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GULF TIMES SPORT

CRICKET

De Kock and Nortje star as South Africa edge England in T20 World Cup

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EURO 2024

France draw with Dutch as VAR rules out Simons strike

‘THE REFEREE’S DECISION IS HARD TO SWALLOW, BUT WE JUST HAVE TO ACCEPT IT’



Netherlands’ forward Xavi Simons (left) reacts after the goal he scored was disallowed by English referee Anthony Taylor (right) following a VAR review during the UEFA Euro 2024 Group D match against France at the Leipzig Stadium in Leipzig yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Leipzig, Germany

France and the Netherlands played it safe in a 0-0 draw in Group D at Euro 2024 yesterday that left them within sight of a place in the last 16 and made Poland the first team to be eliminated.

With France captain Kylian Mbappe on the bench after suffering a broken nose in their opener, the game sparked into life in fits and starts, without ever threaten-

ing to turn into a classic. Netherlands’ Xavi Simons had the ball in the net in the second half but the goal was disallowed because Denzel Dumfries, standing offside next to keeper Mike Maignan, was penalised with the decision eventually confirmed by VAR after a lengthy delay.

“The referee’s decision is hard to swallow, but we just have to accept it because there is nothing we can do to change it. I prefer to take the positives from the game. We showed the best of ourselves, which allowed us to hold one of

the big favourites for this tournament,” Simons said. The result leaves the group open, although with four points in the bag both France and the Netherlands will think they have most likely done enough to reach the last 16.

France next face Poland, who have no points after losing 3-1 to Austria earlier yesterday, while the Netherlands meet the Austrians, who have three points, also on Tuesday. The saga around Mbappe’s selection dominated the build-up, with his appearance at training on Thursday wearing a



France’s midfielder Antoine Griezmann (left) heads the ball during the match against the Netherlands yesterday. (AFP)

tricolour mask seen as a sure sign he was set for inclusion. The first half was at times frenetic, with the Dutch going close within the first minute as Jeremie Frimpong’s effort was tipped around the post by Maignan before Antoine Griezmann had an early shot palmed over at the other end.

“I had two chances, but they got caught up in my feet. It’s a real shame,” said Griezmann.

“We have to work (on scoring). I think that defensively we were OK, tactically we were fine, we’re just missing this goal for the strikers but it’s going to be fine.”

France should have taken the lead minutes later when Adrien Rabiot was played through on goal but inexplicably chose to pass to Griezmann, who was so stunned by his generosity that he miscontrolled, stumbled and lost possession.

With Mbappe out of the picture, Griezmann slotted into the role as France’s main man, firing another chance wide and heading straight at keeper Bart Verbruggen from a Rabiot cross.

By contrast, the Netherlands seemed to lack a real threat, with most of their attacks petering out

with all their forwards guilty of failing to find a telling pass when the penalty area honed into view.

As the second half progressed, France increased the tempo with Marcus Thuram flashing a shot wide on the hour, Aurelien Tchouameni heading over and an off-balance Griezmann again thwarted by Verbruggen from close range.

The Dutch thought they had finally broken the deadlock when Simons flashed a shot into the net only for the celebrations to be halted by the linesman’s flag and dashed by VAR.

FOCUS

Austria down Poland to close on last 16

AFP
Berlin

Austria boosted their hopes of reaching the Euro 2024 knockout rounds yesterday as Marko Arnautovic scored in an impressive 3-1 win over Poland, for whom Robert Lewandowski only managed an ineffective substitute appearance.

Ralf Rangnick’s Austria will likely secure qualification for the last 16 if they can avoid defeat in their final Group D game against the Netherlands on Tuesday.

Poland can no longer finish in the top two and almost certainly need to defeat France to have any chance of progressing as one of the four best third-placed teams.

Gernot Trauner headed Austria into a deserved early lead before Krzysztof Piatek, who had missed their opening loss to the Netherlands, equalised for Poland in the 30th minute.

Lewandowski was introduced for his first appearance of the tournament with half an hour remaining, but was a peripheral figure as Poland slipped to the brink of elimination.

Christoph Baumgartner put Austria back in front after a fine team move and an end-to-end game was killed off by Arnautovic’s 78th-minute penalty.

Austria, who reached the knockout phase at a major tournament for the first time since 1954 at Euro 2020, will be sure of going through if they defeat the Dutch, who face France later Friday.

Lewandowski was not fit enough to start after suffering a thigh injury last week, despite Poland coach Michal Probiez saying he was hopeful the Barcelona striker would be able to play.

Fans from the two countries, which both border Germany, packed out the Olympiastadion.

The Poland supporters who had made the short trip outnumbered their counterparts, but it was the wall of fans in red Austrian shirts who were bouncing up and down in celebration less than nine minutes in.

Their team started in dominant fashion and were rewarded with the lead when defender Trauner powered a header past Polish goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny after clever wing play from left-back Phillipp Mwene.

Poland grew into the contest, though, and Nicola Zalewski passed up a good opportunity to equalise when he blazed over.

