a trip to Frosinone on August 23.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Wakrah wrap up training stint in France

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Wakrah are continuing their preparations for the 2026-2027 season following the conclusion of a training camp in Rennes, France. The camp focussed on fitness, tactics and squad integration under coach Jose Luis Sierra.

The camp and warm-up games helped coach Sierra and technical staff put the new and existing players through their paces and finetune the squad’s preparations for a long and challenging season ahead. Al Wakrah played four friendly matches during the camp. They beat French club Stade Brestois 2-0, but lost to Nantes (1-5), Caen (1-4) and FC Roanne (0-1).

The camp provided an important opportunity for the coaching

staff to evaluate the performance of new players and key members of the squad, work on improving team performance and prepare the team for upcoming challenges.

Al Wakrah finished the Qatar Stars League in eighth place with 27 points (seven wins, six draws and nine defeats). They scored 32 goals and conceded 36 goals.

Al Wakrah strengthened the squad by signing Rabeh Boussafi, Mohamed Ibrahim (Simo) and Tameem Mansour. They will join a squad that retains key figures Luis Alberto, Lucas Mendes, Amin Zahzouh, Aissa Laidouni, Jacinto Dala, Gerard Valentin, Hamdy Fathy, Redouane Berkane, Ayoub Assal, Almahdi Ali and goalkeeper Mohammed al-Bakri.

Al Wakrah will kick off their Qatar Stars League campaign against Qatar SC on August 20 at Lusail Stadium.



Al Wakrah played four friendly matches during the camp in France. They beat French club Stade Brestois 2-0, but lost to Nantes (1-5), Caen (1-4) and FC Roanne (0-1).

Thousands pay tribute to Italian football legend Baresi

Milan: Thousands of people gathered outside a Milan church to pay tribute to Italian football great Franco Baresi, who died last week aged 66. Regarded as one of the greatest sweepers in football history, a funeral service for the former AC Milan captain was held at Milan’s Sant’Ambrogio Basilica. Former teammates Paolo Maldini, Roberto Baggio, Alessandro Costacurta were among many football stars and AC Milan figures in attendance. Outside mourners sang chants and waved red-and-black AC Milan flags, as well as shirts bearing Baresi’s iconic number six.

A World Cup winner with Italy in 1982 and a finalist at the 1994 World Cup, Baresi skippered AC Milan in the 1980s and 1990s when they won three European Cups and six Italian league titles.

He retired in 1997 after 719 matches with the Rossoneri, a record surpassed only by Maldini. The club did not specify the cause of his death.

He had undergone surgery in August 2025 to remove a lung nodule.

RENARD RETURNS AS IVORY COAST COACH
Herve Renard, who led Ivory Coast to 2015 Africa Cup of Nations glory, has returned for a second spell as coach, the Ivorian football federation (FIF) announced.

The 57-year-old Frenchman replaces Emerse Fae, who was not retained despite guiding The Elephants to the AFCON title in 2024. Fae also took the Ivorians into the knockout stage of the World Cup for the first time in June, losing 2-1 to Norway in the last 32.

Renard had the thankless task of being hired as Tunisia coach

after they lost their opening World Cup group match 5-1 to Sweden, before overseeing two more heavy defeats by Japan and the Netherlands.

He has plenty of experience in African football and also coached Zambia to an emotional triumph in the Africa Cup of Nations in 2012. Renard has also had spells at Morocco, Ghana and Angola.

He was in charge of Saudi Arabia at the 2022 World Cup where they beat eventual champions Argentina in the group stage. Renard took charge of the Saudis again in 2024 but was fired before this year’s World Cup.

His first task back with Ivory Coast will be their opening 2027 Africa Cup of Nations qualifier against Ghana in September. The finals are being co-hosted by Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

BARCA’S TER STEGEN JOINS AJAX ON LOAN

Barcelona goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen joined Ajax on loan for the 2026/27 season. “Ajax has reached an agreement with Barcelona and Marc ter Stegen,” said the Dutch club in a statement.

The 34-year-old, who has been at Barcelona since 2014, has missed much of the last two seasons with serious injury issues. With Joan Garcia established as Barca’s number one, the Catalans loaned Ter Stegen to Girona in January but in February he suffered a hamstring injury on his second appearance for the club, ruling him out for the rest of the campaign.

The Germany international was not selected as part of his country’s World Cup squad. Ter Stegen, who won the Champions League and seven La Liga titles with Barca, has a contract until June 2028 at Camp Nou.

