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QATAR STORM INTO ASIAN VOLLEYBALL CHALLENGE CUP FINAL

Qatar secured a spot in the final of the Asian Volleyball Challenge Cup after overcoming Kazakhstan 3-1 (25-16, 19-25, 25-19, and 25-16) in Isa Town, Bahrain, yesterday. In today's final, Qatar will face Pakistan, who defeated South Korea 3-1 (25-22, 24-26, 25-22, 25-22) in the other semi-final. In the classification matches, Bahrain secured seventh place by defeating Australia 25-17, 25-22, and 25-20. China took fifth place by beating Vietnam 25-19, 25-21, 26-28, and 25-21. The losing semi-finalists, South Korea and Kazakhstan, will compete today in the third place play-off.

TENNIS

Swiatek crushes Paolini to win third French Open title in row

‘It’s amazing to be here. I love this place. I wait every year to come back’

AFP
Paris

Poland's Iga Swiatek extended her French Open reign yesterday as she thrashed Jasmine Paolini 6-2, 6-1 in the final to win a third successive Roland Garros title.

World number one Swiatek dominated Italian 12th seed Paolini, a first-time Grand Slam finalist, needing just 68 minutes to capture a fourth crown in five years in Paris. Swiatek has now won all five Grand Slam finals she has contested. Her other victory came at the 2022 US Open.

She is the fourth woman in the Open era to lift the Coupe Suzanne Lenglen four times – after Justine Henin, Chris Evert and Steffi Graf. “It’s amazing to be here. I love this place. I wait every year to come back,” said Swiatek, who clicked into gear after saving a match point against Naomi Osaka in the second round. “I was almost out of the tournament,” she said. “I also needed to believe this one is going to be possible, it’s been a really emotional tournament.”

Swiatek becomes only the third woman to win the tournament three years running. Henin, in 2005-07, was the last to do so. Monica Seles also achieved the feat as a teenager at the start of the 1990s. At 23, her four Roland Garros titles is the same number Rafael Nadal, the record 14-time men’s champion, had at the same age.

For the 28-year-old Paolini it was a sorry conclusion, at least in singles, to an otherwise brilliant fortnight in the French capital. The world number 15 had won a total of four matches in 16 Grand Slam appearances before advancing to the fourth round of the Australian Open in January.

While she fell short of emulating compatriot Francesca Schiavone, who won the 2010 French Open, Paolini could yet finish on a winning note with her and doubles partner Sara Errani through to today’s final. “I have to say congratulations to you, Iga,” said Paolini. “I

think to play you here is the toughest challenge in this sport. It was tough, but it was lots of fun,” she added.

Paolini’s transformation this season into a player capable of challenging for the biggest prizes stemmed in part from quashing the mindset she needed “a miracle” to beat the best in the sport. Yet the odds were heavily stacked against her going into the final, with Swiatek unbeaten at Roland Garros since a 2021 quarter-final loss to Maria Sakkari.

Riding a 20-match winning streak in Paris, and a winner of 18 straight matches this year after titles in Madrid and Rome, Swiatek quickly set about her business. She powered an ace to hold in the opening game and had Paolini backpedalling down break point, but the Italian ground out a gutsy hold and then broke Swiatek when the Pole flayed a forehand long.

That triggered a searing riposte from Swiatek, who broke to love to get back on serve and then surged 4-2 in front after Paolini coughed up a costly double-fault. “I got broken at the beginning, so it wasn’t maybe perfect, but I think the level was pretty high,” said Swiatek.

She had her opponent constantly scurrying around the court and the errors began to stack up for Paolini, who conceded the first set with a weak groundstroke into the net. With Swiatek firmly in the ascendancy, Paolini looked lost for answers as the top seed oozed confidence and repeatedly took control of the rallies.

Had it not been for an astonishing recovery against Osaka in the second round, Swiatek would have suffered her earliest exit at the French Open. Instead that fright served to ignite her title aspirations, reigning Wimbledon and US Open champions – Marketa Vondrousova and Coco Gauff – in particular powerless to stop the Swiatek offensive.

Swiatek had difficulty putting away Karolina Muchova last year when heavily fancied, but there was no such trouble 12 months on as the Pole dismantled Paolini to underline her burgeoning status as the ‘Queen of Clay’. The three games won by Paolini were the fewest in the final here since Henin obliterated Ana Ivanovic 6-1, 6-2 in 2007, which also coincided with the Belgian’s fourth Roland Garros title in five years.

Poland's Iga Swiatek celebrates with the trophy after winning French Open in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

MATCH REPORT

Miller rescues SA in victory over Netherlands

AFP
New York

South Africa overcame a stunning early batting collapse before sealing a four-wicket victory over bogey team the Netherlands in their T20 World Cup Group D clash in New York yesterday.

David Miller's unbeaten 59 off 51 balls saw the Proteas safely home at the Nassau County International Cricket Stadium, the South Africans finishing on 106-6 after restricting the Dutch to 103-9 from their 20 overs.