The two most recent meetings between the teams, in Euro 2020 qualifying, produced only one goal.

But an entertaining game this time was level just before the half-hour mark, as Piatek pounced to slot in from close range after



Austria’s midfielder Christoph Baumgartner celebrates with defender Patrick Wimmer after scoring his team’s second goal during the UEFA Euro 2024 Group D match against Poland at the Olympiastadion in Berlin yesterday. (AFP)

Trauner blocked Jan Bednarek’s shot. Austria wasted an excellent chance to restore their advantage with a three-on-two attack, but

Bednarek threw himself in the way of Marcel Sabitzer’s effort. Rangnick’s side almost found themselves behind in first-half

added time when goalkeeper Patrick Pentz was forced into a diving stop by Piotr Zielinski’s free-kick.

Austria began the second half brightly, with Szczesny holding Stefan Posch’s header.

A huge roar went up around the stadium as Lewandowski made his entrance in the 60th minute.

His only involvement of note was to pick up a yellow card shortly after coming on for catching Philipp Lienhart in the face with his elbow.

Austria moved back ahead with a wonderfully-worked goal in the 66th minute.

Arnautovic dummied substitute Alexander Prass’ incisive pass and Baumgartner took a touch and coolly placed the ball into the bottom corner.

Austria could have wrapped up the three points with 15 minutes left when Patrick Wimmer’s low strike was pushed to safety by the increasingly busy Szczesny.

But the third goal arrived shortly afterwards as Arnautovic calmly put away a penalty after Sabitzer bore down on goal and was felled by Szczesny.

Austria threatened to make the final scoreline embarrassing for Poland, with Szczesny making a brilliant fingertip stop from Posch’s long-range drive.

The Poles were suddenly a shambles and Konrad Laimer dribbled a shot wide of an open goal after rounding Szczesny, but even that miss could not take the gloss off Austria’s third win at a major tournament in 34 years.

COMMENT

‘Afghanistan batters failed the Bumrah test’

Reuters
Barbados

Afghanistan coach Jonathan Trott was disappointed with the shot selection of his batters in their defeat by India in Thursday's T20 World Cup Super Eight match and said they failed to execute their plans for facing Jasprit Bumrah. Bumrah was almost unplayable once again, India's pace spearhead claiming three Afghan wickets and conceding only seven runs in four impeccable overs at Kensington Oval. Bumrah deceived Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Afghanistan's leading scorer in the tournament, with clever change of pace and got the

better of the other opener, Hazratullah Zazai, with an off-cutter that resulted in a leading edge towards point. "Obviously disappointed with a few of the shots or the decision-making," Trott said after their 47-run loss in the Group 1 contest. "Obviously, Bumrah is going to be a key bowler for any side. "For India, he's crucial and we needed to play him better. His figures suggest we didn't play him very well. "We'd obviously spoken about it and how we were going to play him. So, we weren't able to execute that and, yeah, that's very disappointing." India posted a strong 181-8 riding Suryakumar Yadav's second successive half-century.



Jasprit Bumrah of India reacts during the ICC Twenty20 World Cup match against Afghanistan at Kensington Oval in Bridgetown, Barbados, on Thursday. (AFP)

Afghan captain Rashid Khan, also their main strike bowler, finished his quota by the 14th over and India milked 66 runs from the final six overs. Trott, however, backed Rashid's decision to exhaust his overs so early and said other bowlers should have stepped up. "When you bowl three for 26, I think no matter when you bowl you've done a good job," Trott said of Rashid. "It's not just one bowler. Other people have to bowl the 16 other overs to be bowled, and it's the responsibility of other bowlers to be able to execute the plans that we put in place ... "I thought Rash bowled brilliantly today. He has high expectations of himself and he delivered

today. Everybody else, could follow suit. That would be great." Even if they were unable to take wickets the bowlers should have been trying to stem the runs and put pressure on the Indian batters, he added. "Wicket taking, and certainly in T20 and on these types of wickets, comes from creating pressure. "So you need to find a way to create pressure on these types of wickets where there's a short boundary and with the wind. "So you need to (make sure) if you're not getting wickets, you're not leaking for too many runs. "For me, we just weren't able to do that." Afghanistan face Australia in their next match in Kingstown today.

