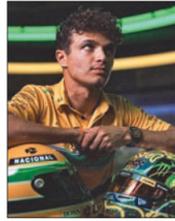


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Norris is in the championship mix, says leader Verstappen

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AMIR CUP

Rizk says no clear favourites, as Al Sadd, Qatar SC face off

'It's not a surprise for me to see Qatar SC in the final. They deserve to be here as they are ambitious'



Al Sadd (left) and Qatar SC players train yesterday at the Education City Stadium, on the eve of their Amir Cup final showdown. **PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil**

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Sadd coach Wesam Rizk said there are no favourites in the high-stakes Amir Cup final as his team face Qatar SC at the Education City Stadium today at 7pm.

Sadd, who reclaimed the Qatar Stars League title last month, are aiming for their record-extending 19th Amir Cup crown. On the other hand, surprise finalists Qatar SC are playing their first final of the prestigious tournament in 20 years.

Rizk was confident about his team's chances in the final, which he predicted to be balanced and fiercely competitive.

"I am delighted we are playing in the final. We have great motivation to win the title and I am hopeful the team will display a winning performance. We faced toughest sides Al Wakrah and Al Duhail on our way to the final.

"We took one match at a time and succeeded through our teamwork and having the likes of Akram Afif and Baghdad Bounedjah in our ranks. We have now just one obstacle left and we will enter this match with full focus on each and every detail," the Sadd coach said.

Rizk praised Qatar SC's journey to the final, noting: "It's not a surprise for me to see Qatar SC in the final. They deserve to be here as they are ambitious and play with a fighting spirit. There are no favourites and both the teams will have equal chances



Al Sadd coach Wesam Rizk is confident of leading his team to record 19th Amir Cup title.

when the final kicks off."

Despite being labelled as heavy favourites, Rizk remained focused on his team's objective: "We have given our best to prepare for the final and our target is to win the trophy. I hope we will lift the trophy in the end to complete a double in the season."

Al Sadd captain Hassan al-Haydos echoes

Rizk's sentiments, affirming the team's readiness and determination. "What is certain is that we are completely ready," said al-Haydos, who retired from national duty after leading Qatar to a second successive Asian Cup title in February this year.

"Our coach Wesam Rizk has prepared us like we prepare before any other big match.



Qatar SC Coach Youssef al-Noubi will be hoping his team can win their third Amir Cup title, and the first since 1976.

We are determined to lay our hands on the trophy tomorrow. I have featured in many finals but every title clash is different having its own circumstances. Tomorrow's final will also be different and tough because Qatar SC have been outstanding in the Amir Cup," he added.

Meanwhile, Qatar SC Coach Youssef al-Noubi said his team was determined to win

their second Amir Cup title, and first since the club beat Al Arabi in the 1975-76 final.

"We are ready to face Al Sadd. The final will be difficult for both teams. Playing the Amir Cup final is an indescribable feeling. We have reached the final stage of the tournament thanks to the efforts of the players. Even though we were not favourites to the title, against our rival in the previous rounds, especially against Al Rayyan and Al Gharafa, we succeeded in beating them," he said.

Reflecting on the journey to the final, al-Noubi underscored the unpredictability and hard work that have propelled Qatar SC to this stage.

"We will compete with Al Sadd to win the title even though it is one of the strongest clubs and a champion team. We will do everything to achieve our ambition. We will play the final with the same mentality with which we played our three matches in the tournament, and we will fight tomorrow until the last minute in order to achieve victory," the Qatar SC coach added.

Qatar SC forward Sebastian Soria too exuded confidence in his team's abilities. "We are very proud to be in the Amir Cup final, which will be difficult. But we are confident in our ability to win the title. We faced Al Rayyan and Al Gharafa and succeeded in defeating them, and I am confident that we are capable of defeating Al Sadd. We have to enjoy the match because it is the most important match of the season and I hope to win the title," Soria said.

Arab Gulf Cup to be held in Kuwait as scheduled

Doha: Minister of Sports and Youth HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, also the President of Arabian Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF), yesterday chaired the Federation's Executive Office meeting which confirmed that the Gulf Cup will be held in Kuwait as scheduled.

The tournament will take place from December 21, 2024 and January 3.

The meeting, which discussed several other matters and was also attended by AGCFF Executive Office Members and its Secretary-General Jassim al-Rumaihi, was held at the AGCFF headquarters in Doha.

The decision regarding the Gulf Cup was taken in the light of inspection committee's report that visited Kuwait earlier this month.

The establishment of the Gulf Club Championship during September 24 to April 25, 2025 and its inclusion in AGCFF's calendar was also discussed. The tournament is scheduled to be held in home-and-away format.

It was also decided to hold the U-23 National Teams Championship, which is scheduled to be hosted by Kuwait during October this year.

