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FOOTBALL

Mourinho return spices up La Liga title race

Veteran Portugese manager returns after 11 years without league title and four without any trophy

Reuters
Madrid

Spain's World Cup confetti has barely been swept away, but La Liga is looming large with Barcelona defending their domestic title and Real Madrid, bruised by two trophyless seasons, throwing money, muscle and Jose Mourinho at the problem.

A little under a month after Spain beat Argentina to claim their second global trophy in New Jersey, adding global supremacy to their European Championship triumph, the country's football gaze has swung from national euphoria to club intrigue. At the centre of it all are familiar combatants: back-to-back champions Barcelona and a Real Madrid side whose summer has carried the unmistakable whiff of urgency.

Newly re-elected Real President Florentino Perez has overseen one of the club's most aggressive transfer windows in years, bringing Mourinho back to the Bernabeu from Benfica in a move that is bold, nostalgic and loaded with risk.

Once known as "The Special One", Mourinho returns to old territory with plenty to prove. He has gone 11 years without winning a league title and four without any trophy, bouncing between jobs and collecting controversies rather than medals. For Perez, the gamble is equally stark.

Real's 2024 LaLiga and Champions League double, which delivered their 15th European Cup and sixth in 11 seasons, feels oddly distant after two successive campaigns without silverware.

The signing of Kylian Mbappe had looked like the rich getting richer, especially alongside Jude Bellingham and Vinicius Jr, but the glittering attack failed to produce the expected trophies. Perez has responded with a summer of high stakes.

Real have signed Yan Diomande, Marc Cucurella, Denzel Dumfries, Ibrahima Konate, Bernardo Silva and Carlos Espi, while also tying Vinicius to a new contract extension after more than a year of tense negotiations.

Yet the question nagging supporters and pundits remains in midfield, where Real still appear to be dealing with the after-shocks of the departures of Toni Kroos and Luka Modric.

BARCA TRUST FLICK'S CORE

Barcelona, by contrast, have chosen continuity with a garnish of ambition. German manager Hansi Flick remains the central figure in their title defence, with the club placing faith in the squad balance that helped them dominate La Liga and supplied key pieces of Spain's World Cup-winning side.

Lamine Yamal, Dani Olmo, Pedri, Pau Cubarsi and Ferran Torres all played important roles in Spain's triumph in North America, with Torres scoring the extra-time winner against Argentina in the final.

Yet Torres could still be heading for the exit. Local media have reported that Paris St Germain have approached Barcelona with an offer for the 26-year-old forward following the arrivals of Anthony Gordon and Karim Adeyemi. Barcelona are also reported to be pushing for a blockbuster move for Spain captain Rodri from Manchester City, a signing that would sharpen their midfield and send a loud message to Madrid.

ATLETICO FACE ALVAREZ DRAMA

Across the capital, Atletico Madrid enter the new season with familiar questions and new turbulence. Diego Simeone begins his 15th season in charge under mounting pressure after a five-year wait for a league title, despite heavy investment and lofty ambitions.

Last season brought promise but no prize. Atletico reached the Copa del Rey final, losing to Real Sociedad on penalties, and were knocked out by Arsenal in the Champions League semi-finals. Now they face a more awkward headache, with forward Julian Alvarez publicly asking for a move and Barcelona openly expressing interest. Atletico have made clear they will not sell Alvarez to their Catalan rivals, but with tensions simmering before a ball has been kicked, La Liga's title race may begin with as much drama in the boardroom as on the pitch.



Newly re-elected Real Madrid president Florentino Perez has overseen one of the club's most aggressive transfer windows in years, bringing Jose Mourinho (left) back to the Bernabeu from Benfica in a move that is bold, nostalgic and loaded with risk.

FOCUS

PSG ‘want to win everything’: Enrique

AFP
Salzburg, Austria

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique says the European champions "want to win everything" this season, ahead of their first chance of silverware in today's UEFA Super Cup final against Aston Villa.

PSG secured their second straight Champions League title last term, as well as a fifth consecutive Ligue 1 crown, the UEFA Super Cup, the French Champions' Trophy and the FIFA Intercontinental Cup.

Enrique's side get their new campaign under way in Salzburg against Europa League winners Villa. "We have to show what our level is and that has to be shown on the pitch," the Spaniard told reporters. "We want to win everything and, if you look at history, it's hard to win all the time. But that's what we want to aim for."

PSG won the Super Cup 12 months ago with a penalty shoot-out victory over Tottenham.

They have a strong recent record against English opposition, including beating Aston Villa in a dramatic Champions League quarter-final in 2024-2025.

"It's difficult to ascertain how they'll be after seeing only a few pre-season games," Enrique said of facing Unai Emery's side. "We'll see what sort of game it will be and what condition both sides will be in. Each opponent we've faced over the last few years have shown how dangerous they can be. We're happy about how we were able to play. Our aim is to prove how unpre-



Paris St Germain coach Luis Enrique (left) with Achraf Hakimi (centre) and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia during a training session in Salzburg, Austria. (Reuters)

dictable we can be."

