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GULF TIMES

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TENNIS

Alcaraz sets sights on year-end number one spot

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FOOTBALL

Al Gharafa ready for tough battle against Shabab Al Ahli

Qatar club's injured star forward Yacine Brahimi improving gradually and likely to play against the UAE side

Agencies
Al Khor

Qatar's Al Gharafa are hoping that their star forward Yacine Brahimi is fit to play when they take on United Arab Emirates' Shabab Al Ahli in the AFC Champions League Elite 2024-25 Preliminary Stage 2 tie at the Al Bayt Stadium today.

The Al Gharafa club announced that fans desirous of attending the match will be given free tickets at Gate No 9 of Al Bayt Stadium.

Shabab Al Ahli booked their spot after coming from behind to overwhelm Iran's Sepahan 4-1 in their Preliminary Stage 1 encounter and will have a spring in their step for the showdown against Al Gharafa. The sides crossed paths twice in the AFC Champions League, having settled for a 1-1 stalemate in 2015 with Shabab Al Ahli walking away with a huge 8-2 win in the 2019 edition.

Al Gharafa's coach Pedro Martins while speaking at the pre-match conference said: "Shabab Al Ahli are a strong team that has players who are playing together for many years. We have studied them well and expecting a difficult match. They proved themselves very strong against Iran's Sepahan in their previous match.

"The timing is not the best as we will play this important game just three days after our match against Al Khor, but I have confidence in my players and we will fight to secure our berth. Yacine Brahimi is



Al Gharafa's coach Pedro Martins and Shabab Al Ahli's head coach Paulo Sousa (below) address the media in Doha yesterday, on the eve of their AFC Champions League Elite 2024-25 Preliminary Stage 2 tie.



improving gradually and we will see if he is ready to play."

Al Gharafa player Ferjani Sassi, exuded confidence saying: "We are 100 percent ready. All the players are excited and have great desire to achieve the victory in what will be

a difficult match as Shabab Al Ahli are coming back to action after an impressive win. "Our team's atmosphere is good and the presence of experienced players will give us strength. We hope to see our fans in good numbers to support us."

Shabab Al Ahli's head coach Paulo Sousa will be banking on the same formula that saw the UAE Pro League club triumph in Isfahan last Tuesday, with the new combination of Sardar Azmoun and Federico Cartabia expected to play more prominent roles after coming off the bench to spark the win.

Serbian Bogdan Planic and Brazilian Breno Cascardo will again be tasked with central defensive duties, while Sousa might be tempted to start Argentinian midfielder Gaston Alvarez, who made a cameo appearance against Sepahan.

Coach Sousa said: "It will be a different match from our last fixture. Al Gharafa have many prominent players but our goal is to win and reach the group stage."

On his part, Shabab Al Ahli defender Eid Khamis said: "It is going to be an exciting match as both teams will fight hard to advance. We are looking forward to continuing our winning momentum."

Al Gharafa will be equally driven to book their spot in the group stage, having opened their Ooredoo Stars League 2024-25 season with a 0-0 draw against Al Khor over the weekend.

Al Gharafa finished third in the 2023-24 Qatar Stars League and have boosted their roster with several notable acquisitions, including talismanic forward Yohan Boli from Qatar SC and well travelled Spanish veteran Joselu, who scored two late and decisive goals against Bayern Munich to seal Real Madrid's place in the 2023/24 UEFA Champions League final.

Thrilling ACL Elite League stage showdowns to be revealed on Friday

Kuala Lumpur: The Asian club game will mark another pivotal milestone when the cast for the groundbreaking AFC Champions League Elite (ACL Elite) 2024/25 season assembles for the official League Stage draw ceremony on Friday. To be held at the InterContinental Kuala Lumpur, the event will reveal highly anticipated battles between Asia's best 24 clubs for the maiden edition of the revamped men's Continental club competition. A pivotal change in the ACL Elite, the League Stage format will be utilised for the first time in an AFC club competition and features two leagues of 12 teams across the West and East regions.

Scheduled to be played between September 16, 2024 and February 19, 2025, each team will face eight different opponents within its region in the form of four home and four away matches.

The line-up - comprising 22 teams that qualified directly and two Preliminary Stage winners.

The top eight finishers of each league progress to the Round of 16, scheduled for March 2025, which will be followed by a unique centralised Finals that sees all matches from the Quarter-finals onwards being contested in Saudi Arabia between April 25 and May 4, 2025.



AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 technical report available now

Kuala Lumpur: The AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 technical report is now available on the AFC.com, offering a comprehensive analysis of the grandest-ever edition of the Continental showpiece that was held in Qatar from 12 January-10 February, 2024. The publication provides a detailed account of the 18th edition of Asia's crown jewel that witnessed a stunning 132 goals scored over 51 matches as Qatar successfully defended their title with a 3-1 win over Jordan at the iconic Lusail Stadium where a record 86,492 capacity crowd created a deafening atmosphere worthy of any final.

In this publication, the AFC Technical Study Group (TSG) closely examines all the action on the field, exploring key technical and tactical aspects, ranging from an in-depth analysis of the goals scored to a comprehensive evaluation of each team's journey through the competition, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses.

The report revisits the impact of technological advancements in the competition, with AFC becoming the first Confederation to introduce the Semi-Automated Offside Technology system at the Continental Men's national team level. At the same time, the 2023 edition of the

AFC Asian Cup saw the full implementation of the Video Assistant Referee system for the first time following its successful introduction in the quarter-finals in UAE 2019. It also provides crucial information on the groundbreaking collaboration between the AFC and FIFA where performance analysts from the world governing body provided information and data via the FIFA Training Centre platform to the participating teams and the AFC's specialist group of Technical Observers.