In addition, the Executive Office discussed during the meeting a number of proposals submitted by the Federation's Competitions Committee, which will draw up the calendar of events in the coming period. Among these proposals is the establishment of a National Futsal Championship, in addition to the establishment of a Women's National Team Championship.

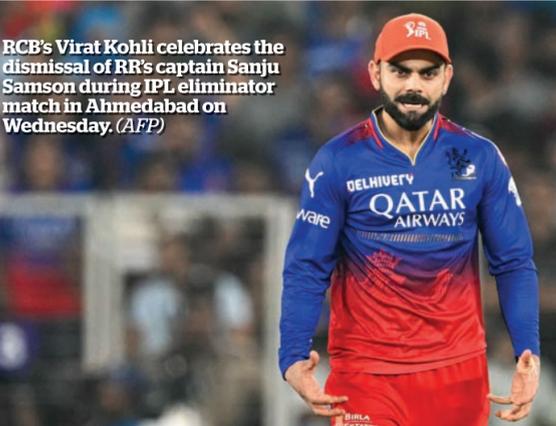
AL-TAMIMI ENTERS QUARTER-FINALS AT QSF 3



Qatar's Abdullah al-Tamimi stormed into the quarter-finals of the QSF 3 squash tournament at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex in Doha yesterday. In the second round of the PSA World Tour Bronze event, the fourth seed local favourite beat Egypt's Ibrahim Elkabbani 11-5, 11-5, 11-9 in 30 minutes. Al-Tamimi will next face USA's Shahjahan Khan in the last eight today. Unseeded Khan defeated eighth seed Karim El Hammamy of Egypt 11-1, 7-11, 11-8, 11-3 in 46 minutes. Egypt's top seed Tarek Momen also cruised into the last eight stage after an 11-4, 11-6, 11-5 win over compatriot Aly Hussein in 22 minutes yesterday. Two Indian players Velavan Senthilkumar and Abhay Singh also advanced after winning their respective second round matches. Abhay advanced after France's Auguste Dussourd retired with the Indian leading 11-7, 5-11, 10-12, 11-5, 9-3. Senthilkumar's opponent Omar Mosaad of Egypt also retired while on the verge of losing in straight games 13-11, 11-3, 9-3.

CRICKET

Kohli still hungry and evolving: Flower



RCB's Virat Kohli celebrates the dismissal of RR's captain Sanju Samson during IPL eliminator match in Ahmedabad on Wednesday. (AFP)

AFP
Ahmedabad

An IPL title has eluded Virat Kohli for 17 years, but Royal Challengers Bengaluru coach Andy Flower praised the star cricketer for his enduring "hunger" for the game. Bengaluru were knocked out of the Indian Premier League playoffs by Rajasthan Royals on Wednesday in Ahmedabad with a distraught Kohli tipping the bails after the four-wicket loss. Kohli, 35, has led the Twenty20 tournament's batting charts with 741 runs, including a century and five fifties, but failed to inspire his team to the finish in a roller-coaster season.

Flower said he was looking forward to watching the India cricket hero bat in the T20 World Cup starting June 1 in the West Indies and the United States.

"Working in the same dressing room with him has been a real pleasure," former Zimbabwe captain and England coach Flower told reporters. "As an ex-batsman it has been an absolute pleasure to watch him bat."

Kohli hit 33 in the do-or-die clash at the world's biggest cricket stadium and remained a force in the field as he ran out Dhruv Jurel with a bullet throw from the outfield.

"The way he thinks about the game – and he backs that up with an amazing level of skill, aggression and hunger – I look forward

to watching him in the World Cup," Flower said.

"I think it's amazing that he is still evolving his game, even though he has got an incredible record already," he added.

Known to wear his emotions on the sleeve, Kohli remained animated throughout the high-octane encounter played in searing heat.

He finally left the field disappointed, but with the orange cap for the highest tournament run-scorer firmly on his head.

Kohli was slammed by critics, including batting great Sunil Gavaskar, for his strike-rate at the start of the season in the hard-hitting Twenty20 format.

Called "King Kohli" for his prolific run-scoring, the batsman however finished with a strike-

rate of 154.69 in 15 matches and smashed 38 sixes. Former Bengaluru teammate AB de Villiers said Kohli, who had taken a dig at his critics, performs best under pressure.

"Maybe it was a blessing in disguise, getting a bit of criticism, because stuff like that motivates him so much," De Villiers said on *Jio Cinema*. Delhi head coach and Australia great Ricky Ponting also defended Kohli.

"It's funny with Virat," Ponting told the International Cricket Council.

"I think people in India just always try to find a reason... why he's maybe not as good as some of these other guys in the T20 game," he said, but added that Kohli is the "first pick for me for India."

