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OCA, CANOC sign agreement promoting ties

The Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) and the Caribbean Association of National Olympic Committees (CANOC) have signed an agreement to foster closer sporting ties between the two regions. OCA President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani signed on behalf of the Asian governing body while CANOC President Keith Joseph signed on behalf of the Caribbean NOCs. The agreement, which was signed in Barcelona, Spain yesterday, will result in a close relationship between the two organisations. It will be for a period of six years – from 2026 to 2032 – with the provision for extension on mutual consent. “We will share information with each other as well as exchange knowledge and expertise in sports development,” said Sheikh Joaan, who is also the President of the Qatar Olympic Committee. The OCA has 45 member National Olympic Committees while CANOC has 32 member countries and territories across the Caribbean.

SPOTLIGHT

Manchester City reject bid by Barcelona for Rodri: Reports

Agencies
London

Manchester City have reportedly rejected an opening bid of £38.5mn (\$52mn) from Barcelona for World Cup winner **Rodri**. The 30-year-old has just one season remaining on his deal at the Etihad Stadium and has been strongly linked with a return to his native Spain. City are understood to want about £68mn for Rodri, who was named player of the tournament at the recent World Cup in North America.

Real Madrid had appeared likely to be Rodri's next club, but La Liga rivals Barcelona now seem to be in pole position. Barca sources had initially said there were no guarantees any deal would be made but the situation now looks to be developing. The club said they are in ongoing conversations with the player's representatives and later made their opening offer. Talks with Real have now ended, report said.

Rodri missed much of the 2024-25 campaign after sustaining a serious knee injury, and parts of last season were disrupted by a hamstring issue. However, the 2024 Ballon d'Or winner was back to his best at the World Cup in the summer, leading Spain to their second title and being named player of the tournament.

He is currently out of action after undergoing

back surgery last month and is scheduled to link back up with his City team-mates in Manchester early next week.

City will be aiming to resolve Rodri's future swiftly in order to sign a replacement. Talks are ongoing to sign 18-year-old Morocco midfielder Ayyoub Bouaddi from Lille, but the French club's £86mn asking price appears to be a sticking point.

Rodri joined City from Atletico Madrid in 2019 and won multiple Premier League titles and the 2023 Champions League under former boss Pep Guardiola. He won Euro 2024 and that year's Ballon d'Or before a serious knee injury ruled him out of much of the 2024/25 campaign.

FOOTBALL

Infantino allies rally as Norway FA chief seeks his resignation

Mexico and Argentina associations latest to throw their weight behind the embattled FIFA chief



FIFA president Gianni Infantino arrived on Friday in the Colombian city of Cali to attend hard-right president Abelardo de la Espriella's inauguration, as a crisis sweeps the highest echelons of the football world. (AFP)

Reuters
London

Football appeared to be headed for a prolonged standoff as allies of FIFA President Gianni Infantino rallied behind him while Norway demanded his resignation after several European associations withdrew their support. Confederations and national associations continued to choose sides a week after Infantino abandoned his proposal to raise some \$4.2 billion by selling off a stake in the commercial rights of the World Cup and other tournaments.

Norwegian Football Federation President Lise Klaveness said Infantino no longer had the confidence of the football community, saying the sport needed to move beyond “Game of Thrones” power struggles and focus on real governance reform. “He does not have the institutional trust required to govern FIFA stably in the times we are in. There is no going back for Gianni Infantino,” said Klaveness, a qualified lawyer.

“The international football cooperation is very much in trouble, and we must have a reason to get together now, and we want to ask the FIFA president to resign now.”

Meanwhile, European football's governing organisation UEFA, which has 55 members, stood firm in its threat to boycott all events organised by the global body. However, the football associations of Mexico and Argentina were the latest to throw their weight behind the embattled world football chief, following the Confederation of African Football's (CAF) unanimous backing of Infantino's leadership on Thursday.

South America's CONMEBOL, meanwhile, expressed concerns over the “repeated unilateral actions taken without resorting to dialogue.”

The Mexican Football Federation (FMF), co-hosts of the recently concluded World Cup, broke ranks with its own regional confederation by supporting Infantino after CONCACAF had earlier called for a “comprehensive reckoning” with his presidency.

CONCACAF, which runs football in

North and Central America as well as the Caribbean, has been among the key critics of FIFA alongside UEFA, which on Thursday said that its key conditions for a return to FIFA competitions had not been met.

UEFA said it remained committed to boycotting the World Cup until it received assurances that “such attempts to disfigure the game in this way will never be made again.”

England defender Lucy Bronze said European players would support a boycott of FIFA competitions if necessary “for the good of the game.”

UEFA has not said whether its teams would skip FIFA's next event -- the women's under-20 World Cup in Poland next month. The French Football Federation said: “For now, France will be participating in the FIFA U20 Women's World Cup.”

Asia's confederation (AFC) said it “stood in solidarity” with UEFA and CONCACAF, although a few of its 47 members have come out in support of Infantino.

In CONMEBOL's statement on Thursday, it said it rejected any attempt to oust Infantino that did not involve a vote of all



Norwegian Football Federation president Lise Klaveness said Gianni Infantino no longer had the confidence of the football community. (AFP)

211 members and Mexico's federation echoed those sentiments.

“The FMF will neither recognise nor approve any process convened outside of that institutional framework, and it joins the call made ... by President Infantino to collectively continue developing football for the benefit of the 211 member associations,” it said in a statement. “The FMF supports President Infantino's leadership in continuing to promote the development of football through institutional strengthening.”