Paris have taken a strong squad to Austria, including winger Bradley Barcola who has been heavily linked with a possible move to Liverpool. There is no place for recent signing Lucas Digne, though, just two days after the France left-back departed Villa Park to rejoin PSG.

"We shared a big hug yesterday. He

congratulated me on all that I've accomplished at the club and I did the same to him," said captain Marquinhos, who was Digne's teammate during the France international's first stint at the Parc des Princes from 2013-2016.

"He's had a long journey back, but I'm so happy he's back. I'm really happy he's here. He's a good guy and a good friend."

SPOTLIGHT

100 days to go until FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar

With just 100 days to go until the FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar 2026, excitement is building for the prestigious youth tournament taking place in Qatar from November 19 to December 13.

This year marks the second of five consecutive editions that Qatar will host annually through 2029, reaffirming its commitment to delivering world-class sporting events while strengthening the country's long-term football legacy.

Building on the success of the landmark 2025 tournament, which saw Qatar host the first-ever FIFA competition featuring 48 teams, this year's edition will once again welcome 48 nations competing across 104 matches. Fans can look forward to up to eight matches per day during an action-packed group stage.

The FIFA U-17 World Cup has long served as a launching pad for many of football's biggest stars, most notably, Egyptian forward and FC Barcelona player Hamza Abdelkarim, who made his debut at the FIFA World Cup 2026 following a breakout performance at the FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar 2025. The tournament will once again provide the world's most promising young players with the opportunity to showcase their talent on football's biggest stage.

The FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar will be held at the Aspire Zone Competition Complex, with the final taking place at the iconic Khalifa International Stadium, where Portugal lifted the trophy last year



The FIFA U-17 World Cup Qatar 2026 will be held at the Aspire Zone.

in front of a crowd of 38,901 spectators.

With all matches being held in a centralised venue, fans will be treated to an exciting festival-like atmosphere under the theme of 'TMRW's GOAT', celebrating young stars as well as exploring a number of cultural and entertainment activities taking place at the Fan Zone.

This year's tournament coincides with a significant milestone for Khalifa International Stadium, which celebrates the 50th anniversary of its inauguration in 1976. One of Qatar's most iconic sporting venues, the stadium has previously hosted a number of major sporting events, including matches during the historic FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

Tickets will be made available at www.roadtoqatar.qa at a later date.

CRICKET

‘Big Four’ back as ageing Australia begin gruelling run

‘This group’s been together for quite a long time now, the majority of it’



Australia's four frontline bowlers Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Nathan Lyon. (Cricket Australia)

AFP
Darwin, Australia

Australia's ageing team begin a demanding run of potentially 21 Tests in 12 months when they face Bangladesh this week, with their injury-prone “Big Four” bowling attack reunited once again.

The two-Test series, starting in tropical Darwin tomorrow before moving to Mackay, will be the first red ball cricket the world's number one side have played since the Sydney Test against England in early January.

It is the start of an intense period that includes series against South Africa, New Zealand and India before culminating in what they hope will be the World Test Championship final and a return blockbuster Ashes showdown in England.

Captain Pat Cummins, veteran quick Josh Hazlewood and spin king Nathan Lyon return after se-

rious injuries curtailed their part in Australia's dominant 4-1 home Ashes win last summer.

Cummins, 33, played only in the third Adelaide Test as he recovered from a back injury, while Hazlewood, 35, missed the entire five-match series with hamstring and Achilles issues.

The 38-year-old Lyon suffered a series-ending hamstring problem in Adelaide and is only now getting back up to speed, with Mitchell Starc, 36, and Scott Boland, 37, carrying the Ashes load.

With all back in the frame, rotation will be the name of the game to get them through the next year, with one of the five set to miss out in Darwin.

Boland is typically the fall guy. Chief selector George Bailey acknowledged it was “an old group” but stressed that “everyone’s body and mental capacities” were different. “It’s not a one size fits all,” he said recently.

“And as we’ve seen, not just to cricket but across sport, it’s

an exciting time because players are playing older and are training smarter and are able to potentially perform at their best or at an international standard for longer.”

Only Cameron Green at 27 is aged under 30 in the 13-man squad for Bangladesh, but Bailey said younger players were on the sidelines waiting for their chance. Hazlewood, who needs five wickets to reach 300 in Tests, said the bowlers were excited for the year ahead.

“This group’s been together for quite a long time now, the majority of it, anyway,” he told reporters.

“The big series are obviously England and India. I haven’t won in South Africa either, so there’s three that are coming up that are a few boxes to tick off there for not just me but from this whole playing group.”

Against Bangladesh, Jake Weatherald is expected to open the batting again with Travis Head as selectors continue to look for the right combination following

the retirement of Usman Khawaja.