CYCLING

Merlier sprints to Giro stage win as Pogacar leads

'Coming from the back is not that easy but we managed well'

AFP
Padua, Italy

Tim Merlier won the 18th stage of the Giro d'Italia yesterday in a messy bunch sprint as Tadej Pogacar held his massive lead on a quiet day for the champion-in-waiting.

Belgian Merlier pipped local hero Jonathan Milan over the line in Padova after 178 kilometres of riding to claim his second victory in this year's Giro.

The Soudal-Quick Step rider had to hold off Milan in the final few metres despite both him and his Italian rival being boxed in towards the chaotic climax of the race.

"Coming from the back is not that easy but we managed well to find a good position," said Merlier.

"I could feel someone coming on the left... then I saw it was Milan on my left and I jumped. A really good jump was necessary."

Merlier's battles with Milan, who retains the cyclamen jersey prized by sprinters thanks to a 127-point lead over Kaden Groves, have been a feature of this Giro.

Milan had used Merlier's wheel to burst through and claim the 11th stage while Merlier also edged Milan on stage three.

The Giro has one more opportunity for the sprinters, in



Team Soudal-Quick Step's Belgian rider Tim Merlier (centre) celebrates as he crosses the finish line ahead of Team Lidl-Trek's Italian rider Jonathan Milan and Team Alpecin's Australian rider Kaden Groves to win the 18th stage of the 107th Giro d'Italia, 178km between Fiera di Primiero and Padua yesterday. (AFP)

tomorrow's final day procession around Rome, with Merlier eyeing a chance to move level at three stage wins this year with Milan.

"It would be nice to have 3-3 but we will see," added Merlier.

Pogacar is seven minutes and 42 seconds ahead of Daniel Martinez with three stages left as he closes in on overall victory.

UAE rider Pogacar is bidding to become the first man to win both the Giro and the Tour de France since the late Marco Pantini in 1998. "It was a perfect day, with good legs, I'm very happy with my day," said the Slovenian.

The next two stages take the peloton back to the mountains, with Friday's finishing in Sappada

close to the border with Austria before tomorrow's punishing double climb of Monte Grappa which is the last opportunity to make a move in the general classification. Pogacar's position at the top of the tree is almost certainly sealed but a podium place is still up for grabs as the Top 10 remains hotly contested.

ANNOUNCEMENT

beIN SPORTS ready to broadcast five cup finals in 24 hours



Supporting Saturdays do not come much bigger. beIN SPORTS is the only place to be this weekend as the leading sports broadcaster in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) promises live and exclusive coverage of an unprecedented 48 hours of elite sport from around the globe, kicking off tomorrow. Billed as the "Day of Finals", the network will exclusively broadcast the finals of three continental cup competitions and two domestic cups, as well the final round of the 2023-24 La Liga season.

In Cairo, an all-Arab CAF African Champions League final sees Egypt's Al Ahly take on ES Tunis of Tunisia, the aggregate score is 0-0 after the first leg.

Arabic studio analysis starts at 19:00 Makkah on beIN SPORTS 6 leading up to the opening whistle at 20:00 Makkah. In Abu Dhabi meanwhile, Al Ain welcome Japan's Yokohama F Marinos in the AFC Asian Champions League final. Al Ain are looking to overturn a one-goal deficit after slipping to a 2-1 defeat in Tokyo earlier this month. The decisive match from the Garden City kicks off at 19:00 Makkah on beIN SPORTS AFC.

In Europe, the one-off UEFA Women's Champions League final between Barcelona and Lyon sees the Catalan giants aiming to de-

pend their title against the record eight-time winners.

At a domestic level, the oldest club competition in world football pits reigning champions Manchester City against their fiercest rivals Manchester United in the final of the FA Cup.

City will be desperate to add an 8th FA Cup title, especially as it would directly deprive United of silverware in what has been a disappointing season for Erik Ten Haag's side.

The action continues on Sunday 26 May with exclusive coverage of the EFL Championship playoff final between Leeds United and Southampton at Wembley Stadium.

Considered the most lucrative match in world football the match is worth over £170m (\$213m) in projected revenue to the winner, plus a place at the top table in English Football with direct promotion to the English Premier League.

On beIN SPORTS 2 ENGLISH, all 78 laps of the Monaco Grand Prix from the illustrious Monte Carlo Street Circuit will also be broadcast live with pre-race Arabic and English studio analysis kicking off at 14:30 Makkah, while the start of the French Open at Roland Garros can be found on beIN SPORTS 7 from 12:45 Makkah.

SPOTLIGHT

Australian great Ponting says he was approached to be India head coach

AFP
New Delhi

Former Australia skipper Ricky Ponting has revealed he was approached to be India's next head cricket coach, but said the demands of the high-profile job meant he was unlikely to take it up.