Ecuadorian Football Federation President Francisco Egas Lareategui also lent his support to Infantino, saying the country's football had experienced “exponential development” thanks in large part to FIFA's financial support.

“We trust that you and those currently leading world football will continue working for the benefit of our sport, adhering to the rules with transparency and conviction,” he wrote in a letter to the FIFA chief.

Following a meeting in Rabat this week, FIFA apologised to its members for mistakes in the proposal and said it would review the process after the plan blindsided national associations and regional confederations.

The fallout from the proposal has cast a shadow over Infantino's bid for reelection for a fourth term at the FIFA Congress in Morocco in March, which had looked like

a foregone conclusion two months ago. No clear candidate to stand against Infantino has yet emerged, however, and the Swiss administrator still enjoys considerable support, including from 2022 world champions Argentina.

Argentina's football association (AFA) backed FIFA's work over the past decade, praising its focus on global development and transparent governance.

While the AFA acknowledged that the proposal generated far more uncertainties than certainties and that errors had been made, it said that the way forward was to continue working under FIFA's leadership ahead of next year's Congress. Paraguay's federation (APF) also published a letter of support addressed to Infantino, writing that it “reaffirms its commitment to continue working alongside FIFA.”

The Croatian Football Federation was among the individual national associations to withdraw support for Infantino, following similar moves by England and Albania. On Thursday, players' union FIFPRO said Infantino's proposal was not just a governance failure but a “profound abuse of presidential power”.

FIFA has said that all actions taken over the commercial rights proposal complied with its regulations and stressed that mistakes related to process and communication rather than breaches of governance rules.

CRICKET

McCullum backs Fleming: ‘Like me, but better’

‘Flem and I talk pretty much every day, we’re close mates and we’ve done a lot together’



Former New Zealand captain and newly-appointed England coach Stephen Fleming has made his name as a coach in the IPL, leading CSK to five titles.

AFP
London

Brendon McCullum has hailed his successor Stephen Fleming as “like me, but better”, after England appointed his former New Zealand teammate as Test coach. McCullum was sacked from his role in charge of the red-ball side last month after a woeful Ashes campaign was followed by a 2-1 series loss at home to New Zealand, but he remains in charge of England’s limited-overs teams.

England are now reverting to a split coaching set-up with Fleming - like McCullum a former captain of New Zealand - taking over for the tour of South Africa later this year that follows a home series against Pakistan. Former batsman Fleming, 53, made his name as a coach in the Indian Premier League, leading Chennai Super Kings to five titles. “The ECB (England and Wales Cricket Board) has done incredibly well to get someone who has options all round the world,” McCullum told Sky Sports. “To get someone (like him) to

commit to English cricket for the period he has is an outstanding achievement. “I had a great time for those four years and now it’s heading in a different direction. Flem will be excellent. He’s a little bit like me, but better.” McCullum believes he can work closely with Fleming to avoid disputes over the availability of multi-format players such as Test captain Joe Root and white-ball skipper Harry Brook. “Flem and I talk pretty much every day, we’re close mates and we’ve done a lot together. He’s one of those guys I trust completely,”

said McCullum. “We have good robust conversations and both of us just want what’s right for English cricket. We want to be able to set this thing up so England is successful across all three formats of the game. “That is going to take some give and some take at times, but we both understand that and we are going to try and work very closely together.” Former England batsman Marcus Trescothick will be the interim head coach for the three-Test series against Pakistan starting at Headingley on August 19.

FOCUS

Rahane joins inaugural European T20 league after call from Waugh

AFP
New Delhi

India’s Ajinkya Rahane said yesterday he will play in the inaugural European T20 Premier League starting this month, thanks to a phone call from Australian cricket great Steve Waugh. Rahane, 38, retired from international cricket last week, bringing the curtain down on a career highlighted by his inspirational leadership during India’s 2020-21 Test series triumph in Australia. But just minutes after he announced his retirement, Rahane said Waugh convinced him to sign up for ETPL franchise Amsterdam Flames, which he co-owns with field hockey player Jamie Dwyer and businessman Tim Thomas.

“The moment I took the call of retirement, I think within five minutes, Steve Waugh called me and he said, ‘Are you interested in playing for me?’” Rahane said in an interview with AFP. “I’ve watched him since my younger days. We’ve been in touch for many years now. I said, ‘I was in a different mindset because I just announced my retirement!’” Rahane decided to take the plunge after discussing the offer with his family. “That day I spoke to my family. I still wanted to play cricket, so I thought, let’s take this opportunity. Let’s probably create that impact globally,” he said. Rahane played 85 Tests, 90 one-day internationals and 20 T20 internationals for India, but fell out of favour after a dip in form and made his last international appearance in 2023. His defining moment came during India’s 2020-21 tour of Australia, when regular captain Virat Kohli returned home after

the opening Test for the birth of his child.

“Leadership lessons” Rahane stepped in to lead a depleted side after a heavy defeat in the first Test and guided India to victories in Melbourne and Brisbane, securing a memorable 2-1 series win. The third Test in Sydney ended in a draw. The soft-spoken middle-order batsman said the tour reinforced lessons about leadership and teamwork. “I think that series was very special,” Rahane said. “That series taught us a lot. It’s always about the team. It’s never about the individual. “When you become a captain, the responsibility changes. But the mindset of a leader, for me, was always there. There were many leadership lessons in that series.” Rahane has captained teams across international, domestic and franchise cricket, including Mumbai in the Ranji Trophy and several Indian Premier League sides, most recently Kolkata Knight Riders. He said he preferred to trust his instincts and bring his “own style” of leadership. “I always tried to be myself, rather than copying anyone or taking something from different captains. I always tried to back my instinct, back my own style.” While Rahane hopes to move into coaching and mentoring after his playing days are over, he said the ETPL offered an opportunity to help develop emerging talent in Europe. Led by Mitchell Marsh, the Amsterdam Flames are one of six ETPL franchises, along with teams based in Dublin, Belfast, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Rotterdam. The tournament will feature 32 matches between August 26 and September 20.