Either Marnus Labuschagne, who is searching for a first Test century since 2023, or Cameron Green should come in at three followed by Steve Smith, with Alex Carey and potentially Beau Webster to follow. It is the first Test at Darwin’s Marrara Stadium in 22 years and Bangladesh’s first Test tour of Australia in 23 years.

The visitors, who lost their only warm-up game in Australia last week by an innings and 38 runs, are depleted by injury with first-choice quicks Nahid Rana and Shoriful Islam out of the Darwin opener.

But experienced wicketkeeper-batsman Litton Das has given a boost to the squad by recovering earlier than expected from a calf strain.

“I have complete faith in the team that is going to Australia and believe we can play good cricket,” captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said, adding that their main goal was to “earn respect.”

FOCUS

Bangladesh and India scramble to save white-ball series

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh is scrambling to save a six-match cricket tour by neighbour India next month with the foreign ministers of both nations roped in to try to salvage the series.

Comprising three one-day internationals and three T20 matches, the white-ball series was originally planned for August last year but postponed after political relations soured between Dhaka and New Delhi.

“It is being worked on at the ministerial level,” Bangladesh Sports Minister Aminul Haque said late Monday, adding talks were ongoing between the foreign ministers of both nations.

Dhaka and New Delhi have been at odds since Bangladesh’s 2024 mass uprising toppled then prime minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India, her long-time ally, where she remains in hiding.

In February, Bangladesh refused to send a team to India for the T20 World Cup, citing security concerns.

The International Cricket Council refused a Bangladesh request to play their matches in Sri Lanka, and Scotland was drafted in to replace them.

“We want to quickly resolve the deadlock that was created around the Cricket World Cup,” Haque said.

“God willing, we are hopeful that it will be resolved very soon.”

India last toured Bangladesh for a cricket series in 2022 and won a two-Test series 2-0. Bangladesh won the ODIs 2-1.

Bangladesh toured India in September-October 2024 for two Tests and two T20 matches, when India swept both formats.

South Africa name Fortuin as skipper for trip to Namibia

South Africa named spinner Bjorn Fortuin as captain of their Twenty20 side to take on neighbours Namibia and Zimbabwe in a tri-series in Windhoek this month, and a three-game one-day international series. The same squad will play the T20 series from August 28 to September 6 at the Namibia Cricket Ground and three ODIs against Namibia.

All-rounders Duan Jansen, the twin brother of Test bowler Marco Jansen, and Eathan Bosch, whose elder brother Corbin has played in all three formats for South Africa, both received a first call-up.

“The idea is to give some of the younger players some international experience,” coach Shukri Conrad told a virtual press conference yesterday, pointing at a busy schedule with tours from Australia, Bangladesh and England later in the year as a reason to rest some of the more experienced players. Batters Connor Esterhuizen and Jordan Hermann, along with seamer Nqobani Mokoena, got their first ODI call-ups.

“We’ve selected one squad for both series as we feel we have all departments well covered and it provides a great opportunity for players to build on their international caps,” Conrad added.

SQUAD: Bjorn Fortuin (captain, Lions), Eathan Bosch, Dewald Brevis (both Titans), Tony de Zorzi (Western Province), Connor Esterhuizen (Lions), Jordan Hermann (Warriors), Rubin Hermann (North West Dragons), Duan Jansen (Titans), Kwena Maphaka (Lions), Nqobani Mokoena (Dolphins), Nqaba Peter (Lions), Lhuan-dre Pretorius (Titans), Lutho Sipamla (Lions), Jason Smith, Prenelan Subrayen (both Dolphins).

Former Australia all-rounder Henriques to captain Portugal in WC qualifying

Former Australia all-rounder Moises Henriques will captain Portugal as they bid to qualify for the Twenty20 World Cup for the first time, Criicket Portugal said yesterday on Instagram.

Henriques, who played four tests, 16 one-day internationals and 24 T20s for Australia, will lead a 14-man Portugal squad at the T20 World Cup Europe Sub-Regional Qualifier C in Finland.

The 39-year-old all-rounder, who was born in Madeira, the birthplace of Portuguese footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, retired

from Australian domestic cricket last year. Portugal face Israel, Germany, Greece and Czech Republic in Group B of the tournament, which runs from August 14-20.

The group winners will advance to a final, with the overall winners progressing to the European regional final alongside Scotland, Jersey and Denmark.

The top two teams from that event will secure places in the global qualifier for the 2028 T20 World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

SPOTLIGHT

Miller, Allen, Klaasen and Stoinis headline ILT20 pre-auction signings



David Miller (right) and Heinrich Klaasen have been signed up by Gulf Giants.

By Sports Reporter
Dubai

Batsmen Finn Allen, David Miller and Heinrich Klaasen will add immense value to the DP World International League T20’s batting firepower – with the trio joining the league as pre-auction signings for Abu Dhabi Knight Riders and Gulf Giants for the tournament’s fifth season.