Additionally, the report includes an exclusive interview with Qatar Head Coach Tintin Marquez who retraces Al Annabi's historic path to glory and shares the unique strategies and philosophy that guided his team to victory.

In another exciting segment, the technical observers present an All-Star Squad of 26 players from a list of 70 who stood out with their captivating performances.

Packed with enticing statistics and data that capture the essence of the Continent's premier men's football competition, the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 Technical Report, available now, is a must-read for not just coaches and technical staff but for the millions of passionate fans of Asian football.



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technical report

the-afc.com

France bids reluctant farewell to dazzling Paris Olympics

France bid a reluctant farewell yesterday to an "enchanted" fortnight of Olympic sport as athletes headed home from Paris praising a dazzling edition of the Games that has breathed new life into the biggest show on earth.

Hollywood star Tom Cruise delivered stardust at the closing ceremony on Sunday evening - and a link with the next Games in Los Angeles - by abseiling into the national stadium.

The *Mission Impossible* star descended on a wire in front of 71,500 spectators, grabbed the Olympic flag and jumped onto a motorbike, to the delight of thousands of dancing athletes and awe-struck fans. The final act of the Paris Olympics brought relief that an event foreshadowed by worries about terror attacks, strikes or protests had passed off with barely a hitch. But there was also sadness that two weeks of high-spirited celebration had come to an end. "Keep the flame alive," urged the front-page headline of France's biggest sports newspaper, *L'Equipe*, which featured new national swimming hero Leon Marchand and urged French people to maintain the spirit "of this enchanted fortnight".

At the Athletes' Village in northern Paris, bleary-eyed athletes were packing their bags after a late night, with the French capital's two main airports braced for a huge influx of travellers and sports equipment. Magda Skarbonkiewicz, a Team USA fencer, said she would return home filled with memories of competing inside the Grand Palais, one of the historic venues used around the French capital. "It's such an iconic venue and just nothing like I've ever seen before," she told AFP.

Many of the widely praised temporary sports stadiums nestled among Paris's landmarks will be used for the Paralympics, which begin on August 28, with many tickets still available. - 'Seine-sational' - During Sunday night's closing Olympics ceremony, which stressed the event's core message of peace in a troubled world, International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach had praised the Paris Games for being "sport at its best".



Los Angeles' Mayor Karen Bass and US gymnast Simone Biles holding the Olympic flag during the closing ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games at the Stade de France, in Saint-Denis, in the outskirts of Paris. (AFP)

"These were sensational Olympic Games from start to finish," Bach said. "Or dare I say: Seine-sational Games," the IOC chief quipped in a pun about the river flowing through Paris which was a sometimes fickle star of the event.

Observers had seen Paris 2024 as essential for the Olympics brand as a whole, coming after a Covid-affected edition in Tokyo and a corruption-tainted version in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. Much of the media commentary on Monday focused on the uplifting impact of the Games on the generally morose national mood in France. Paris 2024 organising chief Tony Estanguet told

the cheering closing ceremony crowd that the Games had transformed "a nation of implacable complainers" into "unbridled supporters who don't want to stop singing".

Just weeks before the Olympics, snap elections called by President Emmanuel Macron plunged the country into a political crisis with a hung parliament and a historic number of seats for the far-right National Rally party. Macron, who is yet to appoint a prime minister, said yesterday at a reception at the Elysee Palace that the Olympics had shown the world "the true face of France". "We don't want life to get back to normal," he said. *Le Monde* newspaper said the Games had "offered the capital and the entire country more than two weeks of fervour and happiness that were so unexpected and appreciated given that they came after a political period dominated by the sad passions of decline and xenophobia."

"For 17 days the stereotype of the indifferent, grumpy Frenchman went missing," wrote sports writer Owen Slot in *The Times* newspaper, adding that Paris had "made the Olympic Games look more beautiful than ever before."

The closing spectacle marked the beginning of the four-year countdown to the LA Games, and American gymnastics icon Simone Biles joined Los Angeles mayor Karen Bass as the Olympic flag was formally handed over. The ceremony followed 17 days of drama-filled sporting action lit up by Biles, American sprinter Noah Lyles, Pakistan's javelin king Arshad Nadeem and casual Turkish shooter Yusuf Dikec, who has become an Internet sensation. They also featured a damaging gender row about two female boxers, Imane Khelif of Algeria and Taiwan's Lin Yu-ting, who both went on to win gold. The last day of sporting action saw the United States pip China for top spot in the battle for medals after the US women's basketball team squeezed past France 67-66 to clinch the last gold of the Games. The USA finished on top of the overall medal table with a total of 126 medals, with China in second place on 91.

SPOTLIGHT

Thorpe took his own life, reveals family

AFP
London

Graham Thorpe's wife Amanda has revealed the former England cricketer took his own life after battling depression and anxiety for several years, with police confirming yesterday he had died following an incident on a railway line near his home.

Aged just 55, Thorpe's death earlier this month plunged the cricket world into mourning for the popular star.

He enjoyed an impressive England career as an elegant batsman from 1993-2005, before spending 12 years in various coaching roles. But Thorpe was hospitalised in May 2022 and declared "seriously ill".

Amanda Thorpe has now disclosed, in an interview with *The Times*, that the former Surrey batsman attempted suicide two years ago before taking his own life.