For a moment however it looked as if the Dutch were poised to inflict another famous upset on the South Africans following wins at the 2022 T20 World Cup and 2023 ODI World Cup.

The Proteas were left reeling at 12-4 after 4.3 overs and had even been 3-3 at one stage as the Dutch bowling attack broke through ear-

ly. But Tristan Stubbs and Miller hauled South Africa off the ropes with a fifth wicket partnership of 65 to leave the Proteas in a winning position.

While Stubbs eventually fell for 33, Miller saw South Africa home with a half century that included three fours and four sixes - including a six off Bas de Leede in the 19th over to seal victory.

"It was just a good finish in the end," a relieved Miller said afterwards. "Credit to the Netherlands bowlers - they bowled really well.

"They made it difficult for us to score. But we have got over the line with our tailenders, so I have faith."

Proteas captain Aiden Markram said his team had overcome a psychological hurdle with the victory over the Dutch after their previous high-profile losses.

"We knew they were always going to up for a scrap," Markram said. "It's a game of cricket ultimately. The history before this

game was obviously they beat us. It's a mental blockade - and we were under pressure again today."

Earlier, Ottniel Baartman's dazzling four-wicket haul helped South Africa hold the Netherlands to a modest 103-9.

Baartman finished with figures of 4-11 off four overs, with Marco Jansen and Anrich Nortje both grabbing two wickets to keep the Dutch batsmen on the back foot.

Jansen had the Netherlands rocking in the opening over, getting rid of Michael Levitt caught behind for a duck after a review.

Jansen was involved again for South Africa's second dismissal, taking a superb one-handed diving catch at first slip after Max O'Dowd edged behind off Baartman. That left the Netherlands reeling on 15-2 after four overs. They were three down in the following over as Jansen bagged his second wicket, obliterating Vikramjist Singh's stumps to make it 17-3.

De Leede was the next to fall,

caught off Nortje for six runs from a delivery which rocketed up off the wicket.

It got worse for the Netherlands in the 12th over. First Edwards was run out for 10 after a superb piece of fielding by South Africa skipper Aiden Markram.

Then Nortje bagged another wicket three balls later after Teja Nidamanuru's leading edge flew all the way to deep third man into the hands of Heinrich Klaasen to make it 48-6.

Sybrand Engelbrecht and Logan van Beek staged a fleeting fight-back before falling to Baartman for 40 and 23 respectively as South Africa's bowlers reasserted themselves in the final overs.

BRIEF SCORES: South Africa 106 for 6 (Miller 59*, Stubbs 33, Kingma 2-12, van Beek 2-21) **beat Netherlands 103 for 9** (Engelbrecht 40, Baartman 4-11, Nortje 2-19, Jansen 2-20) **by four wickets.**



David Miller of South Africa celebrates victory in the T20 World Cup match against the Netherlands in New York yesterday. (AFP)

PREVIEW

Pakistan's Imad set to return, India's Rohit seeks focus

'I think the important thing for us is that we operate genuinely as a team'



Pakistan all-rounder Imad Wasim.



India players during a practice session yesterday, on the eve of their T20 World Cup match against Pakistan in New York.

AFP
New York

Pakistan have been given a much-needed boost ahead of today's clash with India at the T20 World Cup with all-rounder Imad Wasim passed fit to play.

Imad had to sit out Pakistan's opening game - the humiliating defeat to the USA in Dallas - and had missed the final match of their pre-tournament series with England with what was reported to be a rib injury. But Pakistan coach Gary Kirsten told the pre-match press conference that they would be able to call on the 35-year-old left-arm spinner.

"He will be available," said the South African, who took over the reigns of the Pakistan team in April. Kirsten was unable to give any details of Pakistan's likely line-up as he said he was waiting on fitness updates on other play-

ers. But the coach said that whoever took the field would not need any extra-motivation to bounce back from the painful defeat to the USA with a win against Pakistan's arch-rivals.

"It's never nice not winning games of cricket for any player. They're trying their best. It's never nice. I don't think I needed to motivate this team for this game," he said.

"I think the important thing for us is that we operate genuinely as a team. Yes, we need individuals to make good performances, but playing games like this, I think is a real team effort.

"It's a big game, so we're going to treat it as any other game. But certainly, give it our best shot. The team's motivated. Two days ago is forgotten. We can't take it back. It's gone. So, we move on," he said.

The surface at Nassau County International Cricket Stadium has received plenty of criticism for its uneven bounce and India

captain Rohit Sharma knows all about it after he was forced to re-tire hurt after being struck on the arm in the win against Ireland on Wednesday.

But the skipper said it was vital his team kept their focus on the fundamentals and not worry about the wicket or the occasion.

"I think playing good cricket holds the key no matter the opposition. With the pitch, I think you know what to expect from the conditions, so you've got to prepare yourself in a way that you know these types of conditions are there," he said.

"We have spoken about it, about what we need to do on these types of conditions. We have had lengthy chats with individuals about what the game plan can be for the batters and the bowlers as well. You can try to control what is in your control.