Allen (ADKR), Miller and Klaasen (both Gulf Giants) will be making their maiden ILT20 appearances while big-hitting Australian all-rounder Marcus Stoinis (Dubai Capitals) makes a return to the tournament after a three-year gap. ILT20 icons Jason Holder, Sunil Narine (Abu Dhabi Knight Riders), Shimron Hetmyer (Desert Vipers), Rovman Powell and Mus-

tafizur Rahman (Dubai Capitals), Nicholas Pooran, Rashid Khan, Romario Shepherd (MI Emirates) and Sikandar Raza (Sharjah Warriorz) return to their season four franchises.

Vipers – defending champions – have also retained Andries Gous and Dan Lawrence while all-rounder Azmatullah Omarzai and fast bowler Blessing Muzarabani return to the Giants camp.

The six franchises completed the pre-auction signing process for foreign players on Monday – the submission deadline. Each team was permitted a total of four pre-auction signings. The teams will complete their selection process by adding UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and additional foreign players – minimum of 18 and a maximum of 23 players per squad – at the Player Auction which will be held in Dubai on October 1. Fol-

lowing the auction, each team will be permitted to add one further wildcard signing.

ILT20 season 5 pre-auction signings also include USA’s Matthew Tromp – ADKR, Afghanistan’s Mujeeb-ur-Rahman – Desert Vipers (five previous appearances each for Gulf Giants and Dubai Capitals), Noor Ahmad – Dubai Capitals (seven previous appearances for Sharjah Warriorz and eight for Desert Vipers), West Indian Sherfane Rutherford – MI Emirates (nine previous appearances for Abu Dhabi Knight Riders and 30 for Desert Vipers), Adam Milne – Sharjah Warriorz (12 appearances for the Warriorz in Season 3), James Vince – Sharjah Warriorz (42 previous appearances for Gulf Giants) and Waqar Salam-khail – Sharjah Warriorz (21 previous appearances for MI Emirates and 11 for Dubai Capitals).

EUROPEAN ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

British sprinter Hunt chasing three more golds after winning 100m

AFP
Birmingham

Home favourite Amy Hunt took a successful first step in the women’s 100m to her lofty ambition of leaving the European Athletics Championships with four golds.

Hunt, who draws inspiration from the song ‘I Want It All’ by Sharpey Evans from the highly-popular movie ‘High School Musical 3’, held off Poland’s Ewa Swoboda to win the blue riband event in 11.00 seconds on Monday.

The 24-year-old will now turn her attention to the 200m, heats and semi-finals of which, with the final a day later.

Then comes the 4x100m relay on Saturday and the mixed sprint relay on Sunday.

“I really want to win it all and I’m so happy now I’ve got one out of four done,” said Hunt.

The mixed relay, she said, “gives us another opportunity and that should be really exciting to bring together some of the biggest names and British sprinting onto one team together will be really iconic.”

Still the world record holder for the women’s under-18 200m, 22.42sec set in June 2019, Hunt is an English graduate from Cambridge University and only started training full time after graduating in 2023.

She was part of the British team that won European 4x100m



Gold medalist Britain's Amy Hunt celebrates after winning the women's 100m final during the European Athletics Championships at Alexander Stadium in Birmingham. (AFP)

relay gold in Rome in 2024, going on to claim Olympic silver in the relay in Paris later that year and then winning silver in the 200m at the Tokyo world championships a year later – her first senior individual global medal.

Hunt, currently based in Padua north of Venice with Italian coach Marco Airale, backed that up with Commonwealth 100m silver two weeks ago in Glasgow.

“I have had such a string of silvers and I was starting to get a bit fed up with it, so I thought it was time for gold,” said Hunt.

The Briton sported some gold earrings, a gift from her parents, as they wanted her “to finally level up, because I wear all-silver jewellery”

“They said it was time for gold – they left me that note two

nights ago – so it made me quite emotional. “It was definitely time for me to come of age here.” Hunt was hopeful she could take the “momentum and the good vibes” from the 100m victory into the rest of the week.

“I’m so excited to see what it brings me. I felt so euphoric crossing the line as the first half of the race was a little bit messy,” she said. “I think me and the 200m might have a lovely little reunion and make up these champs. We did a lot of testing in the last couple of weeks and some time trials we always do in the lead up to a major champs and it’s looking really good.

“I’m ahead of where I was before Tokyo so hopefully I can look forward to a happy renewal of our vows!”

TENNIS

PTPA cites player workload concerns after Canadian Open withdrawals

Reuters
Toronto

The Professional Tennis Players Association (PTPA) said that a string of withdrawals from the Canadian Open underscored concerns that professional tennis's lengthy calendar and expanded top-level events are increasing injury risks.

The players' advocacy group said it was saddened but not surprised by the absences from the tournament, arguing that reduced recovery time between tournaments was contributing to injuries occurring earlier in the season and becoming more serious.