"Despite having a wife and two daughters whom he loved and who loved him, he did not get better. He was so unwell in recent times and he really did believe that we would be better off without him and we are devastated that he acted on that and took his own life," Amanda Thorpe told *The Times*.

"For the past couple of years, Graham had been suffering from major depression and anxiety. This led him to make a serious attempt on his life in May 2022, which resulted in a prolonged stay in an intensive care unit."

An inquest into Thorpe's death is due to open at Surrey Coroner's

Court in Woking, southwest of London, yesterday, with the coroner having received a referral from the British Transport Police.

The force said: "Officers were called to Esher railway station at 8.26am (0726 GMT) on 4 August to reports of a casualty on the tracks.

"Paramedics also attended, however sadly a person was pronounced dead at the scene. The incident is not being treated as suspicious."

Surrey Coroner's Office

A spokesperson for Surrey Coroner's Office said: "We can confirm that the Coroner has received a referral for a Mr Graham Thorpe from the British Transport Police.

"A post mortem examination has been undertaken and Mr Thorpe's body released to his family."

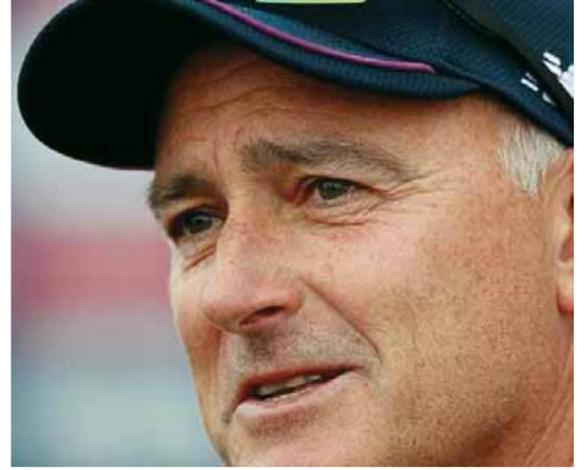
The left-hander featured in 100 Test matches and 82 one-day internationals for England, scoring over 9,000 runs for his country, including 16 Test hundreds.

But he was unable to overcome his mental health battle despite the support of his family and doctors.

"Despite glimpses of hope and of the old Graham, he continued to suffer from depression and anxiety, which at times got very severe," Amanda Thorpe said.

"We supported him as a family and he tried many, many treatments but unfortunately none of them really seemed to work.

"Graham was renowned as someone who was very mentally strong on the field and he was in good physical health. But mental illness is a real disease and can affect anyone."



CRICKET

Afghanistan T20 league opens with star players

Kabul Cricket Stadium hosts first match in front of a big crowd

AFP
Kabul

Afghanistan's leading T20 domestic cricket league opened yesterday with multiple star national players set to participate for the first time since the Taliban return to power, the country's cricket board said.

Kabul Cricket Stadium hosted the first match between the defending champions Speenghar Tigers and Band-e-Amir Dragons in front of an energetic crowd of fans.

Afghanistan T20 captain and ace spinner Rashid Khan, who was expected to spearhead the Speenghar Tigers team, was not yet available to play.

He was among several top players of the national T20 cricket team set to appear later due to commitments in international leagues, such as in the UK and Canada, a senior Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"They will be joining the tournament soon," he added.

Afghanistan's Taliban authorities deployed extra security to the venue of this year's edition of the Shpageeza Cricket League tournament.

The previous season of the league held in 2022 - the first after the Taliban return to power the year before - was attacked with



Ibrahim Zadran of Mis Ainak Knights in action against Amo Sharks during the second game of the Shpageeza Cricket League in Kabul, Afghanistan, yesterday. (@ACBofficials)

a bomb blast during a match that killed at least two spectators and wounded four others.

ACB chairman Mirwais Ashraf called the league "very important" at the opening ceremony.

"This is a big opportunity for the youth to play with their national heroes and stars, they will learn a lot from them and will

become experienced because our star players will come to play in the tournament," he said.

The league was previously organised in franchise format, however, this season, the ACB will hold the tournament itself, featuring five zonal teams competing against each other from August 12-25.

Cricket fever runs deep in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's national cricket team's spectacular strides on the international stage have provided rare moments of widespread celebration in a country ravaged by four decades of war and beleaguered by economic and humanitarian crises.

FIRST TEST

Athanaze heroics guide hosts West Indies to South Africa draw



Kagiso Rabada (third left) of South Africa and Jason Holder of West Indies shaking hands at the end of the 5th and final day of the 1st Test at Queens Park Oval, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, on Sunday. (AFP)

AFP
Port of Spain

Alick Athanaze missed out on a maiden Test century but played the key role in ensuring the safety of a draw for the West Indies against South Africa on the final day of the rain-affected first Test of a two-match series at Queen's Park Oval yesterday.

Set the unlikely victory target of 298 after the Proteas declared their second innings at 173 for three just before lunch, Athanaze's determined 92 and a fifth-wicket partnership of 65 with Jason Holder (31 not out) guided the hosts from the discomfort of 127 for four just after tea to 201 for five at the end of play.

As in the first innings, Keshav Maharaj presented the greatest threat to the hosts, the left-arm orthodox spinner claiming four for 88 to finish with match figures of eight for 164.

Coming to the crease with the West Indies in trouble at 18 for two just after lunch due to early strikes by Maharaj and Kagiso Rabada, Athanaze displayed admirable restraint in an innings spanning over three hours during which he faced 116 balls and stroked nine fours.

