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TENNIS

# Krejciikova holds off Paolini to win Wimbledon title

Czech wins 6-2, 2-6, 6-4 to claim the title, see-saw match decided by vital break in epic deciding set



AFP  
London

**B**arbora Krejciikova of the Czech Republic defeated Italy's Jasmine Paolini to win the Wimbledon women's title yesterday for her second Grand Slam singles triumph.

Krejciikova, the 31st seed, won 6-2, 2-6, 6-4 to add the 2024 All England Club crown to her 2021 French Open victory.

Her win comes 26 years after her mentor Jana Novotna, who died of cancer in 2017, claimed the Wimbledon title.

"Before she passed away, she told me to go and win a Slam. I did that in Paris in 2021 but I never dreamed of winning the same trophy that Jana did," said the 28-year-old Krejciikova, who secured the title in a nervy final service game on a third championship point.

"It's unreal what just happened. The best day of my tennis career and the best day of my life.

"I was just telling myself to be brave. It was such a difficult match, a great final, a great competition and I'm super happy to be standing here enjoying this moment."

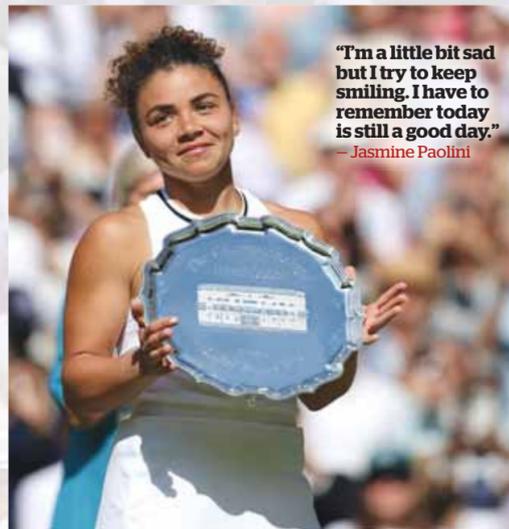
Krejciikova, who will return to the top 10 following her victory, came into Wimbledon after a testing season.

A back injury and illness meant she went winless on the tour from February until June.

"I was injured and ill and didn't have a good start to the season and now I'm Wimbledon winner. How did that happen?"

"I think nobody's going to believe I won Wimbledon. I still can't believe it. Two weeks ago (first round) I had a very tough match, 7-5 in the third set and I wasn't in good shape."

The result means seventh-seeded Paolini has lost two Grand Slam finals back-to-



Jasmine Paolini poses with the runners up trophy yesterday. (Reuters)

"I'm a little bit sad but I try to keep smiling. I have to remember today is still a good day."  
— Jasmine Paolini

played unbelievable. You play such beautiful tennis. Congrats to you and your team."

Krejciikova set the tone at the start of the match by breaking the Italian in the opening game and backing up the advantage with a hold to love.

**NERVY CONCLUSION**

Paolini, the first Italian woman to reach a Wimbledon singles final, had to save two break points in the third game but she cracked under the strain again as the composed Czech stormed into a double-break ahead for 4-1.

Krejciikova moved to three set points in the eighth game and only needed one as Paolini dumped a backhand return into the net.

The nerve-wracked Italian managed to claim just four points on the Czech's serve in the 35-minute opener. Krejciikova hit 10 winners to the Italian's five.

Paolini dashed off Centre Court for a bathroom break and returned re-energised.

She had also dropped the first set in her marathon semi-final triumph over Donna Vekic and yesterday she launched another second set fightback.

Breaks in the second and eighth games levelled the final after a set in which Krejciikova made 14 unforced errors to seven for her opponent, taking her double-fault count to a tournament-high of 33.

The Czech managed just four winners in the set as she went spectacularly off the ball.

However, momentum shifted dramatically back in her favour in the decider when Paolini double-faulted to surrender a break and fall 3-4 behind.

Krejciikova held to love for 5-3 but endured a nervy conclusion, requiring three championship points and saving two break points in the 10th game to seal the title.



Barbora Krejciikova celebrates with family and coaches after winning Wimbledon final against Italy's Jasmine Paolini. (Reuters)

back after coming off second best to Iga Swiatek at the French Open last month.

"I'm a little bit sad but I try to keep smiling. I have to remember today is still a good day," said Paolini, who had never won a grass-court

match in her career until last month.

"I remember watching Wimbledon as a kid cheering for Roger Federer, so to be here now is crazy. It's been a beautiful two weeks."