The Canadian Open's men's event in Montreal was hit by the withdrawals of world number one Jannik Sinner and 24-times Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic.

vic, while Carlos Alcaraz was also sidelined with a wrist injury. Hometown favourite Felix Auger-Aliassime also pulled out due to a back injury before his opening match.

On the women's side, defending champion Victoria Mboko, Wimbledon finalist Karolina Muchova, Emma Raducanu and Jasmine Paolini are also missing the tournament with injuries. Tournament organisers said last month that recurring late withdrawals from Masters 1000 events had become a wider issue for the sport.

PTPA INJURY DATA

The PTPA said it had collected and analysed injury data from more than 30,000 professional matches across all levels of the game over the past eight years in a project launched three years ago with its medical director, Dr. Robby Sikka.

"The evidence is clear: the sea-

son is too long, recovery time is shrinking, and injuries are occurring earlier and becoming more severe," the PTPA said in a statement posted on social media.

The group said upper-body injuries were up 42% in the first quarter of 2026 compared with the same period in 2025, according to its analysis. Arm injuries were up 112% this year compared with the 2025 average, it added.

The ATP expanded seven of its nine Masters 1000 tournaments to 12-day events under its OneVision strategic plan, with 2025 the first season in which the longer format was used across those events.

The PTPA said the change had cut into the time players have to rest, train and travel between tournaments, despite players having voiced concerns about the demands of the schedule for years.

"Short-term commercial interests cannot come at the expense of

player health," the association said. "Protecting players isn't just about today's competitors, it is about protecting the future of tennis."

PLAYER CHOICE

The ATP has previously said players retain choices over their schedules and that it is working to create incentives for an appropriate number of matches to be played during the season.

Spokespeople for the ATP and WTA Tours did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The PTPA called for the sport to take a player-health and data-driven approach to restructuring the calendar. It said players should have a meaningful role in shaping the schedule, while mandatory tournament commitments should be reduced to allow adequate recovery. It also urged the ATP to consider reversing the 12-day Masters 1000 format.



Canadian Open's men's draw in Montreal was dealt a significant blow with the withdrawals of world No. 1 Jannik Sinner and 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic. (Reuters)

TORONTO MASTERS

Swiatek dominates Shnaider to set up semi with Svitolina

'I was quite happy with the way I played. It was a tricky match with the wind

AFP
Toronto

Former world number one Iga Swiatek cruised into the Toronto Masters semi-finals on Monday to set up a clash with Elina Svitolina who fought back from a set down to reach the last four.

Poland's Swiatek, a six-time Grand Slam champion, took just 64 minutes to sweep past Russia's Diana Shnaider 6-2, 6-1.

Ukraine's Svitolina, the ninth seed, beat Russia's Ekaterina Alexandrova 3-6, 6-0, 6-3.

Swiatek reached just her second WTA semi-final this year after Rome and is seeking her first final appearance since winning the Korea Open almost a year ago in Seoul.

"From the beginning I went for it. I felt like I could dominate," Swiatek said after dropping just three points on her first serve.

"I was quite happy with the way I played. It was a tricky match with the wind.

"I thought I needed to adjust to that. I just wanted to be more solid," added the 25-year-old world number eight.

Svitolina won eight consecutive games after losing the first set on the way to dispatching Alexandrova in 93 minutes.

Swiatek leads Svitolina 4-3 in their WTA career rivalry, but lost both their meetings this year.

"I'm gonna talk with my team to adjust a little bit for Iga's game," said Svitolina.

"Of course she's a great cham-



Iga Swiatek of Poland serves to Diana Shnaider during the Toronto Masters quarter-finals. (AFP)

pion. She plays really well this tournament. I have to bring my best."

Swiatek established a 5-2 lead in the first set when she broke Shnaider a second time, courtesy of the Russian netting a backhand, and served out to take it in 31 minutes. The Pole broke for a 2-1 lead in the second when Shnaider netted. A forehand winner gave

Swiatek a 4-1 lead and a third break sealed victory. Svitolina had more of a battle after sending a backhand long on serve to drop an evenly matched first set.

It fired up the Ukrainian who reeled off four breaks to blank Alexandrova in the second set and take a 2-0 lead in the third.

Svitolina served for the match in the eighth game of the final set

only for a double fault to allow Alexandrova a lifeline.

But a pumped-up Svitolina roared back, broke to love and finished the match with a searing return winner. "Very pleased with my performance. With the fighting spirit," said Svitolina.

"She was playing really well in the first set. I had to really step into like a fighting mode."

SPOTLIGHT

LeBron's Sixers hope to spoil Knicks party on NBA opening night

AFP
New York

LeBron James and the Philadelphia 76ers will try to spoil the New York Knicks' celebration of last season's crown when the NBA tips off its 81st season on October 20.