Ponting, 49, is head coach of Delhi Capitals in the Indian Premier League and has television commitments in Australia.

He is also the head of strategy at Hobart Hurricanes for Australia's Big Bash League and head coach of Washington Freedom in the US Major League Cricket tournament.

"I've seen a lot of reports about it," Ponting was quoted as saying yesterday by the International Cricket Council website.

"There were a few little one-on-one conversations during the IPL, just to get a level of interest from me as to whether I would do it," he added. "Everyone knows if you take a job working with the Indian team you can't be involved in an IPL team, so it would take that out of it."

Ponting said being a national coach would mean devoting up to



11 months of the year to the job. "As much as I'd like to do it, it just doesn't fit into my lifestyle right now and the things that I really enjoy doing," he added.

The India coach job, currently held by Rahul Dravid, falls vacant after the T20 World Cup in June with the Board of Control for Cricket in India seeking a replacement until the next 50-over World Cup in 2027.

India have not won a global title since the 2013 Champions Trophy under their last foreign coach, Duncan Fletcher of Zimbabwe.

Local media reports said former India batsman Gautam Gamb-

hir, former New Zealand skipper Stephen Fleming and Australian Justin Langer had also been sounded out for the job.

Ponting said his son was excited when he told him about the prospect of becoming the India coach.

"I had a whisper to my son about it, and I said, 'Dad's been offered the Indian coaching job' and he said, 'Just take it dad, we would love to move over there for the next couple of years'," Ponting said.

"That's how much they love being over there and the culture of cricket in India, but right now it probably doesn't exactly fit into my lifestyle."

FOCUS

Nepal bid to include Lamichhane

AFP
Kathmandu

Nepal said yesterday they were still trying to include controversial star Sandeep Lamichhane in their T20 World Cup squad, despite the spin bowler having been denied a US visa.

Nepal said they were keen to select Lamichhane, who had his eight-year sentence for rape

quashed on appeal last week. Cricket Association of Nepal president Chatur Bahadur Chand told yesterday that they were "trying to see if we can still make it possible for him to join".

Former captain Lamichhane said late on Wednesday that the US Embassy in Nepal had "denied my visa for the T20 World Cup", calling the decision "unfortunate". "I am sorry to all the well-wishers of Nepal Cricket," Lamichhane posted on social

media platform X. Lamichhane, 23, was once the poster boy for cricket in Nepal, but was not included in the original squad because of the conviction for raping a young woman in a Kathmandu hotel in 2022.

Nepal are making their second appearance in the T20 World Cup and will face the Netherlands in their opening match in Dallas on June 4, followed by group games against South Africa, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, was under investigation for alleged offences related to match-fixing and organised betting, police told the court. "The Dambulla franchise, despite the recent changes, will participate under new ownership," IPG Group said in a statement. "We are in the final stages of confirming the new ownership, ensuring a seamless transition and uninterrupted participation of the team in the tournament." A special police unit dealing with corruption in sports carried out the arrest, the first involving an official of the LPL since it began four years ago. Those convicted under the sports act face fines of up to Rs100mn (\$333,300) and jail sentences of up to 10 years.

SRI LANKA T20 LEAGUE TO GO AHEAD DESPITE MATCH-FIXING ALLEGATION

Colombo: Sri Lanka's T20 Premier League (LPL) vowed yesterday to press ahead in July despite the arrest of a team's British owner over alleged involvement in match-fixing. The five-team cricket tournament was thrown into doubt after the arrest of Tamim Rahman, owner of the Dambulla Thunders, on Wednesday. Rahman was stopped at the airport in Colombo before he was able to board a flight to Dubai and remained in custody by a court in the Sri Lankan capital until May 31. It came a day after the team paid \$450,000 to sign 24 players at auction. Dambulla will be taken over by new owners, LPL rights holder IPG Group said in a statement. Rahman, who has extensive business ties to

TENNIS

Djokovic cruises into Geneva semi-finals



World No. 1 Novak Djokovic of Serbia goes for a backhand return against Tallon Griekspoor of Greece in Geneva yesterday. Djokovic won 7-5, 6-1. (@atptour)

AFP
Geneva

Novak Djokovic yesterday booked his spot in the Geneva semi-finals, putting the world number one within two matches of his first title of 2024, days before his French Open title defence begins.

Djokovic saw off a first set challenge from Tallon Griekspoor to win 7-5, 6-1 in 77 minutes at the Parc des Eaux-Vives.

Griekspoor, the Dutch world number 27, was the sixth seed at the 28-man Geneva tournament, which serves as a final warm-up before next week's second Grand Slam of the season on the Paris clay.

