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not dress rehearsal
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says India's Rohit

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AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Al Rayyan off to a bumpy start with loss to Al Hilal

By Sports Reporter
Al Rayyan

Qatar's Al Rayyan suffered a 1-3 defeat to Saudi's four-time continental champions Al Hilal in their AFC Champions League Elite opener at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan yesterday.

Goals late in the first half for Joao Cancelo and Marcos Leonardo effectively confirmed the win for Jorge Jesus' team after Sergej Milinkovic-Savic had put the visitors in front in the 15th minute.

A Roger Guedes goal early in the second half gave Al Rayyan hope and Al Hilal failed to kill off the game with Aleksandar Mitrovic seeing a late penalty saved and Malcom hitting the post as home goalkeeper Paulo Victor kept the Saudis at bay.

It took Al Hilal only a quarter of an hour to take the lead, Milinkovic-Savic bursting into the penalty area to meet Malcom's in-swinging cross from the right and power his header home. Four minutes later Yassine Bounou protected his side's lead with a fine save, pushing David Garcia's close range header over the bar after the defender was found inside the six yard box by Gabriel Pereira's centre.

Al Hilal were clearly on top, however, although captain Salem al-Dawsari squandered an opportunity to double the lead with 33 minutes on the clock when he dragged his shot into the side-netting. Mahmoud Trezeguet was agonisingly

close to levelling for Al Rayyan moments later, the Egyptian seeing his blistering shot from the corner of the penalty area deflected narrowly wide.

But with three minutes left in the half Al Hilal doubled their lead, Cancelo smashing a low first-time shot past Victor after Malcom had slid the ball into the Portuguese right back's path. Two minutes later the former Manchester City man turned provider, Leonardo applying the finishing touch at close range as Cancelo slid a pin-point pass through to the edge of the six yard box. Al Rayyan reduced the deficit barely a minute into the second half through Guedes, who initially laid the ball off to Achraf Bencharki and, having beaten the defender, the midfielder delivered a low cross for Guedes to finish with his in-step from three yards out.

In the 52nd minute Leonardo dragged a shot across the face of the target while Bounou kept the Qataris out at the other end, moving to his right to block Abdelaziz Hatim's goal-bound strike.

Al Hilal were awarded a penalty when Mitrovic's header was blocked by Julien de Sart's arm but Victor pushed away the Serbian striker's 71st minute spot-kick as he dived to his left, keeping Al Rayyan's faint hopes alive.

The Saudis continued to go close to a fourth, with Milinkovic-Savic heading over the target and Malcom hitting the post before al-Dawsari's shot was saved by Victor but Al Hilal had done more than enough to take the points.



Al Rayyan's Achraf Bencharki (right) attempts to get past a diving Joao Cancelo of Al Hilal during the AFC Champions League Elite match at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

SPOTLIGHT

Villa make perfect start on CL return

Emery's men are playing in Europe's top competition after 41 years

AFP
Bern, Switzerland

Aston Villa made a stylish return to the Champions League with a 3-0 win at Swiss side Young Boys yesterday in their first game in the tournament for 41 years. Villa boss Unai Emery had urged his team to take three points in Bern as a tribute to the club's former striker Gary Shaw, who died on Monday aged 63 after being injured in a fall. Shaw's tragic death carried extra poignancy as he was a key member of the Villa side that shocked Bayern Munich in the 1982 European Cup final.

A picture of Shaw celebrating Peter Withe's winner against Bayern adorns Villa's training ground and the players wore black armbands during their Champions League opener in memory of the local hero. Clad in the number eight shirt that Shaw made his own at Villa, it was fitting that Youri Tielemans opened the scoring against Young Boys and celebrated by pointing to his jersey.

Jacob Ramsey bagged Villa's second goal before the interval and Amadou Onana added the third in the closing stages as Emery's men eased to a victory four decades in the making. Villa are back in the Champions League after surprisingly finishing fourth in the Premier League last term.