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

India captain Gill misses warm-up match in Sri Lanka due to injury

India skipper Shubman Gill was yesterday forced to sit out of a warm-up match ahead of the two-Test series in Sri Lanka due to a finger injury, the country’s cricket board said. India are led by KL Rahul in the three-day game against Sri Lanka Cricket XI starting Friday at the Nondescripts Cricket Club Ground in Colombo.

The opening Test will begin on August 15 at Galle. The second Test will be played between August 23-27 in Colombo. “Captain Shubman Gill sustained an impact injury to his right ring finger during India’s practice on Thursday,” the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said in a statement. “As a precautionary measure, he will not take

the field on Day 1 of the warm-up game against SLC XI. The BCCI Medical Team is monitoring his progress.” The series will be India’s first in the current World Test Championship (WTC) since the 2-0 home defeat to South Africa in November. India are fifth in the WTC standings, which are led by Australia, with Sri Lanka sixth.

SPOTLIGHT

Bangladesh says Shakib will not play again



AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh said on that Friday former star cricketer **Shakib Al Hasan** had no prospect of returning to play after he joined a media event with ousted former prime minister Sheikh Hasina. Shakib joined the event by telephone in New Delhi on Wednesday, where Hasina addressed journalists, two years after she was forced from power following a deadly crackdown on student-led protests. Bangladesh Minister for Youth and Sports Aminul Haque said the government had previously taken a more open approach towards Shakib, who was a lawmaker for Hasina’s former ruling Awami League party. Shakib, who is currently in Sri Lanka, was among dozens facing murder investigations for a deadly police crackdown on protesters that toppled Hasina’s government. “We had been looking at the matter with considerable flexibility and tolerance. After this, I do not think there is any room to

think that way anymore,” Haque said in a statement. “Someone who has taken the stage with the autocrat no longer has any opportunity to return.” Shakib, 39, is Bangladesh’s most successful cricketer and one of the country’s best-known sporting figures. He has played more than 400 international matches and represented Bangladesh at five World Cups. Rights groups have long accused Hasina’s former administration of abuses including the murder of rivals, suppression of opposition parties, rigged courts and one-sided elections. A court in Dhaka found Hasina guilty in absentia in November 2025 of crimes against humanity and sentenced her to be hanged. She remains in hiding in India. All-rounder Shakib announced his retirement plans in September 2024 after his team’s second Test in India but later said he would play a full series before calling it quits. The Bangladesh Cricket Board said in January he could play again, but his involvement in the event in India on Wednesday sparked anger.

CYCLING

Ventoux win puts Niewiadoma-Phinney in lead

Reuters
Paris

Poland’s Katarzyna Niewiadoma-Phinney put in a stunning solo ride to take victory on the summit of Mont Ventoux in a thrilling stage seven of the Tour de France Femmes, which moved the 2024 winner into the leader’s yellow jersey as she ended her long wait for a stage win in the race. The 146.8-km ride from La Voulte-sur-Rhone ended with the legendary climb - included in the Tour de France Femmes for the first time - and Niewiadoma-Phinney left her rivals in her wake when she attacked with over nine kilometres left to race. “This victory goes to so many people that were with me along this very long road without proper big wins,” Niewiadoma-Phinney said. “I’m just so tired and so blown away with what just happened.” The stage turned into a battle of the top three overall, and Niewiadoma-Phinney, who began the day in third place, now holds a 15-second lead over Dutch rider Demi Vollering, who came in



SRAM’s Katarzyna Niewiadoma-Phinney celebrates on the podium with the yellow jersey after winning stage 7 of the Tour de France Femmes in La Voulte-sur-Rhone, France, yesterday. (Reuters)

second, with Italy’s Elisa Longo Borghini finishing third. Switzerland’s Marlen Reusser started the stage in yellow, but after coming fourth now trails the leader by 39 seconds. The peloton was down to around 40 riders, including the top 10 in the general classification, as they began the final gruelling 16-km ride to the top, but those numbers were greatly reduced on the early part of the climb.

Vollering, the 2023 winner, launched her attack with less than 11-km to go, but Reusser and Niewiadoma-Phinney stuck with her to leave the trio out on their own. When Niewiadoma-Phinney, who started the day one minute 17 seconds off the lead, made her move, her two rivals hung back as they appeared to be locked in a game of cat-and-mouse. Vollering then gave chase, with

Reusser hanging onto her back wheel, but Niewiadoma-Phinney continued to extend her lead, battling the pain to pile on the seconds. Vollering finally managed to shake off Reusser, who was overtaken by Borghini before the line but, up ahead, Niewiadoma-Phinney continued her march into the overall lead and found the energy to raise her arms in celebration as she crossed the line. The Polish rider broke down in tears as she stood on the podium wearing the yellow jersey for the first time since her triumph two years ago, as her dream of a stage victory finally came true in perhaps the toughest of them all. Niewiadoma-Phinney was not the only one crying. “As we started to climb the Mont Ventoux, I looked right and I saw my parents,” she said. “They made a surprise visit, I could see my dad crying, and I was like, ‘I just need to make them proud!’” Niewiadoma-Phinney and Vollering have finished on the final podium since the Tour de France Femmes began in 2022, and now looks set to fight to become the first repeat-winner of the race.