"There is a lot of experience in our changing room. So, when you come across conditions like these,

I expect everyone to at least try and make good decisions. Again, we are going to approach (it) how we approached the first game. Nothing changes for us. We want to try and tick all the boxes in batting, bowling, and fielding," he said.

Rohit was also wary of reading too much into Pakistan's loss to the Americans, noting that T20 always brings a degree of the unexpected.

"This is the speciality of T20 cricket. Anything can happen anywhere. Last year, in the last World Cup, Pakistan lost to Zimbabwe. But eventually, they played the final. You can't think much about the opposition, about what the opposition's form is. It doesn't take long for the form to come in this format," he said.

"I think this format is a little different from ODI and Test cricket. In that the consistency, the way you play, that matters. But in T20 cricket, I think what's happening on that day matters," he said.

FOCUS

Bangladesh keep nerve to win thriller with Sri Lanka

AFP
Dallas

Bangladesh emerged victorious from a gripping encounter with Sri Lanka in Texas with the two-wicket victory getting them off to a winning start in Group D of the T20 World Cup.

Rishad Hossain produced a brilliant spell of leg-spin as Bangladesh fought back to restrict Sri Lanka to 124-9. Then Liton Das (36) and Towhid Hridoy (40 from 20 balls) put Bangladesh in command before some excellent pace bowling from Numan Thushara (4-18), in his second spell threatened a late twist in the plot.

But veteran Mahmudullah Riyad showed all his experience at the end to see Bangladesh over the line with an unbeaten 16. It was the final of four games at the Grand Prairie Stadium and the Dallas crowd have been treated to some top entertainment on a surface which offered some bounce and produced good contests between bat and ball. Sri Lanka made a fast start, rattling their way to 53-2 in six overs and they progressed to 100-3 after 14 overs with Pathum Nissanka's 47 from 28 including eight boundaries (one six). But then the 21-year-old wrist spinner Rishad struck twice in successive balls to totally change the momentum of the innings.

Charith Asalanka's sweep shot found Shakib Al Hasan at deep backward square and he snaffled up the catch. Sri Lanka skipper Wanindu Hasaranga was the next victim of Rishad's spin, edging a sharply turning delivery to Soumya Sarkar at slip.

Dhananjaya de Silva who made a solid 21 off 26 balls was then beaten by Rishad's flight and was stunned by the alert Liton. Sri Lanka were just able to add 24 runs from the final six

overs losing six wickets in that period. Rishad finished with career-best T20I figures of 3-22 from his four overs.

Mustafizur Rahman finished with 3-17 from four overs while Taskin Ahmed also bowled well for his 2-25. Bangladesh made a shaky start and were struggling at 28-3 in the sixth over before Liton and Hridoy put together a crucial 63-run partnership.

Hridoy hit Hasaranga for three consecutive sixes before he was trapped leg before on the next ball and when Hasaranga removed Liton, there was a glimmer of hope for Sri Lanka. A brilliant diving catch in the deep from Maheesh Theekshana saw the back of Shakib Al Hasan to leave Bangladesh at 109-6. Thushara then returned to the attack and removed Rishad and Taskin to increase the pressure but when Mahmudullah dispatched a loose full toss from Dasun Shanaka for six over mid-wicket, the nerves eased and victory was soon secured.

Bangladesh were playing their first game of the tournament after an unimpressive warm-up campaign saw them lose a three-game series to the USA and then lose by 60 runs to India.

Skipper Najmul Hossain was delighted. "Everybody's body language was great, we gave our 120 percent. Very important for Liton, he's been struggling a bit but he showed his skill today. I think he batted really well. Hridoy was really courageous, the way he played that over really helped us," he said.

Sri Lanka have now lost both their opening games after suffering a defeat to South Africa in their opener.

BRIEF SCORES: Bangladesh 125 for 8 (Hridoy 40, Litton 36, Thushara 4-18) **beat Sri Lanka 124 for 9** (Nissanka 47, Mustafizur 3-17, Rishad 3-22) **by two wickets.**



Bangladesh's Mustafizur Rahman celebrates the dismissal of Sri Lanka's Pathum Nissanka during the T20 World Cup match in Grand Prairie, Texas. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Rampant Afghanistan pull off upset win over New Zealand

AFP
Georgetown, Guyana

Rampant Afghanistan mauled a lethargic New Zealand by 84 runs to grab top spot in Group C at the T20 World Cup with an upset win at the Guyana National Stadium on Friday.

Set a challenging 160 for victory, the Black Caps crashed to 75 all out off 15.2 overs to suffer their first defeat ever to Afghanistan in T20 International cricket.

Opener Rahmanullah Gurbaz led the way for the Afghans with

a top score of 80 off 56 balls (five fours, five sixes), posting 103 for the first wicket with Ibrahim Zadran (44) by the 15th over on the way to a final total of 159 for six after they were put in.