He had three set points against Djokovic in the first set.

"It was a great win. I thought the first set could have gone his way easily because I think he was a better player for most of the first set," Djokovic said afterwards.

"We could have been having a completely different direction of the match if he converted those set points.

"I was lucky to find some really good serves and from that moment onwards really played some good, solid tennis," Djokovic said. "He did help me a bit with the mistakes, I think (the way) I played the second set was really good. So I want to thank everybody again for the support and presence today on a cold day. It's really nice to see you all."

Djokovic, who turned 37 on Wednesday, is the oldest semi-finalist in Geneva tournament history. Making his first appearance at the clay ATP 250, the 98-time tour-level titlist is aiming for his first trophy of the season.

Now 14-5 on the year, Djokovic earned his 1,100th tour-level match win Wednesday when he beat Yannick Hanfmann in the second round.

It was a bridge too far for Griekspoor, who earlier yesterday finished off his second-round match

with Denis Shapovalov, beating the Canadian 6-7 (7/9), 7-6 (7/4), 6-3.

The match was called off for the night in the second set on Wednesday due to rain.

Djokovic will face Tomas Machac of the Czech Republic in today's semi-finals.

The pair have only met once before, with Djokovic winning their contest in Dubai last year.

Machac, the world number 44, will be appearing in his first semi-final on the ATP tour.

He saw off 19-year-old Alex Michelsen of the United States 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) in their quarter-final on the Geneva clay.

Michelsen knocked out his third-seeded compatriot Taylor Fritz in the second round.

In yesterday's other quarter-finals, second seed Casper Ruud, who won the Geneva title in 2021 and 2022, was to face Argentinian fifth seed Sebastian Baez.

Alexandr Shevchenko faces Flavio Cobolli, who knocked out US fourth seed Ben Shelton.

FORMULA ONE

Norris is in the championship mix: Verstappen

'If they suddenly start winning, that can turn around quite quickly'

Reuters
Monaco

Red Bull's Formula One leader Max Verstappen recognised Lando Norris as a growing title threat yesterday after the McLaren driver's run of a win and two second places from the last three races.

Verstappen has won five out of seven so far this season, with a record run of seven pole positions, but the triple world champion accepted ahead of Sunday's Monaco Grand Prix that Norris was closing the gap.



Lando Norris

Asked about Norris's recent reported comments about not ruling out becoming a title contender, Verstappen said "everyone should think like that."

"After their last few races they (McLaren) are really in the mix," he told reporters.

"Of course they are quite a few points down at the moment but if they suddenly start winning, that can turn around quite quickly."

Former champions McLaren have made impressive gains since Austria in July last year, with Norris taking six second places in the



FROM LEFT: Alpine's French driver Esteban Ocon, RB's Japanese driver Yuki Tsunoda, Mercedes' British driver George Russell, Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen, Williams' Thai driver Alexander Albon and Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc attend the drivers press conference at the Circuit de Monaco in Monaco ahead of the Monaco Grand Prix. (AFP)

rest of the season, and have continued to make stellar progress. Norris took his first F1 win in Miami this month after finishing second in Shanghai.

He was also second at Italy's Imola circuit last weekend and third in Australia in March.

The Briton has been on the podium in four of the last five races and not finished lower than eighth. With Ferrari's Carlos Sainz, he is one of only two drivers apart from Verstappen and teammate Sergio Perez to have won since 2022.

Norris, fourth overall, is still

a hefty 60 points behind leader Verstappen with 17 rounds remaining.

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc is currently the champion's closest rival, 48 points adrift.

Verstappen won 19 of 22 races last year in the most dominant season on record but Ferrari and McLaren have both won one each this campaign.

"We have not thought about it (the championship) at all over the last four weeks. You concentrate on getting a good result and things just play out for themselves," said Norris separately.

"We have definitely put ourselves in there," he added.

"We lost a lot (of points) over the first couple of weekends, so that's hurt us, but we are about a third of the way through, so there are plenty of opportunities for us.

"We know we still have some things coming in the future, and if things turn around then we can easily start to come back at some of the teams. We're probably the team, along with Ferrari at least, where we have two cars up there performing at every single session and every single race in qualifying."

Sainz no longer in running for Mercedes seat, says a report

Monaco: Outgoing Ferrari driver Carlos Sainz reportedly is no longer under consideration to replace Lewis Hamilton at Mercedes.

Sainz is seeking clarity on his next move in the coming weeks, but Mercedes team principal and CEO Toto Wolff continues to evaluate the performance of rising junior driver Andrea Kimi Antonelli.

"Why isn't Carlos Sainz going to Mercedes? That conversation has already been had as I understand it and the timescale Mercedes are working towards in terms of making their decision doesn't fit with what Carlos Sainz wants himself," Sky Sports reporter Craig Slater said, per F1.com. "He wants his contract situation sorted in the next few weeks rather than months."