She added: "Barbora, you

"It's unreal what just happened. The best day of my tennis career and the best day of my life. I was just telling myself to be brave. It was such a difficult match, a great final, a great competition and I'm super happy to be standing here enjoying this moment."  
— Barbora Krejciikova

Czech Republic's Barbora Krejciikova poses with the trophy after winning the Wimbledon final yesterday. (Reuters)

## BARBORA KREJCIKOVA FACTBOX

**Age:** 28  
**Country:** Czech Republic  
**WTA ranking:** 32  
**Seeding:** 31  
**Grand Slam titles:** 2 (2021 French Open, 2024 Wimbledon)  
**ROAD TO FINAL**  
**First round:** Veronika Kudermetova (Russia) 7-6(4) 6-7(1) 7-5  
**Second round:** Katie Volynets (US) 7-6(6) 7-6(5)  
**Third round:** Jessica Bouzas Maneiro (Spain) 6-0 4-3 walkover  
**Round of 16:** Danielle Collins (US) 7-5 6-3  
**Quarter-finals:** Jelena Ostapenko (Latvia) 6-4 7-6(4)  
**Semi-finals:** 4-Elena Rybakina (Kazakhstan) 6-3 6-4  
**EARLY LIFE**  
Born in Brno, Krejciikova started playing tennis at the age of six.  
**CAREER TO DATE**  
\* On the ITF Circuit, Krejciikova clinched 14 singles and 19 doubles titles.  
\* In 2013, she was ranked junior world number

three while also winning the girls' doubles titles at the French Open, Wimbledon and the US Open with compatriot Katerina Siniakova.  
\* She made her WTA Tour debut in doubles at the 2014 Gastein Ladies, and her singles debut came at the Tournoi de Quebec in the same year.  
\* She was coached by late 1998 Wimbledon champion Jana Novotna from 2014 to 2017, the year Novotna died of cancer.  
\* She won her maiden WTA doubles title at 2015 Tournoi de Quebec and secured her first major doubles win at the 2018 French Open title with Siniakova. It was followed by another doubles triumph with Siniakova at 2018 Wimbledon, which helped her rise to the world number one doubles ranking that year.  
\* The following year, she won her first mix-doubles Grand Slam crown with American Rajeev Ram at the Australian Open.  
\* Aside from winning the mixed doubles for the third straight year at the Australian Open, 2021 was a highly successful year in her singles career as she won her first WTA singles title at the Internationaux de Strasbourg, a day before the

French Open started.  
\* That year, she also completed the first singles and doubles sweep at the French Open since Mary Pierce in 2000. Her win over Russian Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova in the 2021 Roland-Garros final saw her break into the top 15 WTA singles rankings for the first time.  
\* Having also won the 2021 WTA Finals and a gold medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics in women's doubles, both partnering with Siniakova, she ended the 2021 season as world number five in singles and as number two in doubles.  
\* The next year, she and Siniakova completed a career Golden Slam in doubles after securing the US Open while also achieving a career-high ranking of world number two in singles.  
\* Doubles success followed in 2023 as she won the Australian Open doubles title with Siniakova.  
\* Despite a run of six defeats in eight singles matches before heading into Wimbledon, she won the grasscourt slam by beating French Open runner-up Paolini, also 28, in the final. That triumph will also return her to the top 10 in singles.

## RECENT WIMBLEDON WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS

- 2024: Barbora Krejciikova (CZE)
- 2023: Marketa Vondrousova (CZE)
- 2022: Elena Rybakina (KAZ)
- 2021: Ashleigh Barty (AUS)
- 2020: Tournament cancelled
- 2019: Simona Halep (ROM)
- 2018: Angelique Kerber (GER)
- 2017: Garbine Muguruza (ESP)
- 2016: Serena Williams (USA)
- 2015: Serena Williams (USA)
- 2014: Petra Kvitova (CZE)



Barbora Krejciikova celebrates winning the Wimbledon final against Jasmine Paolini yesterday. (Reuters)

WIMBLEDON

# Djokovic ready for revenge in final rematch with Alcaraz

'He's going to win many slams in his career. I hope he's going to give me this one, and let's see. After that I'll cheer for him'



Reuters  
London

The Wimbledon men's singles final between defending champion Carlos Alcaraz and second seed Novak Djokovic takes place at the All England Club today. Three-times Grand Slam champion Alcaraz landed in Wimbledon as the title favourite following his French Open triumph last month but few expected Djokovic to go far after his Roland Garros run was cut short by a knee injury. However, the 37-year-old, who underwent surgery only five weeks ago, has defied the odds in his bid for a 25th Grand Slam, taking sole ownership of the all-time record he currently shares with Margaret Court. Djokovic's steady return to top form in an otherwise shaky season has left fans at the All England Club and the world over salivating at the prospect of another thriller like the one the duo dished out 12 months ago, when Alcaraz won in five sets.

"I wasn't sure until three-four days before the tournament whether I'm going to take part in it. I made an extra effort to recover as quickly as possible just because it was Wimbledon," Djokovic said. "I'm really, really happy to make the final because I wasn't thinking about, particularly in the first couple of matches, the eventual title match. "I was thinking about moving well, not injuring myself and feeling more free so to say in my movement... In the third and particularly fourth round. I felt, 'Okay, I'm actually playing close to my best and I can have a shot at the title'". Last year's defeat by Alcaraz ended Djokovic's quest for a fifth straight title that would have left him level with Roger Federer on eight Wimbledon trophies and the Serb will head to the clash today seeking revenge. However, he will have his task cut out against an opponent who has never lost a Grand Slam final and is the youngest player in the professional era to win a major on all three surfaces.