The NBA announced several key games on Tuesday ahead of the 2026-27 campaign, which begins with a three-game slate featuring James with his new club to launch his record 24th NBA season.

The schedule begins with an afternoon contest sending Boston to Detroit, matching last season's Eastern Conference regular-season champion Pistons (60-22) against runner-up Boston (56-26). James, whose wait in selecting a new club last month in free agency delayed assembly of the schedule, then takes the stage at Madison Square Garden against Jalen Brunson and the reigning champions. James, the NBA all-time scoring leader, is a four-time champion and four-time NBA Most Valuable Player.

The 41-year-old forward has sparked the Miami Heat, Cleveland Cavaliers and Los Angeles Lakers to NBA titles and hopes to bring the Sixers their first crown since 1983.

Philadelphia also landed 2024 NBA Finals MVP Jaylen Brown from Boston in the off-season and with holdovers Joel Embiid and Tyrese Maxey have given the 76ers new hope of ending their title drought. Knicks players will receive their championship rings and hoist their first championship banner since 1973 before the contest.

New York defeated San Antonio four games to one in last season's NBA Finals in the first playoff run for French superstar Victor Wembanyama, whose Spurs will host Oklahoma City in the third game of opening night in the NBA.

Oklahoma City, powered by

two-time reigning NBA MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, beat the Spurs for the Western Conference regular-season title last season but lost in seven games in the West playoff finals.

The 76ers will play their first home game with James on the roster on October 22 when Cleveland, the hometown team for James, visits. James played 11 seasons for the Cavaliers and brought the first NBA title to "The Land" in 2016.

James, who announced in June he was leaving the Lakers, will make an emotional return to Los Angeles to face his former club as part of five NBA games on December 25 in the 79th year of league Christmas clashes.

After delivering an NBA title in 2020 during his eight-season run with the Lakers, "King James" will play his first game in Los Angeles since departing for the 76ers.

James, who became the first father to play alongside his son in an NBA game while with the Lakers, could face Bronny James and become the first father to play against his son in an NBA contest. The NBA holiday offerings begin with a rematch of the NBA Finals as Wembanyama leads the Spurs into New York to face the Knicks in a noon-time clash. Boston will entertain Miami with the Celtics having won 10 of the past 11 meetings with the Heat over three seasons.

Following the Sixers-Lakers showcase, Christmas will also feature Oklahoma City at Minnesota, with new Timberwolves guard LaMelo Ball and Anthony Edwards facing the Thunder, which beat Minnesota in the 2025 West finals. Denver, powered by Nikola Jokic, will visit Stephen Curry-led Golden State to conclude the December 25 outings.

Other NBA opening week games find Minnesota at Miami and Golden State at the Lakers on October 21, Denver at Oklahoma City the next night and the Spurs hosting Kevin Durant and Houston on October 23.

FOOTBALL

Lusail continue preparations after training camp in Netherlands

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Promoted Lusail are continuing their preparations for a landmark first season in Qatar's top-flight football following the conclusion of a pre-season training camp in Amsterdam, the Netherlands (July 13 to August 1).

During the Dutch camp, the team underwent intense technical and tactical sessions besides physical conditioning under the guidance of Portuguese coach Emanuel Mesquita and technical staff with the aim of raising the readiness level of players ahead of the start of the season.

Lusail played four friendly matches against Dutch clubs FC Dordrecht, FC Den Bosch and FC Volendam, and Egalite FC of Luxembourg during the camp, where the coaching staff focused on building confidence among the enthusiastic bunch of players and match fitness while integrating new arrivals into the existing squad.

Last season proved historic for



Lusail will start their 2026-2027 Qatar Stars League campaign against Al Rayyan on August 20 at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

Lusail as they topped Qatar's Second Division with 29 points from 14 matches (nine wins, two draws and three losses), securing both the championship title with one round to go and automatic promo-

tion to Doha Bank Stars League for the first time. Lusail strengthened their squad for the new season with several signings such as Spaniard Rodrigo Moreno, Argentinians Franco Russo, Iranians Ali Nemati

and Omid Ebrahimi, Macedonian Georg Stojanovski, goalkeeper Amir Hassan, Khaled Mohammed, Hossam Kamal, Ali Malallah, Naif Al Hadhrami, Mohammed Emad Ayash, Khalid Walid and Moham-

med Khaled. They will join the likes of Tiago Gernalnik, Farhad Zavoshi and goalkeeper Arsha Shakkouri. These recruitments were part of the club's broader strategy to compete at the highest level.

Lusail will start their 2026-2027 QSL campaign against Al Rayyan on August 20 at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium with the aim of making a strong impression on their debut in First Division.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Jaissle states Newcastle ambition but urges patience

AFP

London

Newcastle's new head coach Matthias Jaissle has underlined the club's ambition despite a string of high-profile exits including manager Eddie Howe, but warned success would not come overnight.