Clashes with Bayern Munich and Juventus await among their remaining seven fixtures in the revamped league stage of the competition. But this cathartic victory will forever hold a special place for Villa fans given their remarkable return to relevance since Emery was hired to replace the sacked Steven Gerrard in 2022.

Just five years ago, Villa were stuck in English football's second tier, with dreams of facing Europe's elite reserved for only the most optimistic supporters.

Anticipation over their first Champions League tie since 1983 had been building for months and the Villa fans crammed into a corner of the Wankdorf Stadium let out a jubilant roar when the tournament anthem was played before kick-off.

Prince William, a noted Villa fan, sent Emery's team a good luck message ahead of their "European adventure" and his team responded with a well-drilled display on the Wankdorf's treacherous artificial pitch. The meticulous Emery changed Villa's preparations by flying to Bern early to train at the stadium on



Aston Villa's Youri Tielemans (third right) celebrates with teammates after scoring during the UEFA Champions League match against Young Boys in Bern, Switzerland. (AFP)

Monday, a move that paid dividends once they survived an early Young Boys raid.

Ebrima Colley's stinging strike forced a fine save from Emiliano Martinez, who breathed a sigh of relief when Filip Ugrinic dragged the rebound narrowly wide. Villa took the lead in the 27th minute with a clever short corner routine. Lucas Digne passed to John McGinn who lofted his cross towards the unmarked Tielemans on the far side of the area.

The Belgian midfielder took a composed touch and drilled a low shot through a crowd of players into the bottom corner from 12 yards. Austin MacPhee, Villa's set-piece coach, punched the air in delight at his successful scheme, while Tielemans celebrated the club's first Champions League goal since their 1983 quarter-final exit against Juventus.

Villa doubled their advantage in the 38th minute thanks to an unexpected gift from the hosts. Deep inside his own area, Mohamed Ali Camara bizarrely passed back to David von Ballmoos even though the Young Boys keeper was instantly under pressure from Watkins.

Von Ballmoos' panicked challenge up-ended Watkins, who lay prone on the turf as Ramsey pounced on the loose ball and slotted home from close-range. Villa were largely able to cruise through the second half, with Onana

capping a night to remember when the Belgian midfielder smashed a 20-yard drive past Von Ballmoos in the 86th minute.

JUVENTUS BEAT PSV

Juventus beat visitors PSV Eindhoven 3-1 on their Champions League return, helped by two quick-fire goals from Kenan Yildiz and Weston McKennie in the first half in Turin. Yildiz gave Juve the lead after 21 minutes with a stunning curling shot from just inside the box, leaving goalkeeper Joel Drommel helpless as the ball went in off the inside of the post.

McKennie doubled the advantage six minutes later, netting inside the right-hand post from close range and winger Nicolas Gonzalez wrapped up the win after the break before Ismael Saibari pulled a goal back for PSV in stoppage time.

Champions League regulars Juventus have returned to Europe's elite club competition following a one-year absence when they missed out for the first time since 2011-12 after having points docked in a case centred on the club's transfer dealings.

They were also banned from European competition last term for breaching UEFA Club Licensing and Financial Fair Play rules, although Juve denied any wrongdoing.

PREVIEW

Wakrah committed to giving their best against Iran's Tractor, says Coach Angel

By Sports Reporter
Wakrah

Miguel Angel, Al Wakrah's Spanish coach, yesterday said his team is committed to giving their best when they take on Iranian side Tractor FC in an AFC Champions League Two clash at the Al Janoub Stadium today.

"I am confident that the Blue Wave will emerge victorious over the Iranian side. My team has made a resolute commitment to give their all for this crucial match," Angel said during a press conference yesterday.

"We have been diligently preparing since our last league game and are well-equipped to face the challenge. While the Iranian team is a formidable opponent, we have learned valuable lessons from our previous setbacks and are determined to apply them to our advantage," he added.