FOCUS

Amorim looks to rekindle AC Milan’s glory

AFP
Perth

New AC Milan coach **Ruben Amorim** vowed to honour the legacy of club legend Franco Baresi, who died last week, as he sets about reviving the fortunes of the ailing Italian giants.

Portuguese Amorim has returned to coaching after being sacked in January by Manchester United and faces a Milan derby against bitter rivals Inter in the Western Australia city of Perth on Wednesday.

Amorim’s reign began with a 2-2 draw in a friendly against Celtic in Glasgow last month.

The 41-year-old’s immediate target will be a top-four finish in Serie A after AC Milan missed out on the Champions League on the final day of last season. “I feel that the group is really together,” Amorim told reporters in Perth. “The important thing is to continue with this spirit when things become difficult. In this club you need to win every game, so we need to keep that spirit all season.”

AC Milan were boosted in the close season by veteran midfield maestro Luka Modric agreeing a one-year contract extension. Amorim said Modric would play against Inter, having just competed at his fifth World Cup where Croatia were knocked out in the last 32 by Portugal. “We did a lot to get him back at least for one more year,” Amorim said of the former Tottenham and Real Madrid star, who turns 41 in September.

“I’m really pleased with him and he is ready



to play some minutes tomorrow.”

The match will be an emotional first match for AC Milan since the death of Baresi, who captained the club during a golden era in the 1980s and 1990s.

“When you talk with all the staff about Franco, you see the tears in their eyes,” Amorim said.

“Franco was all about the team. The team is the most important thing in our club. I will not promise results, but I can promise that I will continue the legacy of Franco.”

AC Milan will continue their pre-season against Chelsea in Jakarta on Saturday, while Inter Milan - who beat Manchester City on penalties in Hong Kong on Saturday - will remain in Perth to play Juventus on the same day.

Juventus round out the series of all-Italian Perth friendlies against Serie B team Palermo on August 11.

The week-long festival, dubbed “Calcio Italiano”, comes after a proposed Serie A match between AC Milan and Como in Perth earlier this year was cancelled because of sanctions imposed by the Asian Football Confederation.

Inter Milan manager Cristian Chivu said he thought hosting a Serie A match in Perth would be a good idea

“What I suggest is playing it at the start of the season,” Chivu said. “We should start promoting Italian football more, especially in this part of the world.”

PREMIER LAEGUE

Arsenal step up bid to sign Newcastle midfielder Guimaraes: reports

AFP
London

Arsenal have stepped up talks with Newcastle in a bid to sign Brazil midfielder **Bruno Guimaraes**, according to reports.

The Premier League champions reportedly had a recent £70mn (£93mn) offer rejected for Guimaraes, but are set to return with an improved offer.

Arsenal are keen on Newcastle captain Guimaraes after opting not to match



Chelsea’s British record £117mn swoop for England forward Morgan Rogers.

Guimaraes, 28, scored nine goals and

produced eight assists in all competitions for Newcastle last term. Newcastle, who signed Guimaraes for £35mn from Lyon in 2022, are keen to avoid a repeat of the protracted transfer saga that ended with Alexander Isak joining Liverpool just before the transfer deadline last year.

Isak effectively went on strike, refusing to take part in Newcastle’s pre-season preparations 12 months ago, in a bid to force through his move to Anfield. Eddie Howe, who quit as Newcastle manager last week, had admitted earlier in the close-season that he was concerned about losing

Guimaraes.

After a holiday following Brazil’s World Cup last-16 defeat against Norway in July, Guimaraes has linked up with Newcastle on the club’s pre-season training camp in Spain. But it looks increasingly unlikely he will be with the Magpies when they kick off their Premier League campaign at home to Liverpool on August 23.

Arsenal open their title defence against Coventry at the Emirates Stadium on August 21. Gunners manager Mikel Arteta has not spoken publicly about his interest in Guimaraes, but said the club are “very ac-

tive” and “very ambitious in what we want to do”.

“We need to increase the competition internally. We need to make sure we identify the things that we don’t have in the team,” he said.

Alongside Guimaraes, Arsenal also want to add a defender and are trying to pull off a deal for Real Madrid star Vinicius Junior.

Christos Tzolis has arrived for €40mn from Club Brugge, but is the only new signing who truly impacts the first team. Arsenal kicked off their pre-season at the weekend (beating Girona on August 1).