MATCH REPORT

Quinton smashes quickfire 65 as SA edge past England

South Africa bowlers hold their nerve for hard-fought 7-run win



South Africa's Quinton de Kock hits a four during the ICC Twenty20 World Cup Super Eight match against England at Daren Sammy National Cricket Stadium in Gros Islet, Saint Lucia, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Gros-Islet, Saint Lucia

Anrich Nortje held his nerve as South Africa remained unbeaten at the T20 World Cup after defeating reigning champions England by seven runs in a thrilling second-round Super Eights clash in St Lucia yesterday. England, chasing a seemingly modest 164 to win, slumped to 61-4 thanks to fine South Africa bowling and fielding before a partnership of 78 between Harry Brook (53) and Liam Livingstone (33) took them to 139-5 in the 18th over. But, with England needing 14 off the last over, Brook chipped a slower ball from fast bowler Nortje and South Africa captain Aiden Markram held a brilliant diving catch over his shoulder as he ran back from mid-off to end a 37-ball innings featuring seven fours. Two balls later, Sam Curran struck a four but then refused a single, as that would have left lower-order batsman Jofra Archer on strike. England now needed nine off two balls but Curran could only manage a single, leaving Archer with an impossible task off the final ball as they finished on 156-6. It was a fine display under pressure by South Africa, often accused of 'choking' at major events, and took them one step closer to a semi-final berth. "Getting to those last three



South Africa's Kagiso Rabada (left) celebrates after England's Liam Livingstone is caught out during the Twenty20 World Cup Super Eight match at Daren Sammy National Cricket Stadium in Gros Islet, Saint Lucia, yesterday. (AFP)

overs and it looks like to odds are against you, to hang in there and get the win shows a lot of skill, but it comes from a lot deeper than that," said Markram. "Fighting spirit really helped us today. "We are getting closer to the complete game. We are not there yet but we are on the right track." England captain Jos Buttler said: "Brook and Livingstone had an excellent partnership there to take us so close. "At one stage we were favour-

ites but T20 cricket is never that simple, and credit to South Africa for closing it out." He added: "We know we're still in it. We played well today, we just didn't quite get over the line." Proteas paceman Kagiso Rabada removed the in-form Phil Salt for 11 while fellow England opener partner Buttler managed just 17 before he fell to left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj, who also dismissed Jonny Bairstow in a fine return of 2-32.

"I'd say it was lost in the replay," Buttler said. "Quinton de Kock came out and played with really good intent and we couldn't really match that. "I think we were about 20 behind them at the end of our first six (overs)." South Africa, sent into bat, sprinted to 69-0 off seven overs. De Kock hit fast bowler Archer for 21 in the fourth over - including two sixes off successive balls. But he was brilliantly caught by leaping wicketkeeper Buttler off Archer for 65 to end a 38-ball innings featuring four fours and four sixes. England, however, thought they had dismissed De Kock for 58 only for the third umpire to rule Mark Wood had grassed a low catch in the deep - a key decision in a tight game. De Kock's exit sparked a collapse that saw South Africa lose three wickets for 21 runs, with the big-hitting Heinrich Klaasen brilliantly run out by Buttler's direct hit on the stumps at the non-striker's end. But David Miller's rapid 43 helped take South Africa to 163-6 - and that was just enough.

BRIEF SCORES
South Africa 163-6, 20 overs (Quinton de Kock 65, David Miller 43; Jofra Archer 3-40) **v England 156-6, 20 overs** (Harry Brook 53, Liam Livingstone 33; Keshav Maharaj 2-25, Kagiso Rabada 2-32)
Toss: England
Result: South Africa won by seven runs

SPOTLIGHT

Cummins the hat-trick hero as Australia beat Bangladesh in rain-hit tie



Australia's Pat Cummins (left) celebrates bowling out Bangladesh's Mahmudullah (right) during the ICC Twenty20 World Cup match at Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda

Pat Cummins claimed a hat-trick and David Warner thrashed a quickfire 53 not out as Australia beat Bangladesh by 28 runs in a weather-disrupted T20 World Cup Super Eight clash in Antigua yesterday. Australia, who are bidding to complete a historic treble of World Test Championship, ODI World Cup and T20 World Cup titles, were awarded the victory under the Duckworth-Lewis formula after motoring to 100-2 off 11.2 overs when rain stopped play. Earlier, Australia had held Bangladesh to 140-8 off their 20 overs at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in North Sound. Australia captain Mitchell Marsh saluted his bowlers for laying the foundations for the win. "Really exciting bowling performance, the boys played well tonight," Marsh said. "It is a very good playing XI. We've got 15 guys that can take us deep in the World Cup, but there's a long way to go." Fast bowler Cummins was elated to bag his first international hat-trick. "Pretty awesome to tick that off," Cummins said. "The boys are welcoming me into the club - it's a good club to be part of." Warner led a brisk march towards the victory target despite multiple interruptions to the Aus-

tralian innings due to rain. A final rain delay took play past midnight with Warner not out on 53 and Glenn Maxwell unbeaten on 14, Australia 100-2 and needing 41 off 52 balls to win. With no further play possible, the result was awarded to Australia. Bangladesh, put into bat after losing the toss, struggled to get into any kind of rhythm and their innings slowed to a crawl late on after Cummins took the wickets of Mahmudullah, Mahedi Hasan and Towhid Hridoy in consecutive deliveries over two overs. Cummins, restored to the starting line-up, finished with figures of 3-29 while spinner Adam Zampa also impressed with 2-24. Mitchell Starc meanwhile became the most prolific bowler in the history of white-ball cricket with his 95th World Cup wicket after trapping Tanzid Hasan in the opening over. Starc's early breakthrough saw him pull one clear of Sri Lanka's Lasith Malinga, setting the tone for Australia's bowlers. Australia's attack kept Bangladesh on the back foot after Starc's opening wicket, with restored Josh Hazlewood opening his spell with a maiden. Another tidy over from Starc left Bangladesh with just eight runs off the first three overs.