Max Verstappen has been the subject of constant rumours tied to Mercedes' second seat, but Red Bull repeatedly has dismissed them while Verstappen has said he intends to honour his contract that runs through 2028. Several veteran drivers also have been mentioned as possible options to race alongside George Russell if Wolff looks for a one-year stopgap in 2025. Meanwhile, the 17-year-old Antonelli is going through a rigorous private testing programme to get him familiarised with F1 speed and machinery.

"If Mercedes cannot get Verstappen, my understanding is Kimi Antonelli will have that seat next year," Slater said. "That means you can discount some of the other names mentioned. Sebastian Vettel, Esteban Ocon, even Valtteri Bottas. Kimi Antonelli only turns 18 in August



but might he even be in F1 this year? There's that potential. "However, he is in a position if Mercedes cannot get Verstappen to be driving alongside George Russell in 2025. That one probably not decided until August or September."

Sainz is being replaced at Ferrari by the seven-time world champion Hamilton, whose move from Mercedes rocked the Formula 1 world in February. A three-time F1 race winner, Sainz has reportedly received an offer from Audi but may be holding out to see if Red Bull moves on from Sergio Perez after this season.

"It's been hot and cold, hot and cold, in terms of the signals he's been getting from Red Bull," Slater said.

"Is it in the balance? "Interestingly I have heard that the point for Sainz's people is not (Red Bull director) Helmut Marko anymore, it's now (team principal) Christian Horner. That could be good news for Perez. Perez has been supportive of Christian Horner during all of his issues. If you had to force me to put someone in that seat alongside Verstappen it would be Perez."

ANNOUNCEMENT

Aprilia's Espargaro to retire at end of season



Aprilia Spanish rider Aleix Espargaro gets emotional after announcing his retirement from MotoGP at the end of the 2024 season, during a press conference at the Catalunya racetrack in Montmelo, near Barcelona, yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Madrid

Aprilia Racing's Aleix Espargaro will retire at the end of MotoGP's 2024 season, the Spaniard said yesterday ahead of this weekend's Catalonia Grand Prix.

The 34-year-old made his MotoGP debut in 2009 and is riding in his 13th world championship campaign. He has achieved three wins, 11 podiums and five poles during his career featuring more than 300 races.

Espargaro, who joined Aprilia in 2017 for a second stint after spells with Ducati, Forward Yamaha and Suzuki, won the Catalonia Grand Prix last season.

"I am very happy and proud, although it is never enough, but I am proud of how far I have come," Espargaro told reporters.

"Surely that child who debuted around here many years ago would be happy. This is a special place, where I began riding, and where last year was a dream come true to me, so it's the perfect place to announce that I will retire from being a full-time rider," he said.

MOTOGP

Marquez eager to end his long winless streak

AFP
Montmelo, Spain

Marc Marquez is primed to come in from the cold and end a lengthy winless streak in front of his home fans at this weekend's Catalunya MotoGP.

The six-time former world champion arrives at the Barcelona circuit bang in form after two runner-up spots for his new Ducati-Gresini team.

Marquez, without a win since October 2021, said yesterday: "I'm still missing a little bit of consistency even if I feel I'm on the right path and that I'm getting faster and faster."

The 31-year-old's fire and form has been reignited since leaving long term team Honda for Ducati's satellite outfit.

He chased home world champion Francesco Bagnaia on the Ducati factory bike at Jerez last month and had only series leader Jorge Martin in front of him at Le Mans a fortnight ago.

"I'm really happy I was able to fight Pecco (Bagnaia) and Jorge (Martin) in Spain and France. I would be proud if I could fight for the title this season but I have to remain clear and ride intelligently."

Marquez goes into the sixth round of the season lying third in the world championship on 89 points, just two behind second-placed Bagnaia and 40 shy of Martin.

Last year in Catalunya Bagnaia had a horrendous time when he was thrown violently into the air after losing control of his bike with Brad Binder subsequently unable to avoid riding over the Italian's leg. That 2023 race and the sprint 24 hours earlier was won by Aleix Espargaro.