"I'm not sure if I'm going to break his heart," Djokovic said of his 21-year-old opponent. "I'm not intending to do that. I think he's so young, but he already has three Grand Slams under his belt and going for his fourth. "He's a very all-around player, complete player. Impressive what he's done at such a young age. He's going to win many slams in his career. I hope he's going to give me this one, and let's see. After that I'll cheer for him." Alcaraz has not been at his convincing best at Wimbledon this year but can still finish the tournament in elite company as a successful defence will make him only the second player in the professional era after Federer to win his first four major finals. He can also become only the sixth man since 1968 to claim the

Roland Garros and Wimbledon titles in the same year after Rod Laver, Bjorn Borg, Rafa Nadal, Federer and Djokovic. Alcaraz, however, is not taking anything for granted. "I know how it's going to feel playing against Djokovic," said Alcaraz, who is now 2-3 in their head-to-head record having lost the last two meetings - at the Cincinnati Masters and the ATP Finals last year. "I've played few times in Grand Slams, finals of Masters 1000 multiple times against him. I know what I have to do. I'm sure he knows what he has to do to beat me. "It's going to be a really interesting one."



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz takes part in a training session yesterday, on the eve of Wimbledon final at the Aorangi Practice Courts at The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club in Wimbledon, southwest London. (AFP)

**MIXED DOUBLES FINAL**  
A rain-hit tournament meant the mixed doubles final was moved today and the pair of Santiago Gonzalez and Giuliana Olmos, who became the

first Mexican duo to reach the title clash, will look to cap off a successful week with a trophy. They face the seventh-seeded team of Pole Jan Zielinski and Taiwanese Hsieh Su-wei.

CRICKET

## Jaiswal and Gill lead India to 10-wicket win over Zimbabwe

AFP  
Harare

Yashasvi Jaiswal and captain Shubman Gill thrashed Zimbabwe's bowlers to all parts of the Harare Sports Club yesterday to secure a 10-wicket in the fourth T20 international and with it claim the series. Chasing Zimbabwe's 152 for seven, India cruised him with 28 balls to spare to take a 3-1 lead in the five-match series. The left-handed Jaiswal hammered 93 not out off 53 balls and was named player of the match while Gill made 58 not out off 39 deliveries. "Chasing was something we talked about," Gill said at the post-match presentation. "We couldn't do it in the first game so it was good to get it done." Zimbabwe won the first match by 13 runs last Saturday but India have taken charge since then, dominating the next three matches. Although captain Sikandar Raza hit 46 off 28 balls, Zimbabwe were unable to capitalise fully on their first good start of the series. Wessly Madhevere (25) and Tadiwanashe Marumani (32) put on 63 for the first wicket after Zimbabwe were sent in to bat. But the openers fell in successive overs to part-time bowlers Abhishek Sharma and Shivam Dube. India again opted to field only four specialist bowlers, including new cap Tushar Deshpande, who claimed the wicket of Raza while conceding 30 runs in three overs. Raza said he had thought after his team's innings that 160 was a par score but admitted: "The way they batted, 180 would not have been enough." Jaiswal set the tone in the first over of India's innings, hitting



India's Yashasvi Jaiswal (left) celebrates after scoring a half century during the fourth T20I against Zimbabwe at Harare Sports Club in Harare yesterday. (AFP)

three boundaries off Richard Ngara. There was no let-up as India's fifty was posted inside four overs and the hundred inside 10 overs. Jaiswal hit 13 fours and two sixes, while Gill hit six fours and two sixes. The series wraps up with the fifth T20 in Harare today.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Zimbabwe 152-7 in 20 overs** (T. Marumani 32, S. Raza 46; Khaleel Ahmed 2-32) **lost to India 156-0 in 15.2 overs** (Y. Jaiswal 93 not out, S. Gill 58 not out) **by 10 wickets**. **Series:** India lead the five-match series 3-1.

FOCUS

## Atkinson can shape England's post-Anderson era, says Root

AFP  
London

Joe Root has backed Gus Atkinson to play a key role in shaping England's fast-bowling attack following Jimmy Anderson's emotional farewell at Lord's. Anderson played his final Test for England after a glittering career that featured 704 wickets in the five-day format - more than any other quick in history. England batsman Root labelled Anderson "our greatest ever bowler", but the 41-year-old's exit in the aftermath of Friday's innings and 114-run rout of the West Indies in the first Test provides opportunities for a new generation to emerge. Atkinson's remarkable Test debut against the West Indies, in which he surpassed Anderson's career-best match figures with 12 for 106, has made the transition look less daunting for Ben Stokes' side. "I think the future does look very bright in the bowling department. We've lost our greatest-ever bowler, but for Gus to come in and do that shows a lot about where we are as a team. We are moving in the right direction," Root said. England will face the West Indies in two more