However that discipline wavered with the end of play in sight as the 25-year-old left-hander from Dominica, clearly keen to get to the landmark, top-edged a sweep off Maharaj to give Ryan Rickelton a comfortable catch at backward square-leg.

"It was just about dragging the length back and trying to exploit the rough outside his off-stump," said player of the match Maharaj in explaining his plan to claim Athanaze's wicket.

"Full credit must go to him though for the way he played. I just tried to stick to my plans and utilise different angles from the crease."

Earlier, Tristan Stubbs' aggressive 68 off 50 balls (six fours, two sixes) led the Proteas' pursuit of quick runs on a bright, sweltering morning.

His maiden Test half-century was supported by openers Tony de Zorzi (45) and Aiden Markram (38) in scoring at almost a run-a-ball before captain Temba Bavuma declared when Stubbs was bowled by veteran seamer Kemar Roach.

"We expected the wicket to break up a little more than it did," Bavuma said.

"In the end we just didn't have enough time, plus the elements got in the way of what could have been a really good competitive game of cricket."

West Indies captain Kraigg Brathwaite, who fell in the first

over of the innings, slicing an ambitious lofted drive to cover off Maharaj, was not thinking about a draw when he walked out to bat with opening partner Mikyle Louie.

"We believed we could have gotten the runs," he stated bluntly. "We knew it wasn't going to be easy, but my message to the boys was to back themselves and fully commit to their plans at the crease."

Given the significant interruptions by rain - more than two days' playing time was lost - there is already concern the second and final Test, scheduled for the Guyana National Stadium from Thursday, will also suffer a similar fate.

It again raises questions about the wisdom of scheduling international cricket - especially Test matches - in the southern Caribbean at the heart of the rainy season.

BRIEF SCORES

South Africa 357 all out (Temba Bavuma 86, Tony de Zorzi 78, Wiaan Mulder 41 not out; Jomel Warrican 4-69, Jayden Seales 3-67, Kemar Roach 2-53) **and 173-3 declared** (Tristan Stubbs 68, Tony de Zorzi 45, Aiden Markram 38; Jomel Warrican 2-57) **vs West Indies 233** (Keacy Carty 42, Jason Holder 36, Jomel Warrican 35 not out; Keshav Maharaj 4-76, Kagiso Rabada 3-56) **and 201-5** (Alick Athanaze 92, Keacy Carty 31, Jason Holder 31 not out; Keshav Maharaj 4-88) **Result:** Match drawn **Toss:** South Africa



Alick Athanaze of West Indies after being dismissed by Keshav Maharaj of South Africa during the 5th and final day of the 1st Test at Queens Park Oval, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. (AFP)

Bangladesh name five pacers for Pakistan Test series

DHAKA: Bangladesh have named five pacers in their squad for the upcoming two-Test series in Pakistan, though Taskin Ahmed will only be available for the second match of the tour, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) said.

Ahmed, who last played a Test in June 2023, focused on white-ball cricket ahead of this year's Twenty20 World Cup while also dealing with a shoulder injury. He will play for Bangladesh A, who are also touring in Pakistan, before returning to the first team. Wicketkeeper-batter Mushfiqur Rahim is set to add to his 88 Test caps after returning to the 16-man squad in place of 22-year-old Shahadat Hossain, who debuted last year.

Bangladesh will travel to Pakistan ahead of schedule today to hold practice sessions in Lahore. The first Test will begin in Rawalpindi on Aug. 21.

BANGLADESH SQUAD

Najmul Hossain Shanto (Captain), Mahmudul Hasan Joy, Zakir Hasan, Shadman Islam, Mominul Haque, Mushfiqur Rahim, Shakib Al Hasan, Litton Kumer Das, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Taijul Islam, Nayeem Hasan, Nahid Rana, Shoriful Islam, Hasan Mahmud, Taskin Ahmed, Syed Khaled Ahmed

FOCUS

Paris Olympics Games warms the hearts of seasoned golf pros

Reuters
Paris

Two experienced golfers crying on the podium after tight gold medal victories and other moneyed players reveling in the excited crowds shows how the Paris Olympics earned kudos among the pros before they resume their tour lives.

New Zealand's Lydia Ko secured gold on Saturday in her final Games to go with her bronze in Tokyo and silver in Rio when golf returned to the Olympics after a century.

Like American Scottie Scheffler after his win in the men's tournament a week earlier, Ko let out her emotions as her national anthem played at Le Golf National south of Paris. Playing for country rather than prize money and cheered on by the sort of raucous crowds unheard of in golf, except in the popular Ryder Cup team contest between Europe and the United States, the big-



New Zealand's Lydia Ko

name players were enthralled.

"I think this is the biggest crowd I've played in front of and I think it has such a great atmosphere," Australia's Hannah Green said after narrowly missing out on a medal.

Golf officials are considering adding a mixed team event at Los Angeles 2028 to go with the current individual competitions, which could bring the sort of buzz surrounding the Ryder Cup and the corresponding women's contest, the Solheim Cup.

"With more of these (formats) being incorporated, I think it's going to become a goal and dream for many junior golfers growing up," Ko said of Olympic golf.

For now, the players will turn back to their tour priorities, with the women preparing for the last major of the year, the British Open, later this month at St Andrews and the men focused on end of season prizes on the PGA circuit.

But in France golf organisers aim to leverage the Games, like they did the 2018 Ryder Cup also held at Le Golf National, to widen golf's appeal and develop the next Celine Boutier, who had thrilled home fans by taking the first-round lead.