Howe left St James' Park at the end of July after nearly five years in charge, with a clutch of senior players – captain Bruno Guimaraes, Sandro Tonali and Anthony Gordon – all departing during the summer transfer window.

Saudi-backed Newcastle have signed a group of young players including Bazoumana Toure, Sean Steur and Aladji Bamba, but the departures have left the squad short of experience.

Nevertheless, former RB Salzburg and

Al Ahli boss Jaissle remains upbeat.

“We are ambitious. That's the most important thing – also why I decided to come here. But this will not happen overnight,” he said at his first press conference at St James' Park.

“The players who left the club, they were great players, great characters, experienced players and this is now a vacuum. Other players need to step in. It's a big challenge, always when there's a transition period, but it's no time to complain. It doesn't make sense to see the negative things. We want to see the chance in that situation and that's our approach from day one.”

Jaissle, who guided RB Salzburg to back-to-back Austrian league titles and Saudi side Al-Ahli to successive Asian Champions League crowns, said Newcastle had options in the remaining weeks of the transfer window.

“Either we adjust something in the

squad, by signing these players, these profiles, or other players need to step up and fill these positions, these leadership roles,” he said. “So I am quite optimistic, we can work in both scenarios. My job is to do the best out of it.”

Jaissle steered clear of setting a firm target for Newcastle, who limped to a 12th-place finish in the Premier League last season. “I'm long enough now in the industry that you cannot promise anything,” he said. “It makes no sense to promise things now because I don't know how things look in half a year or in one year. What we can control, we will control.”

Englishman Howe revitalised a club that had struggled for decades, securing a first major trophy in 56 years by winning the League Cup in 2025 and twice qualifying for the Champions League. Newcastle start their Premier League campaign at home to Liverpool on August 23.



Newcastle United manager Matthias Jaissle poses with jersey following his introductory press conference at St James' Park, Newcastle, Britain. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

‘Flawed funding system behind silence of smaller nations in FIFA’s civil war’

Oceania’s 11 member federations to discuss the row splitting world football

Reuters

Sydney

Former Papua New Guinea international Alex Davani says some of the smaller football federations have kept quiet during FIFA's civil war because they fear losing the funding that is vital to their operations.

Davani, a former deputy general secretary of Football Australia, believes global football's development funding system is flawed and hopes the discussions prompted by Gianni Infantino's abandoned FIFA Forward Enterprise proposal might create the environment for reform.

The 11-member Oceania federation are scheduled to meet to discuss the row that has split world football asunder and Davani thinks they are in a tough spot.

“I don't think the sort of institutional silence or the quiet coming out of the region is complicity or apathy or anything like that,” the lawyer and sports administrator told Reuters in an interview from Brisbane.

“I actually think it's almost a predictable response in an environment where the FIFA ... development funding is often at times the entire operational budget for a member association from Oceania. So in that context, I think they've been placed in a tricky position.

“On the one hand, you have some of the big confederations coming out being very vocal about the proposal. And on the other hand, you have a situation where, not right or wrong, and maybe not intentionally, I think it's just a situation where speaking or forming a view may perhaps risk that funding. You don't want to put that at risk because it's your livelihood.”

The flaw in the system, Davani believes, is that FIFA's funding is discretionary, not an entitlement. “Whilst the FIFA statutes quite frequently talk about development funding and development programs, nowhere in there is it enshrined the sort of principle that development money is an entitlement versus discretionary money,” he said.

“We all believe that the World Cup and



Funding for smaller federations rose to \$8mn per cycle under FIFA President Gianni Infantino from \$2-\$3mn. (Reuters)

the Women's World Cup, they belong to us (and) the development funding derives from those major assets. So I do think that if we have the sense of belonging to it, member associations can certainly decide where it should go.”

Davani said that smaller federations, like most of those in Oceania, have done well out of Infantino's decade in charge of FIFA with funding increasing from \$2mn-\$3mn over a four-year cycle to \$8mn in the last round.

Infantino inaugurated a new national football centre in PNG funded by FIFA Forward money in 2023, and another has opened in the Solomon Islands. Vanuatu

has a new stadium.

While the prospect of the \$40mn that Infantino promised if the 211 full member associations had opted for his controversial plan would have been tempting, Davani believes that is missing the point about what kind of FIFA president Oceania needs.

“For a region like Oceania, we need our leaders to have a real understanding of some of the things that impact the growth and development of professional football,” he said. “It's really expensive to move around the islands, for example, climate change means we're losing islands and places to play, and the advancement of indigenous peoples' rights are important to the region.

I think that's the standard of leader that Oceania has every right to expect.”

Citing Tim Cahill, who played for Samoa before switching to Australia, and French World Cup winner Christian Karembeu, who was born in New Caledonia, Davani said there was plenty of talent in Oceania if it could be developed properly.

“I think the disappointing thing for me about this entire (FIFA schism) is we stop talking about football, especially in a region where it needs to be played more often,” he said. “I don't think talent has been the issue. I think it's been the systems around that talent, which is why I'm really keen for us to get back to the football discussion.”