Left-arm seamer Fazalhaq Farooqi then followed his five-wicket opening match demolition of Uganda with the first three wickets of the New Zealand innings before coming back to claim a fourth to end the match and complete figures of four for 17.

Captain and champion leg-spinner Rashid Khan shared the bowling honours with an identical haul of four for 17, including oppo-

sition number Kane Williamson with the first ball of his spell to effectively end the match as a contest. "We've been waiting for this moment for about three years," said a delighted Gurbaz after receiving the "Man of the Match" award.

"We have the trust and belief that we can beat any team in this competition on this type or surface. At the start of the innings our target was around 130-140 and we played our part in getting there, but credit must go to the bowlers as well. To do this against a team like New Zealand...it's unbelievable."

New Zealand's capitulation and obvious rustiness leaves the

2021 beaten finalists with a tough challenge ahead, starting against hosts West Indies in at the Brian Lara Stadium in Trinidad next Wednesday. "This just wasn't good enough in terms of starting a tournament. It's very frustrating," admitted Williamson, reflecting on a forgettable night for New Zealand cricket.

"We have to move on quickly from this because the matches now come thick and fast for us. Yes, we have to learn from so much that went wrong without over-analysing, but we have to turn it around as quickly as we can," he added.

Williamson's gloomy demeanor was obviously in stark contrast to his Afghanistan counterpart Rashid, who put the result in perspective.

"It is one of the greatest performances for us in T20's against a big team like New Zealand," he said. "And it was great team effort, from the opening stand between Gurbaz and Ibrahim to the bowlers to the effort in the field from everyone. It's a great feeling to be leading this side."

His own efforts with the ball were impressive but the captain preferred to focus on the impact of Farooqi, who has now taken nine

wickets in his first two matches at this World Cup and had the perfect start against the Black Caps, bowling Finn Allen comprehensively with the first ball of the New Zealand innings.

"He is a very skilful bowler, but there's still lots of areas to improve," Rashid cautioned. "Once he understands how skilful he really is he will be very dangerous in the future."

BRIEF SCORES: Afghanistan 159 for 6 (Gurbaz 80, Ibrahim 44, Boulton 2-22, Henry 2-37) **beat New Zealand 75** (Phillips 18, Rashid 4 for 17, Farooqi 4 for 17) **by 84 runs.**

FORMULA 1

Hamilton on top with vintage lap in final practice

AFP
Montreal

Lewis Hamilton rolled back the years with a vintage lap to top the times for Mercedes ahead of Red Bull's revived Max Verstappen in yesterday's third and final free practice for the Canadian Grand Prix.

The seven-time world champion, relishing the handling of his updated car, clocked a best lap of one minute and 12.549 seconds to outpace the series leader and three-time champion by nearly four-tenths in an intriguing session punctuated by one brief red-flag stoppage.

Hamilton's Mercedes teammate George Russell was third ahead of local hope Lance Stroll of Aston Martin, McLaren's Oscar Piastri and RB's Daniel Ricciardo.

Lando Norris was seventh in the second McLaren ahead of two-

time champion Fernando Alonso in the second Aston Martin, Sergio Perez in the second Red Bull and Charles Leclerc, fresh from winning his home Monaco Grand Prix for Ferrari.

On a cloudy and breezy afternoon on the man-made Ile Notre-Dame, built in 1965 from rock excavated in the construction of the city's metro system, the two Red Bulls led out from the pitlane, both keen to improve on a grim Friday for the team. Perez was soon on top, replaced briskly by Verstappen after a brief red flag caused by Zhou Guanyu, who lost control of his Sauber and hit the barriers at Turn Two. At this stage, everyone was on mediums.

Alpine, another team in some strife, were briefly one-two in the early stages with Pierre Gasly ahead of Esteban Ocon before the Dutchman, on a long run on medium tyres, clocked his 1:15.495 to go top. Alonso then outpaced him



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton drives during final practice yesterday, on the eve of the F1 Grand Prix of Canada in Montreal. (AFP)

in 1:14.870 with Daniel Ricciardo of RB going second ahead of home hero Lance Stroll of Aston Martin before the introduction of softs saw Williams' Logan Sargeant go fastest.

The American's tenure of top spot was brief as Russell and then

Alex Albon, in the second Williams, set the pace, the Anglo-Thai driver becoming the first into the 1:13's.

Leclerc and Hamilton reacted by going quickest, the Briton enjoying Mercedes' updated front wing for the first time clocking

1:13.464. Norris lapped within 0.011 seconds confirming that a close contest is in prospect in qualifying later Saturday.

With the teams using split strategies to gather maximum data, the order was as unpredictable as the conditions with dark

rain clouds looming ahead of the final hot runs.

Russell went early, with 12 minutes remaining, and clocked 1:13.274 to go top ahead of Hamilton before Verstappen took second and then Hamilton responded with a rapid lap in 1:12.549, lifting him seven-tenths clear of Russell.

On the track where he claimed his maiden win in 2007 and has since added a record-equaling six more triumphs, this was a state-ment lap.