"Even if France has nearly 500,000 licensees (club members), it's still perceived by the general public as an elitist sport," said Christophe Muniesa, director of the French golf federation.

"The possibility for us to showcase golf in its best way is really helpful."

TENNIS

Alcaraz eyes year-end number one spot

Reuters
London

After capturing back-to-back Grand Slam titles and a silver medal at the Paris Olympics, world number three **Carlos Alcaraz** said one of his key goals for the rest of the season is to finish as the top-ranked player in the world.

The 21-year-old French Open and Wimbledon champion, who lost a thrilling Olympic final to Novak Djokovic, returns to action at this week's Cincinnati Open, where he can gain ground on the Serb and Italian Jannik Sinner.

Alcaraz is 450 points behind world number one Sinner in the ATP live race to the season finale in Turin, the separate year-to-date standings that serve as a measuring stick for the year-end number one battle.

"Obviously being number one is a goal every time that I'm (behind) and the race is an important ranking for me. At the end of the year if you end the race number one, in the rankings it's quite similar, so

you're going to end number one," Alcaraz said.

"So I'm really focused on that. I'm focused on going to every tournament, thinking about playing great tennis, doing a good result just to get better in the race. This year, ending the year as number one is one of my main goals right now."

Last year's Cincinnati runner-up, Alcaraz will begin his campaign against Gael Monfils or Alexei Popyrin as he returns to hardcourt tennis for the first time since reaching the Miami quarter-finals in March.

Important tune-up event

The Cincinnati Open is an important tune-up event for the Aug 26-Sept 8 US Open.

"I'm excited to play here again. Obviously great memories from last year, reaching the final, losing a really tight and epic match (to Djokovic)," Alcaraz said.

Alcaraz will compete on hard courts for the first time since he reached the quarter-finals in Miami in March.

Djokovic withdrew from

Cincinnati after his Olympic triumph.

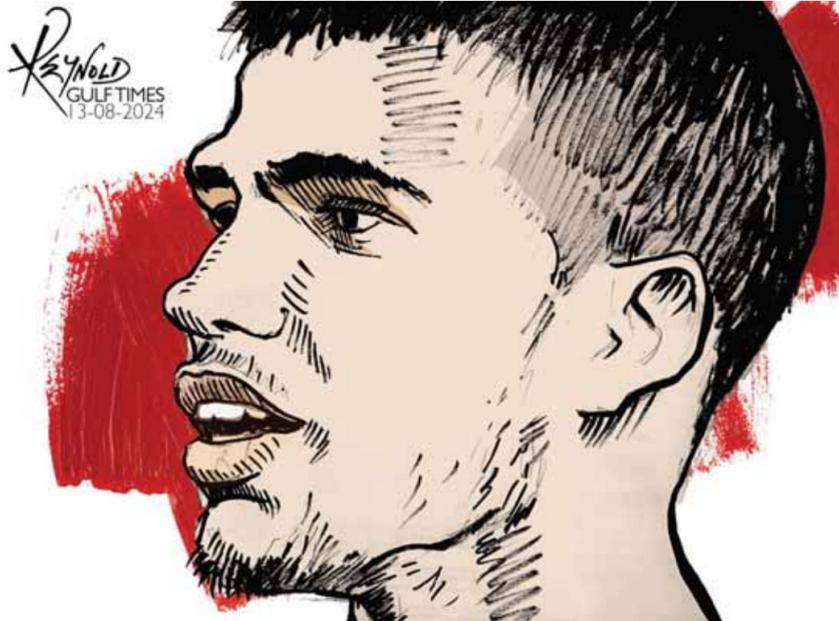
Taylor Fritz and Tommy Paul lead American hopes, while former champions Daniil Medvedev and Grigor Dimitrov also return to the Lindner Family Tennis Center.

Medvedev and Alexander Zverev have fond memories in Cincinnati. Fourth seed Medvedev won the title in 2019 and arrives holding an 18-5 hard-court record this year. Zverev, who advanced to the quarters in Montreal, triumphed in 2021 in Cincinnati.

Andrey Rublev arrives in Cincinnati having enjoyed a deep run in Montreal. The 26-year-old won an ATP Masters 1000 crown in Madrid earlier this year.

Hubert Hurkacz returned from injury in Montreal and the fifth seed will play a qualifier or Miomir Kecmanovic in his opening match in Ohio. Casper Ruud's best result on hard courts this year was a final run in Acapulco.

Seeded seventh, he will play Felix Auger-Aliassime or a qualifier in his opening match. Auger-Aliassime defeated Ruud at the Paris Olympics earlier this month.



CYCLING

Charlotte lands first stage win amid Tour chaos

'It was really hectic but I like it. This is I think the best day of my life'

AFP
The Hague

Dutch rider Charlotte Kool kept her head amid a chaotic bunched sprint finish to win the first stage of the women's Tour de France yesterday.

"It was really hectic but I like it. I kept on thinking 'OK I like hectic, I like chaos,'" said the 25-year-old. "I went so early and I thought it's too long and it hurt so bad but it was enough in the end."

Kool, born in North Holland, took the yellow jersey on home soil as the women's Tour got underway in the Netherlands with a 123-kilometre flat ride from Rotterdam to The Hague.

Topping 60km as she crossed the line, the Dsm-Firmenich PostNL rider claimed her maiden Tour win with an unstoppable surge in the last 100 metres to complete the stage in a time of two hours 47 minutes and 40 seconds.