BRIEF SCORES
Australia 100 for 2 (Warner 53*) **beat Bangladesh 140 for 8** (Shanto 41, Hridoy 40, Cummins 3-29) **by 28 runs** (DLS method)

Hat-trick may not spare Cummins from World Cup chop

North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda: Pat Cummins admits that even taking the first hat-trick of the T20 World Cup may not save him from the axe when Australia tackle Afghanistan in their next Super Eights clash. The veteran fast bowler became just the seventh man to claim a hat-trick in the history of the tournament in the rain-hit win over Bangladesh on Thursday. However, today's clash with Afghanistan is taking place on the spin-friendly wicket of Kingstown in St Vincent. That could mean Cummins, Josh Hazlewood or Mitchell Starc might sit out the game in favour of another slow bowler. "Yes, potentially. We've been pretty open with that, that anyone in the squad's ready to play

and the bowling line-up might change at different times," said Cummins who has played in three of his team's five games so far. "It's got to be adaptable. We feel like we've got all bases covered. So yeah, we'll rock up there. And I mean, the best thing of all this is I'm not captain or selector or anything, so I just turn up and have no worries." Australia played just one front-line fast bowler in the first-round win over Scotland with Adam Zampa, Glenn Maxwell as Ashton Agar providing spin options. In the victory over England, Cummins, Starc and Hazlewood all played just as they did against Bangladesh. Starc sat out the match against Namibia with Cummins and Hazlewood getting the nod.

SPOTLIGHT

Hosting 5 consecutive U-17 World Cups highlights 2022 FIFA World Cup legacy

QNA
Doha

The successful organisation of the first Arab edition of the FIFA World Cup (FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022) by Qatar has left a legacy across various fields, which will be cherished by current and future generations for centuries to come, not only in Qatar but in all Arab and Islamic countries.

This exceptional edition of the World Cup, which placed Qatar in the global spotlight, documented the hospitality of the Qatari people and the advanced infrastructure, as well as the immense capabilities that Qatar possesses as a leading country in hosting and organising major sports tournaments and high-profile global events.

This has left a cultural, architectural, and economic legacy, serving as a source of pride for GCC, Arab, and Muslim populations worldwide.

The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 has firmly established Qatar's name in the annals of global sports, making it an inspiring model of success in hosting major events.

The country's cultural and social attributes conveyed sophisticated messages and corrected misconceptions about the region in a unique way, along with iconic sta-

diums and robust infrastructure, making this World Cup the most successful in history.

The conviction of FIFA that Qatar has become a valuable addition to global football led to the unprecedented assignment of hosting five consecutive editions of the FIFA U-17 World Cup from 2025-2029 to Qatar.

FIFA's council's vote to award these tournaments to Qatar is a new acknowledgment of its global leadership.

FIFA noted the remarkable impact of the dazzling FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 on its future plans for hosting tournaments, affirming that Qatar welcomed the world to the first World Cup held in an Arab country with unparalleled hospitality, delivering the best edition ever.

Qatar's excellent facilities and infrastructure will offer the best conditions for the world's top under-17 talents, giving a new face to the tournament that has historically been a launching pad for the biggest names in football.

Globally, Qatar hosted the FIFA World Youth Championship in 1995, and in recent years, has held two editions of the FIFA Club World Cup in 2019 and 2020, the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2021, and the historic FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

Regionally, Qatar hosted the



AFC Asian Cup 2023 for the third time in its history, following the 1988 and 2011 editions, as well as the AFC U-23 Asian Cup this year, which qualifies for the Paris 2024 Olympics, and is set to host the 2030 Asian Games for the second

time after the 2006 edition.

In this context, HE President of the Qatar Press Center Saad bin Mohamed al-Rumaihi told the Qatar News Agency (QNA) that Qatar's active presence in major sports events confirms its status

as a global reference and model for managing and delivering organisational operations in the best possible way.

His Excellency added that it was not surprising that the country has earned FIFA's trust to host five consecutive editions of the FIFA U-17 World Cup, noting that this was especially true after Qatar successfully made the 2022 World Cup the best in history in various technical, administrative, audience, and organisational aspects.

He added that hosting the World Cup left a lasting legacy in the exceptional infrastructure and stadiums that will help build on the current successes with future ones.

Director of the Marketing and Communications Department at the Qatar Football Association (QFA) Khaled Mubarak al-Kuwari, affirmed that FIFA's decision to grant Qatar the right to host five consecutive editions of the FIFA U-17 World Cup demonstrates that Qatar has become a preferred destination for major sports events, following the tremendous success of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

Al-Kuwari highlighted the events that Qatar plans to host in the coming years, noting that Qatar will host the 2025 World Table Tennis Championships, the 2025 FIFA Arab Cup as one of three upcoming editions, with 2029 and 2033 editions to follow, the 2027 FIBA Bas-

ketball World Cup, and the 2030 Asian Games, which it will host for the second time after the 2006 edition.