As he did it, the 'wall of champions' claimed its first victim when Albon smacked his Williams into it, damaging his car's suspension. He crept home to the pits.

Verstappen responded to Hamilton's lap in 1:13.182, taking second, but he was six-tenths adrift of the Mercedes before Stroll and then Russell moved up to second and third, Russell dipping inside the 1:12's ahead of Verstappen's late wall-grazing surge in 1:12.923.

FRENCH OPEN

Alcaraz eyeing history in final against Zverev

'I'm definitely not a kid any more, I'm a little older. If not now, then when?'



Alexander Zverev



Carlos Alcaraz

AFP
Paris

Carlos Alcaraz says he is hoping to join the long list of Spanish French Open champions when he bids to become the youngest man to win Grand Slam titles on all three surfaces in the final against Alexander Zverev today.

The 21-year-old defeated Novak Djokovic to win Wimbledon last year and also lifted the US Open trophy as a teenager in 2022.

Alcaraz downed incoming world number one Jannik Sinner in five sets in the semi-finals and will be a slight favourite against Zverev, who is still yet to win a Grand Slam tournament. He is aiming to emulate his childhood hero and 14-time Roland Garros champion Rafael Nadal - who won his first French Open when Alcaraz was only two years old - by lifting the trophy, as well as his coach Juan Carlos Ferrero.

"I have a special feeling at this tournament, because I remember when I finish school I'm running to my home just to put the TV on and watch the matches here in the French Open," Alcaraz said.

"I watched a lot of matches. Of course Rafa Nadal dominating this

tournament for, let's say, 14, 15 years. It's something unbelievable.

"I wanted to put my name on that list of the Spanish players who won this tournament. Not only Rafa. Ferrero, (Carlos) Moya, (Albert) Costa, a lot of Spanish players, legends from our sport that won this tournament.

"I really want to put my name on that list, as well."

Alcaraz has been widely tipped as one of the successors to the reigns of Nadal, Djokovic and Roger Federer at the top of men's tennis since he broke onto the scene as a teenager. He is comfortably living up to that mantle.

Today will see the first new winner of the title since Djokovic in 2016, and it will be the first showpiece match in Paris with two first-time finalists since Nadal won his maiden crown against Mariano Puerta in 2005.

Alcaraz has won both of his previous Slam finals - one more and he will be the youngest man to win major events on clay, grass and hard courts.

Victory over Zverev would leave the Spanish sensation heading to the Australian Open next year with the chance to complete the career Grand Slam at a younger age than Federer was when he won his first Slam event. "I always

wanted to be one of the best players in the world," he said. "If I want to be one of the best players in the world, I have to be a good player in every surface, like Roger did, Novak, Rafa, (Andy) Murray. The best players in the world had success in every surface. So I consider myself a player who adapts very well his style in every surface. And, well, I grew up playing on clay but I feel more comfortable playing on hard court, for example.

"I think my game suits very well to the clay, to clay season, to the clay court, as well."

ZVEREV HOPING TO END YEARS OF HURT

Zverev was once regarded as the biggest threat to the dominance of Nadal, Djokovic and Federer, but is now 27 and still chasing a maiden Grand Slam title. The world number four is into his first major final since an agonising defeat by Dominic Thiem at the 2020 US Open, when he led by two sets and a break before falling apart.

"I was not ready then to win my first Grand Slam final," said Zverev, who has also lost in six Slam semi-finals. "I'm definitely not a kid any more, I'm a little older. If not now, then when?"

The German arrived at the tournament under the cloud of a court

case in Berlin over allegations he assaulted an ex-girlfriend. The case was dropped after a settlement was agreed hours before his semi-final win over Casper Ruud, who was struggling with illness. He was accused of "briefly" choking former partner Brenda Patea "with both hands" in May 2020, according to the court.

As part of the settlement, Zverev had agreed to pay 200,000 euros (\$217,000), with most of it going into state coffers and the remainder to a fund for charitable organisations, a court spokeswoman said.

He reacted angrily when asked by a reporter if he was disappointed the case was dropped and he could not clear his name in court.

"They're not going to drop the case if you're guilty at the end of the day. I don't know what translations you have, but that's what it means. Done," Zverev, who had already been fined 450,000 euros in the same case, retorted.

"We move on. I never ever want to hear another question about the subject again. That goes out to everybody."

Zverev will have high hopes of making headlines with a Grand Slam title - he holds a 5-4 winning record over Alcaraz heading into Sunday's intriguing final.

ATHLETICS

Nowicki sails into European hammer final, Sutej pulls up

AFP
Rome

Poland's Wojciech Nowicki made short work of qualifying for the men's hammer throw final at the European championships in Rome yesterday, while Slovenian pole vaulter Tina Sutej suffered an injury scare just seven weeks out from the Paris Olympics.

Nowicki sailed out to 79.00m, two metres further than the qualifying standard, but was the sole thrower in his group to go further than that 77m mark.