FOCUS

Emery eyes Super Cup success despite depleted squad

Reuters

Salzburg, Austria

Aston Villa manager Unai Emery is determined to keep pushing the club to new heights as they prepare to face European champions Paris St Germain in today's UEFA Super Cup, having ended a 30-year wait for major silverware last season.

Villa secured their place in the season curtain-raiser by beating Freiburg 3-0 in the Europa League final in May, earning Emery a record-extending fifth title in the competition and the club's first major trophy since the League Cup in 1996.

The triumph marked Villa's first continental success since they won the European Cup by defeating Bayern Munich in the final in 1982 and then beat Barcelona to win the Super Cup.

“I have been here four years at Aston Villa. I am happy with how we are responding and how the players are responding,” Emery told reporters in Salzburg. “The players have followed us and everything we are trying to set in our standards. We want to build our own mentality. We are thankful for the players. But we want more. We are not stopping here.”



The Spaniard is still seeking his first Super Cup title after three previous unsuccessful attempts, while PSG coach Luis Enrique will be looking to retain the trophy. Villa, however, arrive in Austria having un-

dergone significant changes to their squad during the transfer window.

Midfielder Youri Tielemans has joined Manchester United, while Morgan Rogers moved to Chelsea for a British record fee.

Jadon Sancho and Douglas Luiz have also departed, with Lucas Digne joining PSG.

Injuries have further complicated Emery's preparations, with midfielder Amadou Onana and new signing Johan Manzambi unavailable. Despite the departures, he said Villa's ambitions remain unchanged as the club continues to grow on and off the pitch.

“The effort is not changing. The club is making a really huge effort. The club is moving in the same direction as I am trying to move,” Emery said.

“We are increasing our budget through the good results on the pitch and through selling some players. Aston Villa now can have a better brand in the way we are progressing. It is a huge responsibility for me and the players.”

Villa will also be without several key players involved at the World Cup and who have been granted additional rest. England defender Ezri Konsa and striker Ollie Watkins plus Argentina goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez are all unavailable.

“We do not have some players because they finished their season late. They're resting, which is very necessary,” Emery said. “PSG are in the same situation as us. Tomorrow we will start with the players we have and we hope to get a good result with the capacity that we have.”

Mentality key to Premier League revival for Spurs, says De Zerbi

London: Tottenham Hotspur manager Roberto De Zerbi said restoring the team's spirit and mentality would be crucial to their revival after two seasons spent near the bottom of the Premier League table.

The 47-year-old, who took over in March and steered the club to safety by finishing one place above the relegation zone, said a busy summer recruitment window alone would not be enough to deliver long-term success. Spurs have recruited Sandro Tonali, Mateus Fernandes, Jan Paul van Hecke, Andy Robertson, Marcos Senesi, Cole Ramsey and Martin Dubravka.

“In the transfer market, we're not finished yet. We're looking forward to start another season with different ambitions and results,” De Zerbi said.

“We have to find the condition to build a strong team, than the last seasons to compete again for the top of the table. I usually think about the soul, passion, spirit and mentality of the team and then the improvement we can do in the future, because I can't stay with the focus just on the present.”

The Italian said he wanted supporters to recognise his side not only through its style of play but also through their commitment and character. “I would like when we go to play in the Premier League... the people recognise one's soul, passion, value of the player,” he said.

“The qualities of the players are not enough. If you don't put something more, something of yourself, something you feel inside of you, it's very tough to now compete with the top teams in the world, in the Premier League.”

Spurs begin their Premier League campaign against Brentford on August 22.

JOHNSON SIGNS FOR EVERTON IN MCNEIL SWAP DEAL

Everton and Crystal Palace announced that they had completed a swap deal involving wingers Brennan Johnson and Dwight McNeil. Wales international Johnson, who has signed a four-year contract at David Moyes' Everton, only joined Palace in January in a £35mn (\$47mn) move from Tottenham.

The 25-year-old was an unused substitute in the London club's UEFA Conference League final success, 12 months after scoring Spurs' winning goal in their Europa League final victory.

McNeil, 26, had been close to a switch to the Eagles during the January transfer window, but the deal could not be completed in time. The former England under-21 international has also signed a four-year deal.

Everton finished 13th in the Premier League last season after a disappointing end to the campaign, two places above Palace.

BARCELONA'S BARDGHJI SUFFERS ACL RUPTURE

Barcelona's young Swedish winger Rooney Bardghji faces surgery in the coming days after rupturing the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee, the Spanish champions announced.

The 20-year-old, who joined Barca last summer from Copenhagen, was injured in training on Monday and could be sidelined for at least six to seven months, according to the Catalan press.

He played just 28 matches last season as he served as back-up to Lamine Yamal and was tipped to leave the club following the arrivals of England winger Anthony Gordon and German international Karim Adeyemi.