Al Wakrah will hope for a strong start in the continental tournament, before they face off Tajikistan's FC Ravshan in Dushanbe on October 2. Their Group A also consists of Indian Super League champions Mohun Bagan, Tajikistan's FC Ravshan,

"Our top priority is to elevate the team's performance and seize every opportunity to excel in this AFC tournament. We possess a strong foundation of individual and collective skills that position us for significant achievements. The media spotlight, while demanding, can serve as a catalyst for greater motivation and performance," Angel explained.

"By harnessing the energy and focus generated by media attention, we can channel our efforts into achieving our goals and representing our team and country with distinction. We are committed to pushing our limits, working together as a unified unit, and striving for excellence in every aspect of our game," he said.

Al Wakrah's Algerian player



Farid Boulaya said: "Al Wakrah players are determined to overcome the Iranian team and deliver a victory that will delight our fans. I personally vow to meet everyone's expectations, despite being slightly underprepared physically. I have a wealth of AFC Champions League experience from my time at Al Gharafa, which will undoubtedly benefit Al Wakrah."

Boulaya, who joined Al Wakrah last week, added: "Since joining the team, I've integrated well with my teammates, many of whom I've known for some time. This familiarity has helped me adapt quickly and contribute effectively to the team's dynamics. I am confident that our collective efforts will result in a positive outcome tomorrow."

The Group Stage, running from today until December 5, consists of eight groups, split in half between East and West Asian teams, competing in a round-robin format to qualify for the knockout stage.

The top two teams from each group will advance to the Round of 16, which will be held in February 2025. This will be followed by the quarter-finals in March 2025, the semi-finals in April 2025, and the final on May 17, 2025.

COMMENT

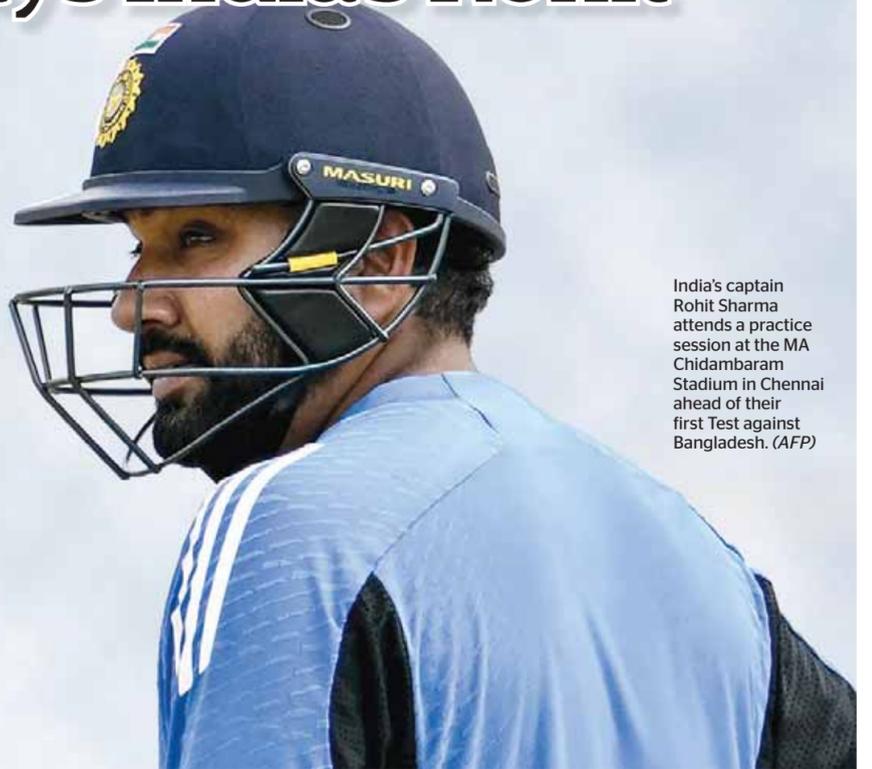
Bangladesh series not dress rehearsal for Australia tour, says India's Rohit