"It's a dream coming true," said Kool. "It was not an easy season and this is where it was all about... This is I think the best day of my life."

Finland's Anniina Ahtosalo of Uno-X and Italian Elisa Balsamo of Lidl Trek completed the podium.

The pre-race favourite, Lorena Wiebes, fell foul of a problem with the chain of her bike just an agonising 200m from the finish



Team DSM-Firmenich PostNL's Dutch rider Charlotte Kool celebrates as she crosses the finish line to win the first stage (out of 8) of the third edition of the Women's Tour de France cycling race, a 123km individual time trial between Rotterdam and The Hague, yesterday. (AFP)

line, leaving the route open for her compatriot to sprint to her first win of the season.

Reigning Tour champion Demi Voller of the Netherlands had a quiet day as did her fellow podium contenders Pole Katarzyna Niewiadoma and France's Juliette Labous and Evita Muzic.

There was drama with 69km still to go when a mass crash in the middle of peloton brought dozens

of riders to a halt on a bridge near the Meuse river.

Thankfully none of the competitors were seriously hurt and all were able to remount their bikes and take off again in pursuit of the front half of the peloton.

Although a flat stage through the lowlands of South Holland, Italian Cristina Tonetti of Laboral Kutxa claimed the first polka dot jersey of the race by win-

ning the only climb of the stage. Race-winner Kool also claimed the green sprint points jersey in addition to the overall leader's yellow tunic. Two stages will be raced today, the first over 69.7km from Dordrecht back to Rotterdam across the Dutch flatlands, followed by a 6.3km individual time-trial. The race finishes on Sunday at Alpe d'Huez, a ski resort in southeastern France.

FOCUS

Vingegaard fourth in Polish opening stage

AFP
Paris

Jonas Vingegaard made a strong start in his bid to win the seven-stage Tour of Poland with a fourth-placed finish in yesterday's opening stage in Karpacz.

The two-time Tour de France winner, who lost his crown to Tadej Pogacar last month, failed to finish the San Sebastian classic on Saturday, his first outing since the Tour, but stayed the course to cross

the line six seconds behind stage winner Thibau Nys (Lidl-Trek).

Belgian rider Nys produced a timely kick 200 metres out to catch and pass Vingegaard's Visma-Lease a Bike teammate Wilco Kelderman.

Lukas Nerurkar (EF Education-EasyPost) was third, three seconds ahead of Vingegaard.

Today's second stage sees the riders tackling a 15-kilometre time trial which starts in Myslakowice and includes a nasty climb up Orlinek before finishing again in Karpacz.

REPORT

Kuchar apologises after one-man finish

Reuters
Greensboro, North Carolina

Matt Kuchar apologised yesterday to all those who had to return to Sedgefield Country Club in Greensboro, North Carolina, to watch him finish his final hole at the Wyndham Championship alone.

Kuchar was out of the running by the time he reached the closing par-four 18th hole on Sunday in dwindling daylight at Sedgefield where he sent his tee shot well left into trouble before marking his ball and deciding to finish in the morning.

Kuchar needed six minutes to cap his round yesterday with a par after getting line-of-sight relief from a scoreboard near the green that allowed him to drop in the adjacent fairway.

The 46-year-old American ultimately ended up in a 10-way share of 12th place that awarded him a \$134,695 payday. A bogey would have lowered his payday to just over \$77,000.

"Nobody wants to be that guy



Matt Kuchar of the US plays a shot on the tenth hole during the final round of the Wyndham Championship at Sedgefield Country Club in Greensboro, North Carolina. (AFP)

that's showing up today, one person, one hole. Not even one hole, half a hole to putt," Kuchar said yesterday.

"So apologies to the tournament, to everybody that had to come out. I know it stinks, I know the ramifications, I know it stinks. Certainly I apologise to force everybody to come out here."

SPOTLIGHT

England's Rai clinches Wyndham title

Reuters
Greensboro, North Carolina

Aaron Rai just kept believing and kept making pars, so by the time a gruelling day of golf at the Wyndham Championship was coming to a close on Sunday, the Englishman was right where he needed to be.

In the PGA Tour's regular-season finale, Rai produced a steady finish for a final-round 64 to win on tour for the first time.

"Truly a dream come true," he said.

Rai's two-stroke victory, which came by playing 36 holes on the final day at Sedgefield Country Club, will be largely associated with Max Greyserman's misfortune as a four-shot lead evaporated on the back nine with dusk fast approaching.

Rai's first title on the PGA Tour came in his 89th appearance. He finished at 18-under-par 262 after earlier posting a third-round 68.

He was bogey-free for the last round, sinking a 6 1/2-foot birdie putt on the last hole.

"I felt pretty calm," he said. "I knew the situation."

Rai, who moved to 25th in the FedEx Cup standings, had only two birdies across the last 12 holes.

"I did just a good job sticking to what we do well," Rai said.

Greyserman (66, 69), bidding for his first tour victory, was second at 16 under.

J J Spaun (66, 64) and Japan's Ryo Hisatsune (64, 67) tied for third at 15 under.

"I knew there was a lot of pressure all day," Greyserman said. "I think I just need to take that away that I know how to play in those situations."

Scheffler gets \$8mn bonus for standout PGA Tour season

NEW YORK: Olympic champion and world number one Scottie Scheffler has pocketed \$8mn for finishing top of the Comcast Business Tour Top 10 list that highlights season-long performance, the PGA Tour said yesterday. Scheffler won six tournaments during the PGA Tour's 2024 season, including four Signature Events and a second career major championship at the Masters.