Rashid takes six wickets as Afghanistan thrash Ireland

Rashid Khan took six wickets as Afghanistan hammered Ireland by 92 runs in the second one-day international yesterday. Victory saw Afghanistan take a 1-0 lead in the five-match series after the first ODI was washed out. Ireland lost seven wickets for 63 runs as they were bowled out for 207 chasing a target of 300 at Bready Cricket Club in the Northern Irish village of Magheramason. Khan, one of the outstanding leg-spinners of his generation, took four of the last seven wick-

ets to fall as he finished with impressive figures of 6-34 - his third ‘six for’ in ODI cricket. Rashid struck two early blows, firstly having Andy Balbirnie caught behind to end a promising stand of 72 with Cade Carmichael. Next over he also had Harry Tector caught behind. Ireland, in a match reduced by rain to 47 overs per side, needed 156 runs from 137 balls with seven wickets in hand when their collapse truly started with the freak dismissal of Lorcan Tucker. Mohammed Saleem appealed for lbw

against Tucker was turned down. But with Tucker attempting a run, Sediqullah Atal, who was at point, ran the batsman out with a direct hit. Earlier, opener Ibrahim Zadran top-scored with 84 in Afghanistan’s total of 299-8. The series continues in Belfast on Monday.

BRIEF SCORES: Afghanistan 299 for 8 (Ibrahim 84, Atal 45, Shahidi 36*, Adair 2-40) **beat Ireland 207** (Carmichael 62, Balbirnie 36, Rashid 6-34) **by 92 runs.**

MOTORSPORT

McLaren boss glad of ‘harmony’ between Norris and Piastri

AFP
Silverstone, United Kingdom

McLaren boss Andrea Stella is proud of the way Formula One world champion Lando Norris and teammate Oscar Piastri have conducted themselves following last season's battle for the drivers' championship.

British driver Norris eventually overcame the Australian in a three-way fight, also involving Red Bull's Max Verstappen, to clinch his maiden world title, even though Piastri had held a 34-point lead with nine races remaining.

There were several occasions where McLaren's wish to ensure both Norris and Piastri raced on even terms were put to the test but relations between the pair remained cordial.

McLaren have been off the pace so far under new regulations for

the 2026 season, with Mercedes leading the way from Ferrari.

But Stella has been pleased by the professionalism of his drivers.

"It wasn't a given that, after last year - when they found themselves battling for the world title right up to the final race - the harmony they'd built would remain intact: yet not only has this not changed, but the relationship between them and with the team has actually become even stronger," team principal Stella said in a McLaren Q&A.

"And whilst this might, in a sense, have been expected of Lando - given that he was ultimately the one to become champion - it was not quite so predictable for Oscar, who, instead, has relied even more heavily on the team to accelerate his development, both on and off the track."

Mercedes teenage rising star Kimi Antonelli is 50 points clear of Ferrari's seven-time former world

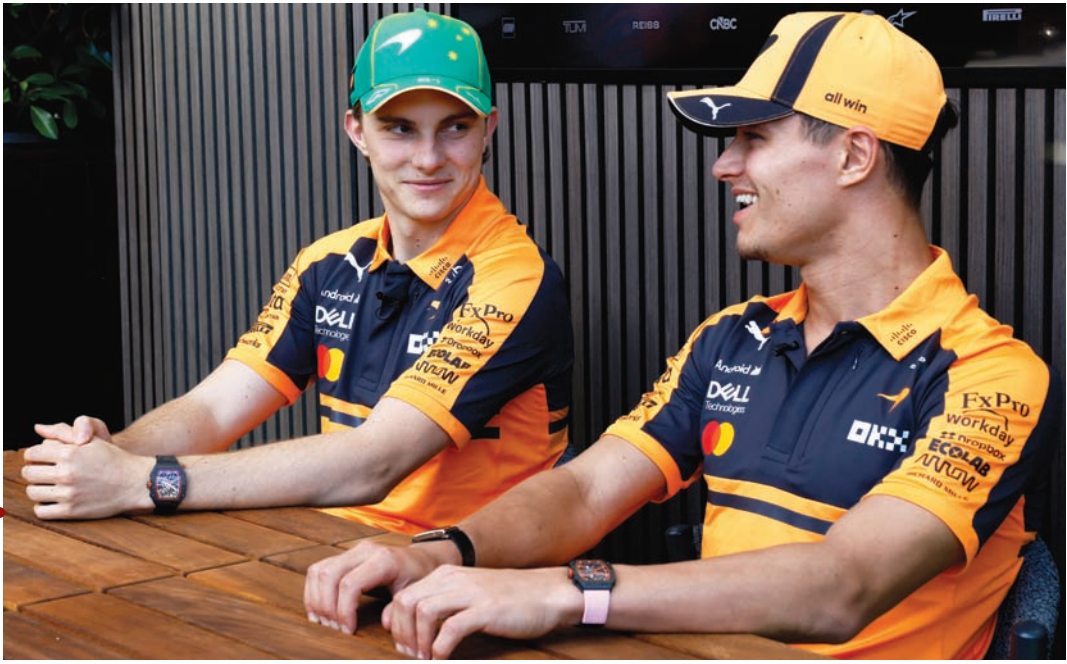
champion Lewis Hamilton at the top of the 2026 drivers' standings, with fifth-placed Norris a huge 91 points off the lead.

Norris, however, did win his first race of the season in Hungary before the current summer break and an optimistic Stella added: "If we can continue the season as we did in Budapest, I think we can still achieve a great deal."