Director of Development Department of QFA Fahd Thani al-Zaraa said that the U-17 World Cup will be held in ideal conditions that ensure the tournament's success.

Al-Zaraa said Qatar's hosting of five consecutive editions of the U-17 World Cup was a significant step that will greatly impact the development of the Qatari football system.

This hosting will provide a high-level competitive field for young players, allowing them to gain experience by interacting with various football schools from different continents, especially with the participation of 48 teams in the tournament.

Former Qatari national football team star and Qatar Legacy Ambassador Adel Khamis confirmed that the flood of competitions hosted by Qatar is a natural result of the world-class organization witnessed during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, which has set a benchmark with a series of record achievements.

Khamis expressed his pride and honour in Qatar being awarded the organisation of five consecutive editions of the FIFA U-17 World Cup starting next year.

TENNIS

Paul beats Draper to reach Queen's semis, Fritz exits

'I PLAYED GOOD TENNIS AND I LIKE THE GRASS. I AM HAPPY'

AFP
London

Tommy Paul ended Jack Draper's seven-match winning run on grass yesterday to reach the semi-finals at Queen's but fourth seed Taylor Fritz crashed out in straight sets.

British number one Draper secured the biggest win of his career when he ended the Queen's Club reign of Wimbledon champion Carlos Alcaraz on Thursday. But the 22-year-old was outgunned by American fifth seed Paul in the last-eight tie in London, going down 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 in a match lasting a shade over two hours.

Draper battled back from a set down but he was broken to love midway through the decider as the match swung Paul's way.

Defeat ended Draper's seven-match winning streak after he lifted his first ATP title in Stuttgart last week.

"I played good tennis and I like the grass," said Paul.

"I knew today was going to be a battle.

"It is never easy against Jack. He has been playing such good tennis, so I am really happy to get through that one."

Italy's Lorenzo Musetti continued his impressive grass-court season by ending the run of British wild card Billy Harris 6-3, 7-5 to reach his second consecutive semi-final on the surface.

Musetti, who advanced to the last four in Stuttgart last week, fired 20 winners and committed just six unforced errors.

He is chasing his third tour-level title and will next play Jordan



Tommy Paul (right) of the US shakes hands with Britain's Jack Draper after winning their quarter-final of Queen's Club Championships at the Queen's Club, London, yesterday. (Reuters)

Thompson after the Australian defeated fourth-seed American Taylor Fritz 6-4, 6-3. Thompson, who did not face a break point against Fritz, arrived in London on a five-match losing streak.

Sinner survives Struff's clutch serves to snatch win

In the face of a brilliant serving display from Jan-Lennard Struff, Jannik Sinner held firm yesterday to advance to the Terra Wortmann Open semi-finals.

Struff hit 18 aces and saved 16 of 18 break points — including all 11 in the second and third sets —

but could not pull off the upset against the new No. 1 in the PIF ATP Rankings.

The Italian's 6-2, 6-7(1), 7-6(3) result was his third consecutive three-set win in Halle, after earlier victories against Tallon Griekspoor and Fabian Marozsan. Sinner lost a tie-break in each of the three matches.

"It was a very tough match," Sinner said. "I had chances in the second, had chances in the third, but couldn't use them. Obviously it has been very tough, also mentally. I'm very pleased to be in the next round, I played a lot

yesterday, I played a lot also today — two and a half hours on grass, it's a long time. I'll try to recover for tomorrow and hopefully show some good tennis."

Playing in his first event as World No 1, Sinner has yet to meet a seeded opponent. That trend will continue in today's semis, when he takes on Zhang Zhizhen or Christopher Eubanks.

Sinner is bidding to become the eighth man in PIF ATP Rankings history to win the title in his first event as No. 1, and the first to do it since Andy Murray at the 2016 Nitto ATP Finals.

HAMILTON ON TOP IN BARCELONA PRACTICE AFTER DRAMATIC DAY AT MERCEDES

Barcelona: Lewis Hamilton led a finely balanced second practice for Mercedes yesterday ahead of the Spanish Grand Prix with Max Verstappen's Red Bull only fifth. Tomorrow's race is the first of a triple header as Formula One returns to Europe where three-time world champion Verstappen was generally expected to reassert his superiority after missing out on two of the past four races. But on the evidence of yesterday's opening two practice sessions Verstappen, who leads the championship by 56 points, has a real fight on his hands in a refreshing turn of events for impartial F1 fans. Hamilton's lap of 1min 13.264seconds lifted him atop the timesheets on a sun-blessed day in Catalonia ahead of home hero Carlos Sainz, appearing at his last Spanish Grand Prix weekend as a Ferrari driver.

The British driver's performance came just hours after Mercedes boss Toto Wolff confirmed police were investigating an email from "a lunatic" claiming his team were sabotaging the car of Hamilton who will drive for Ferrari next season.