Ducati Spanish rider Marc Marquez attends a press conference at the Catalunya racetrack in Montmelo, near Barcelona, yesterday. (AFP)

AL ARABI BEAT AL SADD TO CLAIM AMIR CUP BASKETBALL TITLE



Al Arabi defeated Al Sadd 88-77 in a well-contested final to win the Amir Cup basketball title at the Al Gharafa Sports Club court yesterday. Al Arabi's Mustafa Husein Ali Ahmed Rashed was declared MVP of the match for his match-high 27 points, collecting two rebounds and three assists. Mohamed Hussein scored 19 and Christopher Singleton Jr made 13 points. With the victory Al Arabi, having already clinched the Qatar Cup and Qatar basketball League, completed a hat-trick of titles. Moustafa Fouda and Robert Eugene Jr scored 22 and 16 points respectively for Al Sadd. First Vice-President of the Qatar Olympic Committee Mohamed Yousef al-Mana crowned the winners. Qatar Basketball Federation president Mohamed Saad al-Mughaiseeb and secretary general Saadoun al-Kuwari were also present during the presentation ceremony.

FRENCH OPEN

Nadal handed tough Zverev test in first round

Defending champion Swiatek, Osaka in potential second round clash

AFP
Paris

Rafael Nadal will face world number four Alexander Zverev in a blockbuster first round match at his farewell French Open while women's champion Iga Swiatek and fellow four-time major winner Naomi Osaka are on a second round collision course.

Defending men's champion and 24-time Grand Slam winner Novak Djokovic will face French veteran Pierre Huges-Herbert in his opener. Nadal, who has won Roland Garros on 14 occasions, is unseeded after injury saw his ranking plummet to 276.

He and Zverev met in the semi-finals in 2022 when the German was forced to retire after suffering a serious ankle injury.

Nadal, the winner of 22 Grand Slam titles, will turn 38 next week and this season will be his last on tour. He holds a 7-3 winning head-to-head record against Germany's Zverev with five of those victories coming on clay. Zverev, 27, arrives in Paris on the back of lifting the Rome Open title last weekend.

"I'm going to play the French Open thinking that I can give my all, 100 per cent," said Nadal after a second round exit in Rome last week. As well as 14 titles in Paris, Nadal can boast a record of 112 wins and just three losses, two of which came against Djokovic who will be chasing a fourth French Open title.

"I imagine that looking at the draw, Nadal is not going to be delighted," said French Open tournament director Amelie Mauresmo.

"Zverev is in very good shape, obviously it looks very complicated. But Nadal is a warrior, an



Spain's Rafael Nadal (right) speaks with his coach Carlos Moya during a practice session yesterday ahead of the French Open at the Roland Garros Complex in Paris. (AFP)

extraordinary competitor. It's Rafa so anything is possible."

Djokovic turned 37 on Wednesday and marked the occasion by winning the 1,100th match of his career in Geneva. The Serb has yet to win a title in 2024 with runs to the semi-finals at the Australian Open and Monte Carlo Masters his best performances.

Following yesterday's draw, Djokovic is seeded to face Zverev in the semi-finals. World number two Jannik Sinner, who took Djokovic's Australian Open title in January, faces Christopher Eubanks of the United States.

Third-seeded Wimbledon champion Carlos Alcaraz, a semi-finalist in Paris in 2023, plays a qualifier. Andy Murray, the 2016 runner-up, is also competing at the

tournament for the final time. The 37-year-old tackles 2015 champion Stan Wawrinka, 39, in a battle of grizzled Grand Slam veterans.

In the women's draw, top seed and world number one Swiatek will take on a qualifier with Osaka facing Lucia Bronzetti of Italy in their openers before a potential second round clash. Swiatek is bidding to win a fifth major and fourth French Open title.

"It feels like home here," said Swiatek who arrives at the tournament with clay-court titles in Madrid and Rome under her belt.

Former world number one Osaka, now ranked 134, has never got past the third round in Paris. Bronzetti, the world number 48, has yet to win a main draw in two visits.

Osaka, 26, has endured a bitter-sweet relationship with the French Open. In 2021, she was fined for opting out of mandatory media commitments before withdrawing from the competition after just one match insisting she was protecting her mental health.

Osaka missed the 2023 edition due to being pregnant before giving birth to a baby girl in July. World number two Aryna Sabalenka starts against 101-ranked Erika Andreeva of Russia.

Third seed and US Open champion Coco Gauff faces a qualifier in the first round and is seeded to face Swiatek in the semi-finals.

Double Australian Open champion Sabalenka is seeded to take on former Wimbledon winner Elena Rybakina in the last four.

FOOTBALL

Ten Hag vows to save Man Utd project by winning FA Cup

AFP
London

Erik ten Hag has vowed to win the FA Cup and carry on with his Manchester United project as the under-fire boss prepares for tomorrow's final against Manchester City.

Ten Hag is battling to save his job amid mounting speculation that United's new co-owner Jim Ratcliffe plans to axe him after a turbulent season.

United finished eighth in the Premier League - their lowest final position since 1990 - and crashed out of the Champions League in the group stage.

United have been linked with England boss Gareth Southgate, former Chelsea manager Mauricio Pochettino, departing Bayern Munich boss Thomas Tuchel and Ipswich chief Kieran McKenna.