"To do so, we must keep pushing with the development and ensure we outpace our rivals - who certainly aren't standing still."

"There are still 12 races left on the calendar, so there are plenty of opportunities given that 546 points are up for grabs."

McLaren's Oscar Piastri with Lando Norris ahead of the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 5, 2026. (Reuters)



TENNIS

Norrie survives match point to oust De Minaur

‘As we’ve seen, anything can happen. It’s not the easiest of conditions’

AFP
Montreal

Cameron Norrie extended the upset chaos at the ATP Montreal Masters on Thursday, saving a match point in defeating Alex de Minaur 5-7, 7-6 (7/5), 6-1.

The battling British winner trailed a set and a double break against the Australian third seed, who folded in the final set of an epic lasting for almost three hours.

De Minaur, who had been the highest remaining seed in a depleted draw, could have closed it out in straight sets with a match point chance in the eighth game of the second set.

The tournament had already seen an early exit from top seed Alexander Zverev, an injury pull-out from Canadian second seed Felix Auger-Aliassime and a loss by fourth seed Daniil Medvedev.

The US Open tuneup hardcourt event had already been hit by the absences of world number one Jannik Sinner and 24-time Grand Slam singles champion Novak Djokovic.

The result leaves fifth-seeded holder Ben Shelton as the new man to beat going into the fourth round. Norrie said he had to win a struggle.

"It was a great match to win and test my level," said the 2021 Masters champion at Indian Wells. "I can take so much confidence from this one."

"The level was so high in the first set. He came out firing and I had to match it. Alex stayed tough and stole the first set but took his foot off the gas just slightly in the second."

"I just battled point for point and managed to come out 6-1 in the third set. I was fortunate and I'll take (the win)."

De Minaur, losing finalist in



Cameron Norrie of Great Britain plays a forehand against Alex de Minaur of Australia during their Montreal Masters match on Thursday. (AFP)

Canada three years ago to Sinner, seized a 4-1 first-set lead to take the opener, winning six of seven games.

Norrie began turning the tide in the second set, levelling with a winning tiebreaker before running away in the third, taking match point 62 minutes after de Minaur blew his match point. "I was in a good position," de Minaur said. "It's tennis. As we've seen, anything can happen. It's not the easiest of conditions out here."

"I gave myself chances early in the third set, and then I just played some bad points in a row and then got behind."

"It all just went very quickly."

Norrie will next play Arthur

Fils after the Frenchman defeated Mariano Navone 6-3, 6-2, staking his claim for a comeback effort after missing months of play from a year ago and extending to February.

The 44th-ranked Argentine Navone lost his 22nd career match against a top-30 opponent. Fils advanced on his second match point, winning as he overcame 30 unforced errors with a solid serving performance that included four aces and four breaks of the Navone serve.

"I couldn't put in a serve during warm-up," the 24th-ranked winner said. "But I found my rhythm during the match and hit some good spots."

With no top five players left in the depleted draw, the path is opening for the survivors in French-speaking Canada.

"It has been a tough time for me, I was injured a lot," Fils said. "But I enjoy being back on the big stage - it means a lot."

Jiri Lehecka, at eighth the highest seed remaining after Shelton, stayed alive with a 6-3, 6-4 win over Belgian Alexander Blockx.

He will next face Spanish teen Rafael Jodar, the Washington runner-up who beat 13th seed Lorenzo Musetti 6-4, 6-3.

"I did a great job on returns and generally played very solid," Jodar said. "I'm super happy with the performance."

FOCUS

Sabalenka and Pegula advance in Toronto

AFP
Toronto

Top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka advanced to the fourth round of the WTA Toronto Masters on Thursday by defeating China's Zhang Shuai 6-3, 6-4.

The 28-year-old reigning US Open champion from Belarus, a four-time Grand Slam winner, dropped only seven points on her first serve to advance in 76 minutes.

Sabalenka, with a 38-6 record and three titles this year, struggled to find a rhythm in her return games early.

"I was trying to step in and then I would step back and nothing really clicked," she said. "In the end I finally started moving a little bit better and finding my rhythm so I'm really happy at the end it really clicked."

Sabalenka said she enjoys being atop the rankings, a spot she has held for more than 100 weeks in her career.

"I love it. It just means I'm ahead and they have to come up with something crazy to play such tennis and I'm only getting better from that," Sabalenka said.

"I enjoy being the one being chased. It's really fun. It's tough challenges but I love to go through it and it makes me stronger."

Sabalenka next plays against Russian 16th seed Ekaterina Alexandrova, who eliminated

Australian Talia Gibson 5-7, 6-1, 6-3.

Sabalenka leads their personal rivalry 5-4 thanks to a victory this year on Berlin grass, but Alexandrova won their most recent hardcourt match in a third-set tie-breaker last year at Doha.

"Great player. Super aggressive. Fast game. Always have to stay low," Sabalenka said. "It's always great battles and a lot of things to work on."

American third seed Jessica Pegula advanced to the round of 16 by defeating Uzbekistan's Kamilla Rakhimova 6-4, 6-0 in 68 minutes.

Pegula will play for a quarter-final berth against Russian 15th seed Diana Shnaider, who eliminated compatriot Anna Kalininskaya 6-3, 6-3, in 77 minutes.

Polish seventh seed Iga Swiatek advanced with a 6-2, 6-1 romp over Swiss Viktorija Golubic in 66 minutes, landing 18 winners and losing only 14 points on her serve.

"For sure it was a good day and I'm really happy with the way I played," Swiatek said.

Swiatek countered Golubic's versatile shots by forcing the match tempo.