A visibly angry Wolff spoke out in the strongest terms possible over the "upsetting" e-mail which he denied had come from a member of Mercedes' 1,500 workforce and which has been sent to Formula One's major players including the FIA.

"This was not from a member of the team, this email is upsetting, somebody talking about death," he said. "These lunatics, all those mad people out there - take a shrink."

In hot sunshine, a welcome change after Thursday's scirocco rain and dust showers from the Sahara, Hamilton was making an early statement of intent at a track where Mercedes celebrated a double podium last year.

In third came the McLaren of Lando Norris, followed by the surprisingly quick Alpine of Pierre Gasly. Verstappen could only muster fifth ahead of Charles Leclerc in the other Ferrari, who earlier this week had acted as Olympic torch

bearer on his very own streets of Monaco where he had claimed his maiden home Grand Prix last month. After all the data-crunching from opening practice drivers emerged for the late afternoon session, with Verstappen straight away reporting his Red Bull's "weird understeer".

George Russell, who ended up eighth overall, was quick out of the blocks, the Mercedes pole sitter from Montreal last time posting an early best lap of 1min 14.089sec. His friend Norris led the chasing pack one tenth of a second adrift ahead of Hamilton and Verstappen.

'Something wrong'

After a quiet FP1, Leclerc was motoring, posting the third quickest time as Sainz, who has never made a podium on home tarmac, rose to the top - both Ferraris looking to bounce back from a double DNF in Montreal.

Hamilton, a record-equalling six-time winner at the circuit, was also going encouragingly and took command at the midway stage in the latest positive sign of a return to form by Mercedes.

Gasly, who earlier was wearing a French football shirt ahead of yesterday's France clash with the Netherlands at Euro 2024, climbed to fourth. Norris had laid down an encouraging marker when topping the times in opening practice. After a hard-to-read session as teams toyed with set ups and upgrades Norris had edged Verstappen in the three-time world champion's Red Bull by 0.024seconds.

Oliver Bearman, taking over Nico Hulkenberg's Haas for opening practice, had a steady time of it, assembling data and taking care of a car only lent to him as he takes another step towards a possible entry in F1 next season. Gasly limped back to the pits, the Frenchman reporting "there's something wrong with the car". Verstappen approaches the 10th round of the 24-race world championship leading the drivers standings from Leclerc, with Norris hovering only eight points back in third.



Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton takes part in the first practice session at the Circuit de Catalunya in Montmelo, on the outskirts of Barcelona, ahead of the Spanish Grand Prix. (AFP)

Murray to have back surgery days before Wimbledon

Andy Murray will have an operation on his back today - nine days before the start of Wimbledon - after being forced to pull out of Queen's earlier this week.

The 37-year-old Scot, aiming to make a farewell appearance at the All England Club, where he is a two-time champion, has not been ruled out of the grass court Grand Slam, which starts on July 1. Murray managed just

five games before a back injury forced him to withdraw from his second-round match against Australia's Jordan Thompson at the Queen's warm-up event on Wednesday. "Andy is having a procedure on his back tomorrow (Saturday)," said a statement from Murray's management company. "We will know more after this has taken place and will update further as soon as possible."

The former world number one, who plays with a metal hip, struggled from the start of his match against Thompson and said afterwards he had a feeling of weakness in his right leg and had lost coordination. Murray underwent minor back surgery in 2013 and following a first-round loss at the recent French Open he said he would need treatment to address soreness.

PREVIEW

Guler Turkiye's hope against star-studded Portugal

AFP
Düsseldorf

Arda Guler will test his mettle against a Portugal team packed with big names today after the Turkish teenager showed why he is a star in the making with one of the goals of Euro 2024.

Real Madrid midfielder Guler crashed in Turkiye's stupendous second goal in Tuesday's thrilling 3-1 win over Georgia, the most entertaining game of what so far has been a brilliant group stage.

The 19-year-old's rocket of a shot put Turkiye ahead against spirited Georgia in front of huge and fanatical support in Dortmund. Guler, who had a difficult time with injuries in his first season in Madrid, announced himself as one of the young players to watch as Turkiye coach Vincenzo Montella celebrated his 50th birthday in perfect fashion.

"It was our coach's birthday today and we wanted to give him the best present possible," said Guler after the match.