The 35-year-old Pole, the reigning Olympic champion and five-time world medalist, is bidding for a third successive Euro title after previous successes in Berlin in 2018 and Munich in 2022. "I am sure that even with my first attempt, it would be enough to qualify for the final. But I was not very satisfied with it so I decided to go into the second attempt and test the circle a bit more for the final," Nowicki said.

"I do not think about the fact that I am defending champion. For me, this was just like a first training and tomorrow, it is just like a second training towards the peak of the season - the Olympic Games.

"I want to be in the best shape in Paris. I am still in training and my shape is developing but I am hoping for at least one really good throw here."

Nowicki added: "I am 35 years old so I have to adapt my body a bit. My head still wants to do it but my body is getting older."

Alongside Nowicki, all the other medalists from both 2018 and 2022 Euro championships also qualified for today's final scheduled for 1911 GMT: Polish team-mate Pawel Fajdek, the five-time world champion and 2016 European title winner, Hungary's Bence Halasz and

Norwegian Eivind Henriksen. Qualification for the women's pole vault saw Sutej, who was fourth in last year's world championships in Budapest, pull up injured in her warm-up.

"A week ago, I had training and a pole hit me in my biceps. I had a slight tear. I was thinking about cancelling this championships for me but then my doctor said 'Yes, you are fine and you can jump'" she said.

"So I was like OK, I can try. But in the warm-up, I realise that the muscle is not functional and it is my top arm so this is a really important one. All the pressure goes to that arm and it just does not work."

All thoughts turned to the Olympic Games, now just 48 days away. "I think it should be OK for Paris, but right now I need some treatment and rest and we will see. I still do training, just the arms will have a little break. I still can run. But we will see."

Britain's Holly Bradshaw will also be absent from tomorrow's final, set for 1815 GMT. The reigning Olympic bronze medalist had three no-marks and misses out on the 12-strong final field. Her team-mate Molly Caudery made no such mistake, and goes through along with world bronze medalist and reigning European champion Wilma Murto of Finland and Ekaterini Stefanidi of Greece, seeking a historic third continental title, and Switzerland's Angelica Moser.

Belgium's Nafi Thiam, a two-time Olympic champion as well as defending double European gold medalist and a two-time world title holder, remained in control of the heptathlon after the opening event of the second day of competition.

She managed a best-of in the long jump that left her on 4,991 points overnight, 77 ahead of team-mate Noor Vidts, with the javelin and 800m to come in Saturday's evening session.



Poland's Wojciech Nowicki in action during the hammer throw qualification at the European Athletics Championships in Rome yesterday. (AFP)

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL PHENOMENON CLARK FACES US OLYMPIC SNUB: REPORTS

Women's basketball phenomenon Caitlin Clark will not be selected for the United States Paris Olympics team, multiple US media reports said yesterday.

USA Today cited three sources with knowledge of the situation as saying that the 22-year-old Indiana Fever rookie had been left off the roster. The Athletic also reported that Clark was expected to be snubbed for an Olympic ticket. Clark entered the

WNBA this season after a record-shattering college career that has sent interest in women's basketball skyrocketing. News of Clark's Olympic omission comes after she shot a record-tying seven three-pointers in a 30-point haul for Indiana in a victory over the Washington Mystics on Friday night. The game in the US capital was watched by a packed crowd of 20,333 - the largest crowd for a WNBA game in

17 years. Clark shot to prominence during her college career, which saw her eclipse Pete Maravich's 54-year-old all-time college basketball scoring record, largely due to her long-range shooting prowess. She averaged 31.6 points per game in her final season in college basketball, where she led Iowa to the championship game for a second straight season. Even though Iowa was beaten in the final, the game smashed

ratings records, drawing an average audience of 18.7 million viewers, making it the most watched women's basketball game in history. It was also the most watched basketball game of any kind - men's or women's, college or professional - since 2019. Clark's entry into the professional ranks has been tinged with recent controversy, with accusations that some players have targeted her for rough treatment.

Last week, Chicago Sky player Chenney Carter was retrospectively sanctioned for a hit on Clark which triggered widespread condemnation. The WNBA upgraded the foul after an outcry from Indiana officials. "There's a difference between tough defense and unnecessary targeting actions," Fever general manager Lin Dunn said. "It needs to stop! The league needs to clean up the crap."

SPOTLIGHT

QMA nurturing next generation of Qatari drivers

By Sports Reporter
Doha

When it comes to motorsport there's nothing quite like Formula 1 for glitz, glamour and adrenaline-fuelled action.

It is perhaps no surprise then that there's a new generation of Qatari motorsports fans who are dreaming of becoming the next Formula 1 Champion, having seen the world's most talented drivers compete for victory at Lusail International Circuit (LIC) in 2023.

In the case of four young drivers from Qatar Motorsports Academy (QMA), that dream became a step closer to reality in March 2024, when they took to the tarmac behind the wheel of a Formula 4 single seater racing car as part of an exciting new test day facilitated by QMA at LIC.