"I played back her slice pretty well so the change of rhythm didn't bother me that much," Swiatek said. "I tried to pick the right balls to attack because I was controlling the pace. It was just about the decision making."

She next faces 10th seed Marta Kostyuk, who dispatched US 19th seed Madison Keys 6-3, 6-1 in 72 minutes.



Aryna Sabalenka acknowledges the crowd after defeating Shuai Zhang at the WTA Toronto Masters. (AFP)

Niemann opens with 64 for two-shot lead

Joaquin Niemann used a hot start to fire a 7-under-par 64 and take the first-round lead at LIV Golf New York on Thursday in Bedminster, N.J.

The Chilean started on Trump National Golf Club's usual first hole, birdied four of his first five holes and reached 5 under with a birdie at the par-5 eighth. He made just two more birdies the rest of the way while keeping a bogey-free card.

That was plenty for a two-shot lead over Ian Poulter of England and Lucas Herbert of Australia.

"(My putter) worked out pretty well today," Niemann said afterward. "Yeah, feel good. Just keep doing my routine. I feel like every time I keep doing the same thing, just seeing my lines, sticking to my routine, and then see if it goes in. It went in today."

Niemann, 27, is chasing his ninth LIV

Golf individual title and his second of the year following a five-win season in 2025.

Niemann's 64 also anchored the team he captains, Torque GC, which leads at 4 under par. They're three in front of the all-Australian outfit Ripper GC and HyFlyers GC.

Herbert continues to enjoy a breakout season. He shot a 62 in the second round of the Open Championship last month, tying the low round in major championship history, and went on to tie for sixth, by far his best finish at a major. One week later, he earned a runaway win at LIV Golf UK.

The veteran Poulter would love nothing more than to earn his first win in five years with LIV.

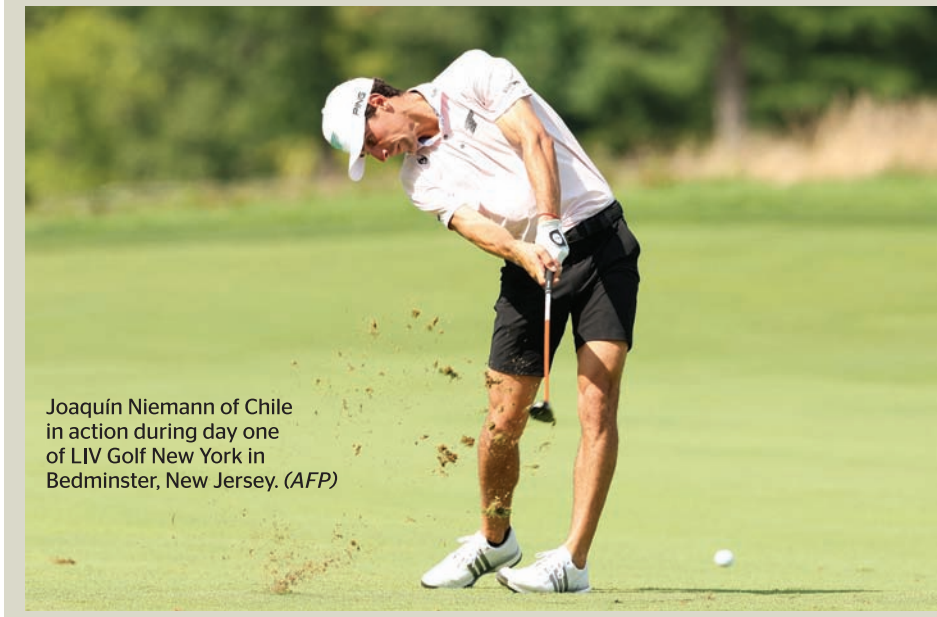
He began the day on No. 10 and opened with two straight birdies, then knocked in additional birdies at Nos. 15, 17 and 2.

"I'm hitting good golf shots," said Poulter, 50. "I feel like I'm rolling the ball really well. I made an up-and-down right here where we're standing (for his interview), and you need to to shoot these scores on these type of golf courses. This is a long golf course for me."

Brendan Steele and Thomas Pieters of Belgium are tied for fourth at 3-under 68. Bubba Watson, Harold Varner III, Scott Vincent of Zimbabwe and Lee Westwood of England are another shot back in a tie for sixth.

Spanish star Jon Rahm, who owns a massive lead in the individual standings, began his week with a 1-over 72.

Cameron Smith - the captain of Ripper and the individual winner the last time Bedminster hosted a LIV event in 2023 - struggled to a 4-over 75. Bryson DeChambeau opened with a double bogey and imploded for a 5-over 76.



Joaquin Niemann of Chile in action during day one of LIV Golf New York in Bedminster, New Jersey. (AFP)

FOCUS

Diaz inspires Bayern to friendly win over Villa

AFP
Hong Kong

A wondergoal from Luis Diaz powered a youthful Bayern Munich to a 2-1 win over Aston Villa in a pre-season friendly in Hong Kong.

Diaz starred in Colombia's run to the World Cup last-16 and the winger lit up a sometimes scrappy game between last season's German double-winners and the Europa League champions.

Bayern hit the front in the 37th minute when South Korean defender Kim Min-jae ghosted in to glance a free-kick into the far corner from the edge of the six-yard box.

The Bavarian club brought some of their big guns off the bench in the second half and started turning the screw, Diaz having a shot cleared off the line.

He stretched the lead in trademark style in the 73rd minute, picking up the ball on the left, jinking inside and cracking a dipping shot in off the crossbar. It was a superb strike that delighted the majority of the 38,000 fans inside Kai Tak stadium who were mostly cheering for Bayern.