"(Real Madrid coach Carlo) An-

Ronaldo deserves to play for Portugal, insists coach Martinez

Roberto Martinez insisted on Friday that Cristiano Ronaldo deserves to play for Portugal at Euro 2024 as the ageing icon prepares to face Turkey in a potentially crucial Group F clash. Ronaldo is Portugal's all-time top scorer with 130 goals in a record 208 international appearances and is playing at his sixth European Championship at the age of 39. He moved to Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia last year but is still a fixture in his national team despite no longer being the player he was, and Martinez said that he will play in Dortmund today. "I think what's

important is to understand what a player brings. For us, Cristiano brings the experience, brings the know-how, brings the goal-scoring opportunities, the movement in the box, the opportunity to open up space," Martinez told reporters. Ronaldo played all of Portugal's opening 2-1 win over the Czech Republic in Leipzig but did not score, with Francisco Conceicao getting the decisive late goal. "If you want to analyse the stats in terms of the physical side, well you need to look at what he's done in the last 12 months," added Martinez, with Ronaldo having

scored 44 goals in 45 games for his club over the past season. He also scored seven times in seven appearances for Portugal between the season starting and the Euros beginning. "Cristiano is in the national team of Portugal because he deserves to be, and all the physical stats just back that he can play every four days." Portugal trail group leaders Turkey on goal difference in Group F but will qualify for the last 16 in Germany in first place if they win at the Westfalenstadion and Georgia do not beat the Czechs in Hamburg.



Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo gestures during a training session in Marienfeld yesterday. (AFP)

a hostile atmosphere for a Portugal side stacked with talent and experience.

Guler will share the pitch with ageing ex-Real Madrid icons Cristiano Ronaldo and Pepe, who at 41 years old is the oldest player to ever play at a European Championship.

He is at his fifth Euros as a former winner while Guler became the youngest player to score for Turkiye with his first strike for his country, another special curler against Wales in qualifying.

"His goals don't surprise me as we also played together at club level," Fenerbahce defender Ferdi Kadioglu told UEFA's website.

"His first goal with the national team against Wales was also amazing."

Turkiye have not got past the group stage of a Euros since reaching the semi-finals in 2008.

But with Guler and other bright young attackers like Juventus' Kenan Yildiz, experienced playmaker Hakan Calhanoglu and their massive support, Montella's team have hope of causing an upset against one of the tournament favourites.

FOCUS

Yaremchuk shines as Ukraine rally to beat Slovakia 2-1

'The players showed the spirit of Ukraine on the pitch and deserved the win'

AFP
Düsseldorf, Germany

Roman Yaremchuk scored the winning goal as Ukraine beat Slovakia 2-1 at Euro 2024 yesterday, sparking tears from their players and earning the congratulations of President Volodymyr Zelensky for keeping alive their chances of reaching the knockout rounds.

Ukraine trailed to an early Ivan Schranz goal in Duesseldorf and were in danger of suffering another defeat after losing 3-0 to Romania in their opening game at the tournament.

But Mykola Shaparenko equalised shortly after half-time and then set up substitute Yaremchuk to score the winner 10 minutes from time to get Ukraine's campaign in Group E up and running.

"The players showed the spirit of Ukraine on the pitch and deserved the win," said coach Serhiy Rebrov, whose team are playing at a first major tournament since Russian forces invaded in 2022.

"Today it was a very important win for Ukraine and for our country. I'm sure they were proud," Rebrov added. Zelensky greeted the win on X, formerly Twitter, by writing "Way to go guys!" He said it showed a country "that takes a punch and overcomes obstacles... This is exactly what Ukraine's National Football Team is doing today."

Slovakia knew victory would have taken them through to the knockout stage with a game to spare, but the result means they, Ukraine and Romania are all level on three points in a wide-open Group E. Romania play Belgium, who are bottom without a point, on Saturday in Frankfurt before the final round of matches next Wednesday.

As they had before their first



Ukraine's forward Roman Yaremchuk (right and inset) scores his team's second goal past Slovakia's goalkeeper Martin Dubravka and Slovakia's defender Milan Skriniar during the UEFA Euro 2024 Group E match at the Duesseldorf Arena in Duesseldorf yesterday. (AFP)

game against the Romanians, the Ukraine players emerged onto the sodden pitch in Duesseldorf with Ukrainian flags draped over their shoulders.

With the war in their homeland still raging, it was impossible to avoid the political narrative to this match.

Slovakia shares a border with Ukraine but the country's populist Prime Minister Robert Fico - who survived being shot in an assassination attempt last month - opposes giving military aid to the Ukrainians in its fight against the Russians. Last weekend Peter Pellegrini was sworn in as Slovakia's new President after a campaign dominated by divisions over Ukraine. His predecessor, Zuzana Caputova, was a staunch Ukraine supporter, but Pellegrini is in favour of peace negotiations. There was more support in the stands

for Ukraine than their opponents at the Merkur Spiel-Arena, as Rebrov made four changes following the heavy loss to Romania.

Captain Taras Stepanenko and Girona winger Viktor Tsygankov were among the players to drop out, while Benfica's Anatoliy Trubin started in goal in place of Andriy Lunin, whose errors proved costly in the opening match.

Slovakia, though, played with confidence after their fine result against Belgium, and Trubin made one stop from Lukas Haraslin before producing a fine reaction save to deny Schranz. They were soon rewarded for their early pressure with the opening goal. Trubin saved a David Hancko free-kick, then from the throw-in which followed Haraslin lobbed the ball from the byline to the back post for Schranz, of Slavia Prague, to head in. However, Ukraine improved

and were almost level just after the half-hour mark when a low strike by Oleksandr Tymchyk was tipped onto the far post by the fingertips of Slovakia goalkeeper Martin Dubravka. They drew level on 54 minutes after a fine move which ended with Oleksandr Zinchenko's low ball into the middle from the left being swept home by Shaparenko, of Dynamo Kyiv.