The talented quartet – Khalid al-Muftah, aged 20, Bader al-Sulaiti aged 16, Taha Hassiba, aged 15 and his younger brother Tamim, 14 – who all cut their teeth in karting at QMA, were able to road test their skills at LIC as part of the FIA F4 Saudi Arabia Championship, a single-make junior drivers' programme where cars are powered by 1,600cc engines which boast up to 160 brake horsepower.

QMA, which has been based at the state-of-the-art Lusail International Circuit since 2018, aims to develop home-grown young talent providing drivers with a hub where they can begin to ascend through the ranks of the motorsport ladder.

Khalid, whose racing hero is Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso, says of his experience: "It's the best feeling ever to sit in a single seater racing car at a track like Lusail! It's really important for the future of motorsport that young people like me can learn with QMA and have the opportunity



Qatar Motorsports Academy trainees Khalid al-Muftah, Bader al-Sulaiti, Taha Hassiba and Tamim Hassiba.

to try out world-class facilities like these."

Meanwhile, Bader, who joined QMA at the age of 14, beginning his career in the BNL Rotax and IAME karting series, adds: "Driving Formula 4 for the first time at a world class circuit was an amazing experience. LIC consists of several high-speed corners which allows you to know the limits of the car and enhance your own skills and abilities."

Tamim, who was inspired by his father to get into karting, joining QMA in 2022, credits the Formula 4 test as being the "most amazing experience ever – I can't wait to do it again!"

When it comes to the future of motor-

sport in the Middle East, all four acknowledge the importance of having a centre of excellence in Qatar. Bader continues, "It's essential to nurture young talent because these drivers will be the stars of tomorrow – they need support in developing their skills and experience in racing internationally."

Taha, who joined the academy at 13 is in agreement, claiming that the work of QMA is key to "growing the motorsport community" adding that his own experience prompted him to take the sport "much more seriously".

What advice does the foursome have for other aspiring youngsters wanting to

follow in their footsteps? Taha is quick to advise that anyone wanting to break into the sport should be "very fit, train every day at the track and have a very healthy diet. They need to be consistent". Sibling Tamim nods in agreement, adding "they should keep focused and never give up!"

Meanwhile, Bader, who is eyeing a career in Formula 1, adds that rookies need to be "patient and respectful towards other teams and drivers and also ensure they are professional and sportsmanlike if they are to gain respect within the motorsport community." He continues: "It's a great way to learn and develop new skills which could eventually lead to you racing inter-

nationally representing your country?"

When it comes to Qatar's standing on the global motorsport stage, the youngster also acknowledges the significance of events like Formula 1 and MotoGP: "Hosting international events significantly raises the profile of the sport here in Qatar and at an international level and this kind of exposure helps to attract more fans."

With the country's love of motorsport showing no signs of abating and QMA nurturing the considerable talents of these committed young sportsmen, it may not be long before spectators get to see a home-grown Qatari lining up on a global grid.

CRICKET

Ruthless Australia rout England at World Cup

England are still winless after their game against Scotland was wrecked by rain

AFP
Bridgetown, Barbados

Australia crushed England by 36 runs in Barbados yesterday to leave the defending champions' T20 World Cup hopes in the balance. Defeat means Jos Buttler's men are still winless after their opening game against Scotland was wrecked by rain.

But Australia, who posted 201-7, are top of Group B with two wins after restricting their fierce rivals to 165-6 in their 20 overs. Australia's openers raced out of the blocks and the team posted the first score of 200-plus at the tournament even though no batsman reached 40.

Phil Salt and Buttler gave England a solid platform in their reply, reaching 54-0 after six overs before going up a gear, taking 19 off Mitchell Starc's third over. But spinner Adam Zampa bowled Salt (37) with his first ball to leave England 73-1 in the eighth over and took the prized wicket of Buttler in his next over for 42.

Will Jacks was caught by Starc in the deep off the bowling of Marcus Stoinis for 10 as Australia turned the screw, conceding just 11 runs in three overs. Moeen Ali took three sixes off a Glenn Maxwell over but Jonny Bairstow went cheaply and Moeen perished for 25, caught by David Warner in the deep as Australia's situation became increasingly desperate. England became bogged down against disciplined bowling as the run rate climbed and Zampa finished with impressive figures of 2-28 off his four overs.

Earlier, Buttler chose to bowl at the Kensington Oval but quickly lost control as openers Travis Head and Warner went on the rampage. Spinner Jacks went for 22 runs in his first over, conceding three sixes as Australia's openers savaged the bowling.

Paceman Mark Wood also conceded 22 runs in his opening over as Australia raced



Australia's Adam Zampa (right) celebrates with captain Mitchell Marsh after dismissing England's captain Jos Buttler during the ICC Twenty20 World Cup Group B match at Kensington Oval in Bridgetown, Barbados, yesterday. (AFP)

to 55-0 in four overs, relishing a short boundary on one side of the ground. Moeen made the breakthrough England desperately needed in the fifth over, bowling Warner for 39 and paceman Jofra Archer flattened the stumps of Head (34), leaving Australia 74-2.