Tests and then host Sri Lanka in a three-match series later in the summer. But Root is already looking ahead to the next Ashes clash with Australia, which is scheduled for late 2025 into 2026. England will be aiming for a first series win over Australia since 2015 and Root believes Atkinson could emerge as a key figure. "I think as a player (the Ashes) is the series that you're always looking forward to, they're the ones you're always building towards," Root said. "When teams have gone out there, what they need for those conditions is someone like Gus that can bowl in the late 80mphs, early 90mphs, and still move the ball around and make things happen at high pace. "It was great to see him come in and do that on such a slow wicket here." Anderson will be around to mentor Atkinson and the rest of England's pace bowlers as part of an arrangement that lasts for the rest of the summer. "All I've ever known for England is playing alongside Jimmy. I'll terribly miss playing alongside him but the fact that he'll be around for the summer will be great for the young bowlers coming through," Root said. "You can't buy that experience, can you? No fast bowler has played that amount of Test matches, taken that amount of wickets. "So for young guys coming in, someone like Gus or the likes of Dillon Pennington and Matthew Potts, to have that knowledge to bounce off, it's invaluable really."

**Wood replaces retired Anderson in England squad for second Test**  
Fast bowler Mark Wood will take James Anderson's spot in the England squad for next week's second Test against West Indies at Trent Bridge, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said yesterday. Anderson, 41, retired on Friday after finishing his 188th test, having taken 704 wickets in a career spanning 21 years - the third-highest wicket taker in the format, as England beat West Indies by an innings and 114 runs at Lord's. Wood has played 34 tests, taking 108 wickets. The 34-year-old's last Test was against India in March. The second Test begins on Thursday, with a third and final Test scheduled at Birmingham starting on July 26. **England Squad:** Ben Stokes (captain), Gus Atkinson, Shoaib Bashir, Harry Brook, Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Dan Lawrence, Dillon Pennington, Ollie Pope, Matthew Potts, Joe Root, Jamie Smith, Chris Woakes, Mark Wood.

TOUR DE FRANCE

# Pogacar pummels rivals with Pyrenees win

AFP  
Saint-Lary-Soulan, France

Tadej Pogacar extended his overall lead on the Tour de France when he won stage 14 in the Pyrenees yesterday. His arch rival Jonas Vingegaard came second at 39sec while Remco Evenepoel was third at 1min 10sec.

Ahead of another monster run in the Pyrenees today, Pogacar extended his lead to 1min 57sec over Vingegaard as Evenepoel dropped to third at 2min 22sec.

With bonus seconds for the win, his 13th Tour de France stage victory, Pogacar extended his lead by 43sec. He punched the air in triumph at the line.

"The plan was to come to the final and make the sprint hard, maybe take some seconds and a stage win. But in the end this it's much better," he said at the line.

"I'm super, super happy to get this," he said.

Pogacar's team UAE waited until the third and final climb of the day before sending Adam Yates on

an attack seven kilometres from the line on the 11km ascent to the Pla d'Adet.

"It's so noisy on the climb we had to scream at each other, I was telling him to attack," Pogacar said.

Yates admitted he had been shocked by the instructions.

"I thought maybe he could go for the win, but it didn't quite work," said Pogacar.

The English rider was waiting to help after Pogacar unleashed his own ferocious acceleration.

The Slovenian's two podium rivals had followed, but were either unwilling or unable to match the pace.

Over the final section of a climb, packed on either side by raucous fans, 2020 and 2021 champion Pogacar kept up his pace all the way to the line after dropping Yates. "I'm much better than last year, handling pressure and emotions," Pogacar said.

"I'm getting more and more comfortable. I have to enjoy this while it lasts."

Wearing a mask in the mixed zone, Evenepoel seemed relaxed

and happy too. "I tried to keep up as long as possible but he's wild," said the Belgian, who thanked his team members by name for their support.

Perhaps Pogacar heard him as the 25-year-old also named each and every one of his teammates too.

Yesterday's stage first took the peloton up the feared Col du Tourmalet with tens of thousands of fans partying all day.

Before the peloton arrived, holidaying cyclists rode up the 19km climb at an average 7.5 gradient to 2,115m altitude, many pushing their bikes or using electric assistance.

## PIDCOCK DROPS OUT

When the peloton set off from Pau, the gateway to the Pyrenees, only 158 riders of the original 176 remained.

Cross-discipline maverick Tom Pidcock was absent, the latest to pull out with suspected Covid. He is due to protect his mountain bike Olympic title in just three weeks.

The race zipped through pilgrim

site Lourdes, one of the most visited cities in France due to its grotto and fountain.

Sunday's 15th stage falls on July 14 and should provide a show for the roadside and armchair fans alike.

Warren Barguil is the last Frenchman to provide a win on the national holiday back in 2017.

The wait is unlikely to end, but Romain Bardet, in his retirement year, will likely reach beyond himself trying.

Instead the five fearsome climbs should provide a further battleground for Pogacar, Vingegaard and Evenepoel.

UAE Team Emirates' Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar wearing the overall leader's yellow jersey cycles to the finish line to win the 14th stage of the 111th edition of the Tour de France cycling race, 151.9km between Pau and Saint-Lary-Soulan Pla d'Adet, in the Pyrenees mountains in southwestern France, yesterday. (AFP)



FOOTBALL

# 'El Fideo' says final farewell as Messi's foil

'I'm not ready for my last game with the national team, but it's time'

AFP  
Miami

Argentina's golden era will forever be linked with the genius of Lionel Messi but today's Copa America final is a reminder of the key influence of winger Angel Di Maria.