Villa pulled one back in the 83rd minute when new signing Joao Gomes took aim

from the edge of the area and left Manuel Neuer with no chance.

They nearly equalised moments later but the legendary German stopper reacted quickly to block Tammy Abraham's point-blank header, and Bayern closed out the game. Several World Cup stars, including Bayern's Michael Olise and Harry Kane, did not travel to Hong Kong.

"I told the players honestly that I was impressed (with the performance) because you know who's there and you know who's not there," Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said. "It's difficult to go into these games... and still look the same, still look (like) the Bayern Munich that we can be. The last 10 or 15 minutes were a little bit a reflection of what pre-season is – a lot of changes... it's (more) difficult to control in that sense, as a coach."

Villa are adjusting to life without Morgan Rogers after the England midfielder moved to Chelsea last month for a reported British record fee of 117mn pounds (\$157mn).

They face Paris Saint-Germain in the European Super Cup on Wednesday before travelling to Brighton for their opening Premier League fixture on August 23. Bayern kick off the new Bundesliga season at home to Stuttgart on August 28.



Bayern Munich's Luis Diaz (left) vies for the ball with Aston Villa's Matty Cash during the pre-season friendly match in Hong Kong. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

UEFA president Ceferin taking fight to Infantino

The Slovenian would be a crucial ally to any potential challenger to Infantino

AFP
Paris

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin says one of his mantras is to "choose your battles", but European football's governing body is now locked in a bitter fight with FIFA boss Gianni Infantino.

Ceferin has previously called himself an "underdog" leader, despite having been at the helm of UEFA since 2016 and pushed through a statute change which will allow him to run for a fourth term next year.

One battle the 58-year-old Slovenian appears ready to sit out is as a challenger to Infantino, who is seeking a fourth and final term as FIFA president in Rabat next March. "No," he said last September when asked if he was considering standing for the FIFA presidency.

Infantino is under severe pressure for the first time, in part due to UEFA's reaction to his scrapped private investor plan. Ceferin would be a crucial ally to any potential challenger to Infantino.

UEFA's threat to boycott the World Cup if Infantino pushed through his proposals arguably led to the Swiss's humiliating climbdown in ditching the plan last Saturday. Terrence Burns, who served as brand and marketing strategist for two successful World Cup host bids, believes Ceferin emerged a big winner from the fall-out.

"Ceferin played it well," Burns said. "UEFA carried the fight collectively while he issued no personal statement at any point. The boycott threat was aggressive and credible, which is a rare pairing."

Ceferin served in the Yugoslav Army in the 1980s, before also being called up by the



UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has previously called himself an "underdog" leader, despite having been at the helm of UEFA since 2016 and pushed through a statute change which will allow him to run for a fourth term next year. (AFP)

Slovenian forces during their War of Independence in 1991. "Luckily I never had to shoot (anybody)," he once said.

Ceferin, like Infantino a lawyer by profession, will hope he has picked the right moment for his latest battle. "I think you should in professional and private life, choose your battles," he said last year. "You should fight when it's really a reason to fight, but every fight is tiring."

Last week brought to a head tensions between UEFA and FIFA that had surfaced during the World Cup. Ceferin boycotted the World Cup final last month in protest,

largely over the controversy surrounding US striker Folarin Balogun's red card in their last-32 win over Bosnia and Herzegovina.

FIFA stepped in and suspended Balogun's ban, freeing him to play against Belgium in the last 16. The decision led to widespread condemnation, especially when it emerged US President Donald Trump had intervened by calling Infantino.

The successful taking down of the investment plan is not the first time Ceferin and UEFA have played a pivotal role in confronting FIFA under Infantino and

won. Their opposition – along with South American confederation CONMEBOL – ultimately forced Infantino in 2021 to scrap the idea of holding the World Cup every two years. Ceferin also turned his fire effectively on the European Super League when it was launched in April, 2021. He was so angry about the failed breakaway, he called then-Juventus chairman Andrea Agnelli "a snake", even though he was godfather to the Italian's daughter.

"I didn't sleep, eat or drink for 48 hours, because I had phone calls with governments and royal families... and pressures and threats," he said in 2021.

Ceferin and UEFA, despite the quick collapse of the ESL, still felt obliged to reform their showpiece club competition, the Champions League. Ceferin has had bumps in the road during his tenure since first being elected 10 years ago.

A UEFA statute change introduced in 2024 did not completely erase the three-term limit for the presidency, but stipulated terms started or served before July 1, 2017 should not be taken into account.

That paved the way for Ceferin to seek a fourth term next year, drawing criticism. It sparked the resignation of Croatian football great Zvonimir Boban as UEFA's chief of football. "Ironically, it was the UEFA president himself that proposed and launched a set of reforms in 2017 which were introduced to prevent such a possibility," said Boban. "The reforms were to football's great credit, and that of the UEFA president. His shift away from these values is beyond comprehension."

Ceferin's next goal will be to prevent Infantino, who was re-elected unopposed in 2019 and 2023, from winning his own fourth term in charge of FIFA.

Barcelona snub game in Morocco amid 'uncertainty'

Madrid: Barcelona said they would not contest a friendly in Tangiers due to "uncertainty", a week after an unprecedented migrant rush from Morocco to Spain's territory of Ceuta.

The Catalan giants released a brief statement saying a men's first-team game on August 15 had been ruled out amid "the current context of uncertainty". "FC Barcelona believes that the circumstances are currently not right for this match to be held," the statement said.