Maxwell and Mitchell Marsh brought up the hundred in the 10th over but Australia were reduced to 141-4 after both batsmen departed in quick succession. Stoinis

(30) and Matthew Wade took Australia to the 200 mark, with Archer the pick of the bowlers, taking 1-28 off his four overs.

"Very pleased, allround game was outstanding. The powerplay was the difference in the game, we learnt lessons from the first game, to trust our games. The bowlers did their thing, we have an experienced group," said captain Marsh after Australia's win.

The top two teams in the group will advance to the Super 8 stage of the competi-

tion. An early exit for England would be a nightmare after their miserable title defence at the 50-over World Cup in India last year.

BRIEF SCORES

Australia 201-7 in 20 overs (David Warner 39, Mitchell Marsh 35, Travis Head 34; Chris Jordan 2-44, Jofra Archer 1-28) **bt England 165/6 in 20 overs** (Jos Buttler 42, Phil Salt 37; Pat Cummins 2-23, Adam Zampa 2-28) by 36 runs; **Toss:** England

FOOTBALL

Rice says England have 'work to do' after Iceland loss



AFP
London

Declan Rice says "there is work to be done" if England are to go far at Euro 2024 after a shock defeat to lowly Iceland in their final game before the tournament starts.

What was supposed to be a relatively straightforward friendly instead ended in an alarming 1-0 loss to a nation ranked 72nd in the world, who will not be in Germany. Jon Dagur Thorsteinsson gave Iceland a shock early lead at Wembley and Gareth Southgate's lacklustre England could not find a response.

Swathes of supporters left before

full-time, with some of those still at the stadium jeering the home team at the final whistle. England's campaign kicks off against Group C rivals Serbia next Sunday and Rice knows improvements are required for the Euro 2020 runners-up, who have not won a major trophy since the 1966 World Cup.

"There's work to be done," said the Arsenal midfielder, 25. "When you have that much of the ball, have a couple of clear-cut chances, and get beaten 1-0 at home just before the Euros it isn't ideal."

Despite the unexpected setback, Rice believes England can still take some positives from their display. "There were a lot of promising performances, we played with a good tempo, always

tried to play forward. We have to be a little bit more savvy," he said. "It's not ideal we lost but there are good learning curves we can build on as a team."

Anthony Gordon, who played on the left side of England's attack, said fans should not be concerned despite the disappointing result.

"Good players make it click, good players make it happen," he said. "We need time to train together and in a tournament that will happen."

"We're always going to work. We're always going to prepare as much as we can. I think we've got enough players, enough camaraderie around the group, we are very together. I think that helps in tournaments."

Croatia beat Portugal in Euro 2024 warm-up

Oeiras, Portugal: Croatia finished their Euro 2024 preparations with an impressive 2-1 friendly win over Portugal yesterday. Zlatko Dalic's side beat the Euro 2016 winners in the Lisbon suburb of Oeiras to send Group B rivals Spain and Italy a warning.

Roberto Martinez's Portugal, among the contenders to win the tournament, fell to only their second defeat in 13 matches under the Spaniard. Talisman Cristiano Ronaldo was left on the bench by Martinez, whose side spurned chances to equalise in the second half.

Croatia had the better of the opening period against the subdued hosts and veteran Luka Modric netted his 25th international goal from the penalty spot after Vitinha felled Mateo Kovacic. Real Madrid midfielder Modric, 38, is hoping to finish on a high in what is likely to be the last major international tournament of his career.

Substitute Diogo Jota, on at the break, pulled Portugal level early in the second half but Budimir soon restored Croatia's advantage with a header after Mario Pasalic hit the crossbar.

Portugal have one final tune-up friendly, against Ireland on Tuesday in Aveiro. Martinez's side are favourites to progress from Group F which also contains the Czech Republic, Turkey and Georgia. Euro 2024 begins on June 14 in Germany.

SWITZERLAND, AUSTRIA DRAW BEFORE HEADING TO EUROS

Switzerland and their Alpine neighbours Austria played out a 1-1 draw yesterday in a final match before both sides head to Euro 2024 in Germany. Christoph Baumgartner put visitors Austria ahead in the fifth minute at the Kybunpark in St. Gallen before Silvan Widmer levelled for the hosts in the 26th minute. Switzerland had most of the possession but Austria racked up more shots.

The two countries had not met since a 2015 friendly, when Switzerland won 2-1 in Vienna. Switzerland are ranked 19th in the world and Austria 25th. Switzerland coach Murat Yakin named his 26-man squad for the Euros on Friday, retaining 18 players that went to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Veteran midfielders Granit Khaka and Xherdan Shaqiri remain the star names in the Swiss squad.

In the Euros, Switzerland will play Hungary on June 15, Scotland on June 19 and then hosts Germany on June 23 in Group A. Austria are in Group D, where they face France on June 17, Poland on June 21 and the Netherlands on June 25. Switzerland reached the quarter-finals in the 2020 European Championship, their best-ever performance in the tournament.