The 36-year-old has made clear that the clash with Colombia, when the world champions could win their third straight major title, is his last game in the famous light blue and white stripes.

Whatever happens during the clash at Hard Rock Stadium, it is going to be an emotional occasion for Di Maria, who hasn't hidden his feelings about his farewell.

"With all the pain in my soul and feeling a lump in my throat I say goodbye to the most beautiful thing that has happened to me in my career, to wear it, sweat it and feel it with all my pride," Di Maria said in November when announcing his planned retirement.

Like Messi, Di Maria played through all the years of frustration for Argentina that ended with their 2021 Copa America triumph in Brazil and was then obliterated by the joy of the World Cup title in Qatar a year later.

Like the eight-times Ballon d'Or winner, Di Maria fought for glory in South America while enjoying a successful career in European football, particularly in Spain where he was a league title and Champions League winner with Real Madrid. Both players hail from the football hotbed of



Argentina's forward Lionel Messi (right) and forward Angel Di Maria take part in a training session ahead of the CONMEBOL 2024 Copa America final against Colombia in Miami. (AFP)

Rosario and their success together began with the 2008 Olympic Games where Di Maria scored the winner in the gold medal game against Nigeria. That victory was expected to be the first of many for a talented generation of Argentine player but instead it became merely referred to, for 13 years, as the only title they had managed.

When Argentina finally claimed silverware, in the 2021 Copa at the Maracana in Rio, the headlines around the world proclaimed the end of Messi's long wait for a tro-

phy with his country. As in Beijing, it was Di Maria who got the decisive goal, cutting in from the right and lobbing Brazil keeper Ederson in the 22nd minute. But operating in Messi's shadow, is exactly what Di Maria has been thriving on for the Albiceleste.

When Messi has played on the left-side of the attack, Di Maria has operated on the right. When Messi has switched flanks, so has Di Maria, who has also operated centrally from midfield.

Whatever line-up Argentina

and Messi have adopted, Di Maria has been the consistent provider of assists, with his languid dribbling style, precise crosses and clever cut-backs, a constant source of creativity.

He also has 31 goals in his 144 appearances for his country - one of the most crucial coming in the 2022 World Cup final against France, four years after one of his best - a superb left-foot strike against the same opponents in the round-of-16 defeat in Russia.

Messi has said that he wants to win this Copa for Di Maria, nicknamed El Fideo, the noodle, due to his skinny frame.

Di Maria was asked about Messi's words and responded with a tearful interview where he conceded he was finding it hard to say goodbye.

"I'm not ready for my last game with the national team, but now it's time. A thousand things can happen, but I think that whatever happens on the 14th (in the final), I can leave through the big door. I've done everything to be able to leave through that door," he said.

"I'll take a lot of trophies with me, but the people, teammates and friends I'll take with me is something you can't buy with anything," he added.

But his coach Lionel Scaloni has tried to leave the door open, hoping that perhaps another emotional night for the team might prompt a rethink. "I'm in favour of letting Di Maria play...then we'll see if he convince him to stay or not. In the meantime, he has to enjoy the moment. We'll see if we can convince him."

GOLF

# Aberg holds 2-stroke lead at Scottish Open

Reuters  
North Berwick, United Kingdom

Sweden's Ludvig Aberg briefly surrendered the lead before posting 5-under-par 65 to finish the third round of the Scottish Open with a two-shot lead yesterday at North Berwick, Scotland.

Aberg is at 17-under, with Robert MacIntyre, in his home country, in second place at 15-under after carding a 7-under 63 yesterday.

Australia's Adam Scott shot 64 and is at 14-under in third place. Golfers had to contend with rainy conditions at The Renaissance Club after what was described as ideal conditions a day earlier.

Sahith Theegala (66), Collin Morikawa (66), France's Antoine Rozner (68) and South Korea's Sungjae Im (67) are tied for fourth at 13-under. Rozner began the day a shot off the lead.

Defending champion Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland shot 67 to move to 12-under. He's in his first tournament since last month's late-round struggles on the final day of

the US Open. McIlroy dropped a stroke on the final hole when he took a bogey, chipping from one side of the green and off the surface to the other side before recovering to prevent further damage.

Aberg posted 3-under across the first nine to head to the backside with a share of the lead with MacIntyre. Aberg shook off consecutive bogeys to record a birdie on No 13 and get back on track.

Aberg's three-putt bogey on the par-3 12th created a temporary two-shot advantage for MacIntyre.

Following a front-nine 30 that included an eagle on the par-4 fifth hole, MacIntyre took the lead briefly after birdies on Nos 10 and 11.

He tried to scramble on No 18, hitting an approach shot from the rough. But he ended up needing three putts from nearly 90 feet and settled for a bogey.

MacIntyre, who was this tournament's 2023 runner-up, won the Canadian Open on June 2 for his first PGA Tour title.