Ceuta, a tiny territory of 84,000 inhabitants, received 72,000 migrants from July 30, according to official Spanish figures, with dozens drowning as they tried to swim around a barrier in the Mediterranean Sea.

The scenes shocked Spain and sparked a rift with some other EU countries who back a harder line on irregular immigration. Madrid has avoided criticising Rabat over last week's mass arrivals, which some commentators have interpreted as a means for Morocco to pressure Spain.

Morocco does not recognise Spanish sovereignty in Ceuta or Madrid's other north African exclave, Melilla, and has claimed both territories since gaining independence in 1956. Some commentators have suggested that the crisis was a way for Morocco to warn Spain after Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez tried to improve ties with Rabat's historic enemy Algeria.

Some Spanish political parties, including hard-right formation Vox and Sumar, a far-left member of the governing coalition, have called for Morocco to be stripped of its right to co-host the 2030 World Cup alongside Spain and Portugal.

The symbolic demand has no chance of succeeding as world governing body FIFA decides who hosts football's showpiece tournament.

Barcelona are due to play Premier League side Nottingham Forest, Italian team Udinese and Al Ahly of Egypt before opening their La Liga title defence at Elche on August 23.

MARADONA'S 'HAND OF GOD' BALL HEADS TO AUCTION

The ball that Diego Maradona used to score his notorious "Hand of God" goal during Argentina's win over England in the 1986 World Cup is expected to sell for \$10mn at a US auction this month.

Maradona's goal in the quarter-final match saw him illegally punch the ball into the net – a foul missed by the referee. After the match, the Argentine star said his goal was scored "a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God."

His nation went on to win the World Cup.

Heritage Auctions, based in Texas, expects the ball will sell for eight figures when it goes under the hammer from August 21 to 23, with a \$2.5mn opening bid. The jersey that Maradona, who died in November 2020, wore during the Argentina-England clash currently holds the record for the most expensive football shirt – standing at \$9.3mn.

BOTTOMLINE

New Belgium coach Van Bommel had no hesitation accepting job

Reuters
Brussels

Belgium's new coach **Mark van Bommel** did not hesitate to accept the job offer even if there might have been a chance to take over the national team of his native Netherlands, who are still looking for a coach after the World Cup.

Van Bommel, in his first press conference since his appointment late last month, said he jumped at the offer to replace Rudi Garcia as Belgium coach.

"Did I want to wait for the Dutch national team? No, not at all. I didn't even think about that," he said. "As a coach, being in charge of a national team is one of the best jobs there is. You work with the best players in a country. And there aren't that many really top countries."

"I am very happy to be here. It is different from coaching a club, but this challenge suits me well. In the past two years, I have had many offers, but none that I was convinced of. Things have moved very quickly here. Coaching a country, and certainly Belgium, is an honour. Every coach wants to do this."

Belgium reached the World Cup quarter-finals last month, but Garcia did not have his contract renewed, with Van Bommel, a former defender with Barcelona, Bayern Munich and AC Milan and who played for the Dutch in the 2010 World Cup final, quickly named as his re-



placement.

Van Bommel, 49, said winning was top of his agenda. "As a footballer and a coach, you always want to win," he told reporters. "You don't know what will happen along the way, but you want to go as far as possible. In the Netherlands, they often say: 'We are going to be world champions!' However, there are quite a few factors involved. So I don't want to go around shouting that we are going to win the European Championship, even though that is the reason why we are playing."

Belgium will start first, however, with the Nations League and Van Bommel's debut as coach is against Italy in Rome on September 25,

followed by two matches against Turkey and one against France in the September-October international window.

Van Bommel was repeatedly asked whether he might try to persuade goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, who said after the World Cup he wanted a break from the national team, to keep playing. "We are going to talk to Thibaut first without passing judgment. He has given his opinion, and at this moment, we are not going to decide about it. That wouldn't be right if you have only spoken to each other once," the new coach said. "Perhaps he has already revised his opinion. As soon as he is back in full training, we will fly there and talk."

TRAGIC

Uganda star Owori killed in Kampala assault

Agencies
Kampala

Uganda international and SC Villa captain David Owori died on Wednesday after being attacked near his home in the capital city of Kampala, police and the club confirmed.

Police said unidentified assailants critically injured Owori, 27, on Tuesday night in Makindye, a suburb of Kampala. Passersby discovered him unconscious and transported him to a nearby medical facility before he was transferred to another hospital, where he later died.

Witnesses said the attackers struck Owori with paving stones before taking his cellphone and other belongings and fleeing. Police have launched an investigation and are pursuing leads to identify those responsible.

Known by the nickname "Colgate" Owori played as both a right back and midfielder. He began his senior career with Vipers SC in 2016, moved to SC Villa in 2018 and later spent time with Velez CF in Spain and Utsiktens BK in Sweden before returning

to SC Villa for a second stint in 2023. Owori captained Villa to the 2024 Uganda Premier League title, ending the club's 20-year drought and claiming its record 17th top-flight championship. He also played for Uganda during Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers in 2021 and remained part of the national-team setup.

The Federation of Uganda Football Associations (FUFA) remembered Owori for the influence he carried beyond his performances. "David was not just a footballer," the federation said in a statement. "He was both a leader and an inspiration to a generation."

FUFA added that Owori led Villa with courage and humility, carrying the country's hopes and expectations whenever he represented the Cranes internationally. SC Villa called for authorities to apprehend and prosecute the attackers, describing the killing as a senseless loss for both the club and Ugandan football. His death came two months after Uganda rugby international Sydney Gongodyo was killed in the city following an attack by a mob that reportedly mistook him for a thief.