Rebrov's team now had the momentum and they hit the woodwork again on 74 minutes when Mykhailo Mudryk struck the post from a tight angle after being set up by Yaremchuk. It was Yaremchuk, the striker who has spent the season in Spain at Valencia, who got the winner as he controlled Shaparenko's high ball over the top and poked past Dubravka to spark wild celebrations in the stands and tears of joy from the players at full-time.

SPOTLIGHT

Czechs aim to attack more and shackle Georgia's 'Kvara-dona'

Reuters
Hamburg

The Czech Republic aim to shackle Georgia's exciting winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia in today's Euro 2024 clash while unleashing their own attackers more than they could in their opener.

Coach Ivan Hasek's side were largely on the back foot in their first Group F game where they lost 2-1 to Portugal, and want to express themselves more against unfancied Georgia who also lost their first match.

"We really do want to attack, get set pieces, and be dangerous," Hasek said, declaring his entire side fit for the game in Hamburg. "We didn't attack that well in the first game, and that's why we want to do it tomorrow. We want to show it."

Championship debutants Georgia gave Turkiye a rough ride in their first game, despite the losing scoreline of 3-1, and will hope once again to defend stoutly and hit on counter-attacks. "We have to be really focussed and not let them counterattack, that is their biggest threat," said Czech midfielder Antonin Barak beside his manager at a news conference.

Georgia's main talent is Napoli winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, whom fans nicknamed "Kvara-dona" in reference to late Argentine hero Diego Maradona. "Yes he's a big star,"

said Barak, recalling his role in Napoli's 2023 title-winning side. "On the other hand, in the national team, his role is a little different, he doesn't have so much support from his team, he plays a little further down.

"We are getting ready for him, we are preparing ourselves. But we do not forget the other players, they have a lot of attacking force. So it is not only about Khvicha, but he is a superstar definitely."

Also on the radar is Georges Mikautadze, who against Turkey netted Georgia's first ever goal at the Euros.

Hasek said his team would be aiming to prise open space in Georgia's stubborn defence in a game both teams need to win for their first points of the tournament and a shot at reaching the knockout stage. Czech forward Patrik Schick should be able to maraud more than he was able to against Portugal. "Georgia knows and we know that we cannot lose. But it won't be that wild of a game," Hasek said. "Georgia have players who can attack but they won't open the defence."

Barak said the team were determined to impress.

"We want to introduce some different elements, we want to create our own playing style," he said. "I hope that tomorrow we win and that we show the fans how we can attack but also be reliable and compact in the defence... We want them to feel joy about how we play and together we will be happy."



IORDANESCU CHALLENGES ROMANIA TO MAKE 'HISTORY' AT EUROS

Cologne: Romania boss **Edward Iordanescu** urged his team to make "history" at Euro 2024 as they bid to seal a place in the last 16 with a victory over Belgium. Iordanescu's side will be guaranteed to reach the knockout stage if they follow their impressive win against Ukraine with an even more surprising success when they meet star-studded Belgium in Cologne today. Romania powered to a 3-0 win against Ukraine in their Group E opener on Monday, while the Belgians slumped to a shock 1-0

loss at the hands of Slovakia. Inspired by their first win in a major tournament since beating England at Euro 2000, the Romanians have their sights set on making the competition's knockout stage for the first time in 24 years. "It would mean history. It would be a fantastic example for what football and sport means in Romania," Iordanescu said yesterday. "After the first game, the whole country was behind our team. It really helped our people. I can feel happiness and hope for all Romanians.

That motivates us even more." Belgium wasted a host of chances to score against Slovakia and were denied a late Romelu Lukaku equaliser by a controversial VAR decision. Iordanescu knows Kevin De Bruyne and company will be desperate to make amends against Romania as the talented underachievers fight to avoid another flop at a major tournament. "Obviously the opponent is amazing. But we are going into the game trying to win it. Why not get the points that would mean qualification?" he said.

"We have to keep the context in mind. They are number three in the world, with great players, and they really need to get a result. "That is a really difficult challenge for us. We are waiting for it. This is the Euros, the best players and coaches. These are incredible experiences. "We have to elevate to another level. We have to be very exact and very efficient." Ukraine's 2-1 win against Slovakia yesterday raised the prospect of all four teams having three points heading into the final round of

matches if Belgium beat Romania. Iordanescu acknowledged a draw would be a good result against Belgium as he insisted his players would not lose focus after their memorable start to the tournament. "The qualification is the most important thing for us. If a point would be enough, then we would take it," he said. "Of course we had euphoria on the pitch (after the Ukraine game). That needed to be enjoyed, then we relaxed and started preparing for tomorrow's game. It is a new challenge."