The Scottish Open is the first of two tournaments co-sanctioned by the PGA Tour and European Tour.

## Lahiri holds 4-stroke lead at LIV

India's Anirban Lahiri carded a 5-under-par 66 yesterday to seize a four-stroke lead after the second round at the LIV Golf Andalucia event in Sotogrande, Spain. Lahiri, who resides at 7-under 135, collected six birdies against one bogey at Real Club Valderrama. "I mean, I made a lot of putts. Holed a chip. You had to do all of that to shoot five (under). So I'm really happy that I was in a good zone, pretty calm," Lahiri said.

"Had a few lipouts, a few missed chances early. Just kind of stayed in the round. Stayed in the shot. Stayed in the present. Really happy obviously, yeah."

Thanks to Lahiri's performance, Crushers GC has a four-stroke lead over Fireball GC and a five-stroke advantage versus Stinger GC in the team competition. New Zealand's Danny Lee shot a 72 on Saturday to sit in second place overall, one shot ahead of the trio of Germany's Martin Kaymer (68), England's Tyrrell Hatton (68) and Spain's Eugenio Chacarra (72).

First-round leader Dean Burmester followed up his 66 on Friday with a 75 yesterday to reside in a five-way tie for sixth place. He is tied with Bryson DeChambeau (67), England's Lee Westwood (70) and Richard Bland (70) as well as South African Louis Oosthuizen (71).

Spaniard Jon Rahm, who is seeking his first LIV individual title, shot a 69 to rest at even par. "I feel like I'm falling victim like many others of just being Valderrama, right?" Rahm said.

## REBORN RODRIGUEZ HOLDS KEY TO COLOMBIA'S COPA FINAL HOPES

He was the golden boy of the 2014 World Cup but after a decade of disappointment at club level and at the age of 33, **James Rodriguez** is back and starring again on the international stage.

The Colombian 'number ten' has been fundamental to his team's run to the final of the Copa America where 'Los Cafeteros' will face world champions Argentina for the title.

Ten years ago in Brazil, Rodriguez scored six goals in Colombia's run to the quarter-finals of the World Cup including a stunning volley on the turn against Uruguay which won FIFA's Puskas Award for goal of the year.

Such was Rodriguez's impact on the tournament that when Lionel Messi was handed the Golden Ball for the World Cup's best player, his fellow Argentine great Diego Mara-

dona said that the prize should have gone to Rodriguez. The midfielder's displays earned him a lucrative move to Spanish giants Real Madrid for a fee reported to be around 80m euros, at the time the fourth most expensive transfer in the world.

He was handed Real's famous number ten shirt and presented as the club's next great star but he was unable to live up to those high expectations and his club career, which showed such promise with Porto and Monaco, has never truly recovered.

He was loaned to Bayern Munich and by 2020 he had moved to English club Everton on a free transfer before finding himself at Qatari club Al Rayyan with Greece's Olympiacos and then last year Brazil's Sao Paulo, as a promising career lost its way.



This season in Brazil, Rodriguez has made just eight appearances for the club but none of that club form appeared to worry Colombia coach Nestor Lorenzo. The Argentine had seen enough from Rodriguez in the national team shirt to give him a central role at the Copa and he has been rewarded by performances that have defied his decline at club level. "Since I took over the national team, I followed him and whenever

he played (for his clubs) he did interesting things but we needed him to play," said Lorenzo.

Rodriguez has rewarded Lorenzo with a tournament record six assists and a goal and performances that have brought the best out of the team's attacking talents.

"The chance for a great player to play and get minutes gives him the opportunity to show what he can do. If he plays less, he is going to have less chance," added Lorenzo. What is key is that Rodriguez is allowed with Colombia to play in his preferred role, floating behind the strikers, dictating play, opening up the defence with clever passing constantly searching for an opening.

He is a classic 'number ten', a role that has gone out of fashion in many clubs and leagues, but one which Lorenzo appears to under-

stand is essential to getting the best out of Rodriguez. Certainly his team-mates are appreciative of the 'second wind' in his career. Liverpool winger Luis Diaz, whose electric pace poses one of the biggest threats to Argentina on Sunday, talks of his team-mate in the language of a fan.

"He has always been my idol along with (Radamel) Falcao and (Juan Guillermo) Cuadrado, who I used to watch on television when I was a kid. I keep telling James: 'You're a superstar! I admire you a lot and you deserve it,'" the winger told DirectTV. Diaz also made sure the fans were well aware of his appreciation when Rodriguez scored from the penalty spot in the 5-0 quarter-final crushing of Panama. Diaz ran over to his team-mate and

gestured the placing of a crown on his head. "He deserves it, this is his Copa, no doubt... We know what he has been through, what he has suffered. Football is for moments like this and it provided him a rematch," he said.

While Argentina are looking for their third straight major title at the Hard Rock Stadium and a record setting 16th Copa America, for Colombia and Rodriguez this is a chance for just their second title after their 2001 Copa. Rodriguez hasn't elaborated on the contrast between his club and country form but perhaps the desire to provide his football-mad country with a rare piece of silverware is explanation enough. "When I play for Colombia I try to help my team-mates. Everyone knows that I give everything for this shirt," he said.