But Ten Hag is convinced he can turn the tide by securing United's first FA Cup triumph since 2016, in the process avenging last season's loss to City at the same stage of the competition and ensuring his club qualify for Europe.

Asked yesterday if the final could be his last match as United manager, Ten Hag laughed and told reporters: "I have nothing to say. I'm just focusing on the job I have to do."

"That is first to win the game

on Saturday and then we are in the project. Keep going in the project.

"After every season you review it and see where you are in the project and what things may need to change. "We spoke late-ly about it. There are players developing and values going up."

City were crowned Premier League champions for an unprecedented fourth successive season last weekend, giving them six titles in seven years.

Pep Guardiola's men have beaten United twice already this season and Ten Hag knows a surprise win for underdogs United would be a well-timed feather in his cap.

"It's all about trophies. We have a huge opportunity to win a trophy. In the last 10 years there has not been so many trophies at the club but we have the opportunity to win two in two years," he said.

"The FA Cup final, it's a big event. Even in a season that is not in our way, we are there. We know we have an opportunity."

Ten Hag has been hampered by injuries to key players throughout the season, but his fitness issues have eased ahead of the final.

Lisandro Martinez and Raphael Varane have returned, with Victor Lindelof, Mason Mount and Anthony Martial pictured in training this week, although Harry Maguire and Luke Shaw will be sidelined.

West Ham appoint Lopetegui as head coach

LONDON: West Ham United have appointed former Spain and Real Madrid manager Julen Lopetegui as head coach to replace David Moyes, the Premier League club said yesterday. Lopetegui, who previously coached Wolverhampton Wanderers in the Premier League, will take charge of West Ham on July 1 after Moyes left the east London club this month by mutual consent upon the expiry of his contract. Lopetegui has signed a two-year deal with West Ham, who finished in ninth place with 52 points and missed out on qualification for European football next season after winning the Europa Conference League last term. The 57-year-old took over as Spain coach in 2016 following the retirement of Vicente del Bosque, but was sacked two days before the 2018 World Cup after agreeing to become Real Madrid manager after the tournament. Lopetegui was then dismissed by the Spanish giants a few months later following a woeful start to his spell in charge.

FOCUS

Lookman hat-trick fires Atalanta to Europa League

AFP
Dublin

Ademola Lookman scored a stunning hat-trick as Atalanta ended Bayer Leverkusen's 51-match unbeaten run to win the Europa League final 3-0 on Wednesday and claim their first trophy for 61 years.

Lookman became the first player to score a hat-trick in a European final since 1975 to secure Atalanta's first ever continental trophy. The side from Bergamo have long lived in the shadow of nearby giants AC and Inter Milan.

However, they have enjoyed a golden era under Gian Piero Gasperini, reaching the Champions League on four occasions, and now have silverware to show for it.

"To win it with Atalanta is perhaps one of the football fairy-

tales that rarely gives scope for meritocracy," said Gasperini. "It doesn't always come down to cold hard numbers or super leagues but shows teams without huge budgets can achieve big things."

Leverkusen have made a habit of late fightbacks in their remarkable run to winning a first ever Bundesliga title without tasting defeat.

But this time they failed to dig themselves out of a hole created by a slow start.

Atalanta's more purposeful play in the opening stages was rewarded after just 12 minutes.

Davide Zappacosta got to the by-line and Lookman caught Exequiel Palacios napping to fire into the top corner at the back post.

The Nigerian has at times endured a nomadic career, bouncing around the lower reaches of the Premier League on loan spells at Fulham and Leicester after being discarded by RB Leipzig.



Atalanta's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the UEFA Europa League final against Bayer Leverkusen in Dublin. (AFP)

But Lookman has found a home in Bergamo, where he will now forever be a hero. "In the past few years I've been able to take

my game to a new level and show that on a more consistent basis," said Lookman. The 26-year-old's second goal was fit to win any fi-

nal as he nutmegged Xhaka before curling a powerful shot into the far corner. For the fourth time in seven Europa League knockout

matches, Xabi Alonso's men found themselves 2-0 down.

Alonso has enjoyed a rapid rise to become one of Europe's hottest coaching properties.

The Spaniard has rejected the advances of former clubs Liverpool and Bayern Munich to remain at the BayArena next season.

However, Alonso's decision to start without a recognised striker did not work and he threw on Victor Boniface at half-time to give his side a focal point up front.

The damage, though, was already done as the German champions looked a side drained by their record run across three competitions. Atalanta were happy to soak up the Leverkusen pressure after the break and hit on the counter-attack. The final blow was another fabulous finish from Lookman as he skipped past Edmond Tapsoba and this time blasted into the top corner on his weaker left foot.