"It's been an incredible year for me both on and off the course, so to finish up the regular season by earning the top spot in the Comcast Business Tour Top 10 is an honour," Scheffler said in a news release.

"Every year I try to perform and compete to the best of my abilities, so this award really represents the hard work put in throughout the course of the season with the support of my family and team."

In March, Scheffler got his first win of 2024 at the Arnold Palmer Invitational, which began a series of four wins in five starts, including triumphs at The Players Championship, Masters and RBC Heritage.

He went on to win the Memorial Tournament and Travelers Championship to claim four of the eight Signature Events on the season. After his excellent regular season, Scheffler won the gold medal at the Paris Olympics where he began the final round four shots back



Scottie Scheffler of the US celebrates with his green jacket and the trophy after winning The Masters at Augusta National Golf Club, Augusta, Georgia. (Reuters)

of the co-leaders but fired a closing nine-under-par 62 to triumph by one stroke. As part of the Comcast Business Tour Top 10, a \$40mn bonus is shared among the top-10 finishers in the FedExCup regular season standings.

Reigning PGA Championship and British Open winner Xander Schauffele (\$6mn) and Rory McIlroy (\$4.8mn) finished second and third, respectively, while Collin Morikawa (\$4.4mn) and Wyndham Clark (\$4mn) rounded out the top five.

Bradley names Snedeker second US vice-captain for Ryder Cup

Brandt Snedeker will serve as one of Keegan Bradley's vice-captains on the US Ryder Cup team who will try to reclaim the trophy from Europe next year at Bethpage Black in New York, the PGA of America said yesterday. Snedeker, a nine-time winner on the PGA Tour who was named the US-based circuit's rookie of the year in 2007, joins previously appointed former US Open champion Webb Simpson as a vice-captain on Bradley's staff.

"As I've started preparing for the 2025 Ryder Cup, I quickly realised that Brandt was someone I wanted by my side," Bradley, who was announced as captain in July, said in a news release.

"Having competed in two Ryder Cups, including a stellar individual performance in 2016, Brandt's experience and insight will surely be beneficial to our team in the months ahead." The 2025 Ryder Cup will be Snedeker's first stint as a vice-captain in the biennial team event.

The 43-year-old Nashville, Tennessee native has played in two Ryder Cups, compiling a 4-2-0 career record, including 3-0-0 as the only undefeated American in 2016. Additional vice-captains will be announced at a later date.

SPOTLIGHT

From Biles to Djokovic: Stars of the Paris Olympics

AFP

Paris

There were many contenders to be crowned stars of the 2024 Olympic Games which wrap up on Sunday.

AFP Sports looks at six of the best:

Simone Biles: Biles proved as popular a draw as the Eiffel Tower, the 1.42m bundle of brilliance standing tall on her return to the Olympics after the trauma of Tokyo. In Japan she was forced to withdraw from most of the Games with a debilitating mental block known as the "twisties". Three years on, watched by an enraptured full house at Bercy Arena including her husband, NFL player Jonathan Owens, Tom Cruise and Lady Gaga, Biles resumed the gold run she had begun at Rio 2016. The 27-year-old pipped Rebeca Andrade for the coveted all-around crown on her last tumble on the floor. That was book-ended by titles with the US team and vault - where she executed her Yurchenko double pike, the Biles II, her sixth eponymous skill. Stumbles on the final day as tiredness - both mentally and physically - set in left her with silver behind Andrade on the floor. In a mark of her class as a person she bowed to the Brazilian on the podium.

Leon Marchand: A new star was born in the Paris pool with Leon Marchand enthralled packed houses at La Defense Arena by completing a feat not seen since the days of Michael Phelps. The 22-year-old emphatically won all four of his individual races - the 200m butterfly, 200m breaststroke and 200m-400m medley double. It thrust him into elite company as the first male swimmer to do so at a singles Games since the American legend in 2008. In an ominous warning, Marchand said "it's only the beginning", with his sights already set on Los Angeles in 2028.

Noah Lyles: Lyles arrived in Paris shouting about wanting to cement his legacy as the rightful heir to Usain Bolt. The American did win a 100 metres that will live long in the memory, edging Kishane Thompson of Jamaican by five thousandths of a second. But he looked out of sorts in the 200m as Letsile Tebogo emphatically won to deny him the sprint double, then revealed he had tested positive for Covid. He was therefore sidelined as the Americans flopped and were disqualified in the 4x100m relay. Bolt, in contrast, won sprint doubles and the relay at three successive Games, only losing one relay gold due



to a team-mate's doping case.

Antoine Dupont: Half-time at a packed Stade de France and two-time Olympic champions Fiji looked in control against the hosts in the rugby sevens final. Enter Antoine Dupont. Dupont, arguably the world's greatest 15-a-side player, had started on the bench so he could make the maximum impact with fresh legs in this high-octane sport. That impact was immediate. Seizing on a loose ball from the second-half kick-off, he hared down the wing, outpacing

Fiji sevens legend Jerry Tuwai and popping an inside ball to Aaron Grandidier-Nkanang for a simple try. Dupont then scored two tries of his

own to bring home the gold 28-7, in a fevered atmosphere that even seasoned commentators said they had never experienced at a rugby match.

Novak Djokovic: At the age of 37, Novak Djokovic finally won an Olympic gold medal to go along with his 24 Grand Slam titles.