## FOCUS

# Southgate dares to dream as England eye end to long wait for Euros glory

'I'm not a believer in fairy tales but I am a believer in dream'

AFP  
Berlin

England manager Gareth Southgate said he does not believe that fate is guiding the Three Lions to Euro 2024 glory, but is dreaming of ending a 58-year wait to win a major tournament in today's final against Spain.

Three years on from losing the Euro 2020 final on home soil to Italy, Southgate's men have another opportunity to become European champions for the first time in Berlin.

England have struggled on their road to the final, needing a series of late goals, fightbacks and a penalty shoot-out against Switzerland in the quarter-finals.

"I'm not a believer in fairy tales but I am a believer in dreams," Southgate said at his pre-match press conference yesterday.

"We've had big dreams, we've felt the need and the importance of that but then you have to make those things happen.

"Fate, the run that we've had, the late goals, the penalties, that doesn't equate to it being our moment, we have to make it happen tomorrow and perform at the level that we need to perform."

Southgate has transformed England from perennial underachievers into serial contenders at major tournaments.

In his four World Cups or Euros, England have reached one quarter-final, one semi-final and now two finals, including their first ever on foreign soil.

However, Southgate conceded they needed to go one step further to earn worldwide respect for a slow and steady improvement.

"I've travelled to World Cups, European Championships watching as an observer and watched highlights before the matches that were on the big screens and we weren't in any of them be-



England's head coach Gareth Southgate leads a training session in Blankenhain yesterday, on the eve of their UEFA Euro 2024 final against Spain. (AFP)

cause you only show the finals and you only show the big games," he added.

"So we needed to change that. We had high expectations but they didn't match where we were performance wise.

"Now the high expectations are still there but we have had consistent performances over certainly three of the last four tournaments.

"A lot of records have been broken but we know in the end we have to do this one, we have to get this trophy to really feel the

respect for the rest of the football world."

Southgate's contract expires at the end of the year with questions over his future no matter the outcome of Sunday's match.

The 53-year-old said the highs and lows of his career, particularly during the last eight years in charge of his country, had prepared him to approach the final with no fear. "To represent my country as a player and then to be able to lead my country for eight years as a manager is the biggest

privilege I could possibly have," said Southgate.

"Tomorrow I don't have any fear of what might happen because I've been through everything. I want the players to feel that fearlessness. I want them to be able to be the best version of themselves.

"Whatever happens we're so strong as a group and we support each other. I said earlier in the tournament, 'if we're not afraid to lose it gives us a better chance of winning' and that's very important for us."

## Kane out to crown England legacy with Euros glory

Harry Kane said leading England to win Euro 2024 today would be the "most incredible feeling" a footballer can have as he aims to end his own long wait to win a trophy.

The England captain has scored 406 goals for his clubs and country in a decorated career without winning any collective silverware. All that could change in Berlin today should Kane guide England to a first major tournament win in 58 years to become European champions for the first time.

"It's no secret that I haven't won a team trophy. Every year that goes by, you're more motivated and you're more determined to change that," Kane said at a pre-match press conference yesterday.

"Tomorrow night I have the opportunity to win one of the biggest trophies you could ever win and to make history with my nation.

"I'd swap everything in my career to have a special night and a win tomorrow evening."

Kane was on the losing side three years ago as England missed out on the Euros to Italy on penalties at Wembley. Now into their first ever final on foreign soil, the Bayern Munich striker said England would be fuelled by the pain of defeat at Euro 2020.

"It would be, obviously, the most incredible feeling as a professional footballer you can get and I'm sure also for the fans, to have that moment in history and to be able to celebrate, that would be something very special," added Kane.

"We've been here before and it was a tough finish in the last Euro. So there's that extra hunger and fire in the belly to make sure this one goes our way."



The two finalists have arrived in Berlin in contrasting fashion.

Spain have looked a class apart in Germany, eliminating the hosts and France, as well as beating Italy and Croatia to become the first side to win all of their first six games at a Euros.

England, on the other hand, have had to battle back in all three of the knockout rounds against Slovakia, Switzerland and the Netherlands without ever delivering on the full potential of a richly-talented squad.

Kane, though, said England's resilience to win, thanks to late goals and a penalty shoot-out against the Swiss in the quarter-finals, had fostered greater belief their time has come.

"You have to have a belief you can win it otherwise there's no point in being in the tournament, but I think that belief has grown as we've gone through the tournament," he added.

"What we've been through with the late goals and the penalty shoot-out and all that stuff builds resilience and builds belief."

(AFP)

## SPOTLIGHT

## Birthday boy Yamal stakes claim as player of the Euros

Reuters  
Berlin

The most exciting player on the most exciting team at Euro 2024 - Spain's Lamine Yamal - turns 17 yesterday, but the birthday celebrations will have to wait while he prepares for today's European Championship final against England in Berlin.