The Serb defeated Carlos Alcaraz, 16 years his junior, in a memorable final at Roland Garros where has already been crowned French Open champion three

times. Djokovic achieved his dream the hard way - having to defeat career-long rival Rafael Nadal in the second round in the pair's 60th meeting. He then overcame aggravating a knee injury which had needed surgery in June during his quarter-final win over Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Djokovic said he wants to defend his title at the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles when he will be 41.

"I love the drive, every day, every week of training my body, perfecting my game, improving myself still at this age," he said.

The Crowds: Any doubts about the French crowd's commitment to the Olympics were dispelled by the huge roar the first-time swim sensation Leon Marchand dived into the La Defense pool. Marchand's march to four golds sparked a rhythmic roar from spectators every time his head broke the water - even seasoned Olympians said the noise was extraordinary. The French and fans from around the world also turned the spectacular beach volleyball venue next to the Eiffel Tower into a party every night that lit up millions of Instagram accounts.



FOOTBALL

Atletico sign Manchester City striker Alvarez

AFP

Madrid

Atletico Madrid signed striker **Julian Alvarez** from Manchester City yesterday in a deal reported to be worth up to 85m euros (\$93m).

"The club has reached an agreement with Manchester City for the transfer of the Argentine forward, who has signed a contract for the next six seasons," said Atletico in a statement. Spanish reports say Atletico will pay 75m euros for the forward, with potentially 10m more in bonuses.

The 24-year-old arrived at City for just £14m (16m euros) in January 2022 from River Plate, winning two Premier League tro-



phies and the Champions League among other silverware.

Alvarez also helped Argentina lift the World Cup trophy in December 2022 and the Copa America in 2021 and 2024.

"Today I say goodbye to this amazing club, with a lot of emotion," Alvarez told City's club

website. "These have been two very special years. During this time, I have grown and learnt a lot - both as a player and as a person."

Alvarez scored 36 goals for City in 103 appearances across all competitions.

"He's incredibly loved by the team for his behaviour but like I said many times for many players, he wants to leave and have a new challenge," said Manchester City coach Pep Guardiola last week. Diego Simeone's Atletico have also signed Robin Le Normand and Alexander Sorloth as they reinforce heavily to compete with Real Madrid and Barcelona, following a disappointing fourth-place La Liga finish last season.

Atletico begin the new campaign with a visit to face Villarreal on August 19.

FOCUS

Hero's welcome for Olympic champ boxer Khelif in Algiers

AFP

Algiers

Olympic boxing champion Imane Khelif said she had won for her country's women as Algeria's Paris Games medallists received a hero's welcome at Algiers airport yesterday.

Khelif, who was the centre of a gender controversy at the Olympics on her way to the women's 66kg title, teenage gymnastics gold medallist Kaylia Nemour and men's 800m bronze medallist Djamel Sedjati brandished their medals for the waiting fans.

The crowd cheered Khelif with chants of "Tahia Imane" (long live Imane).

"The answer lay in the results of each match," she said. "I wanted to show the strength of performance and the presence of women in general, and Algerian women in particular."

The International Olympic Committee took over the boxing competition in Paris after losing patience with the International Boxing Association.

The IBA, led by Umar Kremlev, a Kremlin-linked oligarch, retaliated during the Games by saying it had disqualified Khelif and Taiwan's Lin Yu-ting from its

world championships last year because its tests showed "these are men". The IBA had allowed both boxers to compete in Tokyo three years ago.

Khelif, 25, addressed what she called a "relentless campaign" on Monday.

She said she wanted "to thank the Algerian people who supported me in this ordeal and gave me strength".

"Algerian women are an example and a model for the whole world," the boxer said. "Thanks to God, we have restored Algeria's honour and flown the Algerian flag in Paris, which is the most important thing."



Algerian boxer Imane Khelif (left), who won the gold medal in the women's welterweight boxing at the Olympics and Algeria's French-born Kaylia Nemour, who won the gold medal in asymmetric bars at the Paris Games, pose upon their arrival at the airport in Algiers, Algeria, yesterday. (Reuters)

Martinez signs new Inter deal until 2029

Lautaro Martinez committed his future to Inter Milan yesterday after signing a new contract which keeps him with the Serie A champions until 2029.

"FC Internazionale Milano can confirm that an agreement has been reached to extend Lautaro Martinez's contract. The 1997-born forward has put pen to paper on a deal lasting until 30 June 2029," said Inter in a statement. Argentina striker Lautaro will reportedly earn a net salary of nine million euros (\$9.8m) per season after renewing a deal which was set to expire in two years' time. Inter president Giuseppe Marotta

said last month that Lautaro had already agreed to sign his new contract but that the club would wait until he returned from post-Copa America holidays to announce it. Lautaro was key to Argentina retaining the Copa America, netting five times including the only goal in the final triumph over Colombia. International glory for the 26-year-old came after he helped power Inter to their second Serie A title in four seasons, finishing their triumphant campaign a whopping 19 points ahead of local rivals AC Milan. The Inter skipper topped the scoring charts with 24 goals in 33

league appearances, eight strikes ahead of his nearest rival Dusan Vlahovic. Lautaro confirming his intention to stay at Inter is a huge boost for a club which headed into the close season in uncertain mood after a sudden change in ownership. Investment fund Oaktree took control of Inter just days after they won their 20th league crown, when previous owners Suning defaulted on repayment of a loan which matured at 395m euros. However Oaktree have opted for continuity rather than revolution since ousting ex-president Steven Zhang and Chinese conglomerate Suning.