"I've told my mum that if we win I don't want any presents, I just want to celebrate in Madrid with my mates," Lamine, as he prefers to be called, said in an interview with Spain's *Marca* outlet yesterday.

"That would be crazy, to celebrate with people on the streets all the way from the airport. Everyone would go crazy! We would arrive with incredible euphoria."

Yamal has been breaking records since making his professional debut for Barcelona less than 15 months ago, the last one becoming the youngest goalscorer in Euros history with a stunning curled long-range shot against France that helped his side reach the final.

The youngest to play, start and score for his club and his nation are other records he has broken since. Against England at Berlin's Olympiastadion he may have the chance to reach even higher ground if he helps his side win a record fourth European Championship title.

It would strengthen his case as the most productive young player in Europe and surely put him in the frame to be named player of the tournament.

Lamine fever has set in, with his father making headlines last week by publishing on social media a December 2007 photo of his baby son in the arms of former Barcelona forward Lionel Messi.

Messi, 20 at the time and starting a career which would take him on to win the Ballon D'Or eight times, was posing for a charity calendar, and just happened to be cradling in his arms a baby who 17 years later would take the European Championships by storm.

His father told Spanish TV La Sexta it was "just a life coincidence".

The reporter suggested maybe Messi's blessing had somehow given Yamal his remarkable talent, to which his mother fired back: "What if it was the other way around?"

Yamal, born in Spain to a father from Morocco and a mother from Equatorial Guinea, is the latest wonderkid to make headlines in a country that has become one of European soccer's most fertile production grounds for world-class players.



Spain's forward Lamine Yamal during a training session in Donaueschingen yesterday. (AFP)

Following in the footsteps of Barca academy teenage sensations Pedri, Gavi and Ansu Fati, Yamal has established himself as an important part of Barca's forward line.

He has also been highly influential for Spain in Germany as the player with most assists (3), key passes (16) and clear chances created (6).

He has been a nightmare for opponents, running up and down the right channel and showing great technique and vision to deliver key passes, making him one of Spain's most dangerous weapons.

He was close to scoring several times in Spain's first five games in Germany, but it wasn't until their sixth - the semi-final against France, that he finally made his mark with a candidate for goal of the tournament.

"We have seen genius from a genius," Spain coach Luis de la Fuente said.

"We are very lucky that he is Spanish and that we are going to enjoy him for many years to come."

## BOTTOMLINE

## De la Fuente calls on Spain players to make history in final

AFP  
Berlin

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente called on a "brilliant" generation of players to make history for their country in the Euro 2024 final against England yesterday.

La Roja are aiming to win a record fourth European Championship 12 years after they last lifted the trophy.

With Rodri Hernandez pulling the strings in midfield and explosive young wingers Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams in attack, Spain have been the tournament's great entertainers on the road to Berlin.

"It's a brilliant generation, many of them have come through successful youth levels and that usually bodes well for success," De la Fuente told reporters yesterday.

"We want to start to make history - and we have made history already in the run to (the final)... I trust in a great future, there's both present and future."

Spain won the 2008 and 2012 Euros and the 2010 World Cup with many star players from Barcelona and Real Madrid, including Andres Iniesta, Xavi Hernandez, Sergio Ramos and David Villa. The current side has fewer stars but consider that one of their strong points, with the squad on an even footing and "unity" has been a key word among Spain players at the tournament. Despite Spain shining en route to the final while England have scraped through, De la Fuente said the clash at the Olympiastadion will be "extremely balanced".

"Whichever team manages to impose their strengths, whoever makes less errors (will win)" said the coach. "But you can win a one-off game, even playing far



Spain's head coach Luis de la Fuente speaks with his staff during a training session at the team's base camp in Donaueschingen, yesterday, on the eve of their Euro 2024 final against England. (AFP)

worse (than your opponent). We need to have maximum concentration, not make any mistakes and take advantage of the chances we have - put them away."

The coach thanked injured duo Pedri and Ayoze Perez, who will not be available to face England, and said Barcelona midfielder Gavi will travel to join the team for the final.

The 19-year-old missed most of the season with a knee injury but was an important player for Spain before sustaining it in November.

De la Fuente said it was no challenge to keep Barcelona's Yamal, who turned 17 on Saturday, and Athletic Bilbao's Williams, 22, calm ahead of the biggest game of their careers.

"It's not at all hard, they have such joy, and incredible maturity for such young players, they understand the sport very well and they are well accompanied by

more experienced players," explained the coach. "We're a team, it's not about hailing individuals, and this makes us stronger."

At the other end of the age spectrum is 38-year-old Sevilla defender Jesus Navas, who started the semi-final win over France in direct confrontation with Kylian Mbappe.

Navas won the 2010 World Cup, 2012 Euros and the 2023 Nations League with Spain and said he would love to lift another trophy with his country.

"To still be enjoying myself with my national team at 38 is incredible," said the right-back.

"In (Spain's golden years) we were such a close-knit group, and you could feel it. Now it's the same, there's an incredible group. I'm delighted by everything that's happening to us.

"We know the excitement and hope that we all have and I hope we can win it."