Chennai: India are focused on making a strong start to their home Test season and will not view their two-match series with Bangladesh merely as preparation for their tour of Australia later this year, skipper Rohit Sharma said yesterday. Rohit's side begin a busy schedule with the opening match against Bangladesh starting tomorrow, after which they will host New Zealand in three games and then head to Australia in November for five more Tests. "Every game is important while playing for the country," Rohit told reporters in Chennai. "It's not a dress rehearsal for the Australia series. There are World Test Championship points at stake and we need to start the season on a high. The focus is on winning the Bangladesh series rather than looking too far ahead." India last lost a home Test series in 2012 when they fell 2-1 to England and have since won 17 consecutive series, losing only four out of 51 matches, but Rohit said his players cannot get complacent. "We're resuming after a long time," added Rohit, whose side completed a 4-1 win over England in March. "When it (the series) starts, we have to see where we stand and take it from there." Rohit threw his weight behind bats-

man KL Rahul, who made 86 and 22 in the first match against England in January but missed the rest of the series with injury. "Everyone has an up-and-down career. The kind of quality KL Rahul has, everybody knows. The message to him from our side was we want him to play all the games and bring the best out of him," Rohit said. "Unfortunately, he got injured after Hyderabad and didn't play afterwards. I hope he continues from where he left off. I don't see any reason why he can't flourish in Test cricket."

Busy Test schedule
Commenting on India's busy Test schedule, Rohit reaffirmed their stand to manage the workload of premier pacers including Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj as they have impressive young talents to fill up for them. For the first Test against Bangladesh, India have handed a national call-up to pacer Yash Dayal while Akash Deep retained his spot in the Test side. "You want the best players to play all the games, but that's not possible. You've to see what's best for the team and manage your bowlers accordingly. We'll monitor that for our bowlers. We've managed to do that

in the England series. We got rest for Bumrah and Siraj," Rohit said. "So, we will keep assessing them. You want everyone to play all the games, but it's not in our hands. We saw exciting prospects in Duleep Trophy. "I am not too worried about the kind of bowlers waiting in the wings," he added. The Indian captain praised the performances of batters Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sarfaraz Khan and Dhruv Jurel. "They've everything that's required to be a top player for India in all three forms. With time, we've to nurture and groom them well. They're very hungry for success and to play for India," Rohit remarked. "Jaiswal had a great home series when we played last time. Jurel showed what he's capable of as well, with the bat. "Getting the tough runs. Sarfaraz as well, being fearless, not being too worried about what happens outside. "You need all sorts of players who are fearless, cautious and responsible as well. We have that mix of everything and it's a good sign," he added. "They've everything that's required to be a top player for India in all three forms," Rohit said.



India's captain Rohit Sharma attends a practice session at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai ahead of their first Test against Bangladesh. (AFP)

PREVIEW

Bangladesh seek more history in India Test series

'After having a good series against Pakistan, there's extra confidence'

AFP
Chennai, India

Fresh from their first-ever Test series win over Pakistan, Bangladesh will chase more cricket history when they face India in Chennai from tomorrow

The 2-0 sweep in Pakistan sparked celebrations at home a month after political turmoil and deadly protests in Bangladesh ousted the autocratic former premier. But a two-Test series in India is a far more daunting prospect - Bangladesh have never won any of their 13 previous matches, losing 11 and drawing two.

Both draws came at home, at Chittagong in 2007 and Fatullah in 2015.

"This will be a challenging series for us," visiting skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto said ahead of the first Test. "After having a good series against Pakistan, there's extra confidence in our team, as well as among all the people of the country."

India will be strong favourites to sweep the series but Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim, Litton Das and Mehidy Hasan Miraz all head to Chennai in good form.

Mushfiqur amassed 216 in the Pakistan series while off-spinner Mehidy was the leading bowler with 10 wickets in the two matches.

Bangladesh unveiled a new pace sensation in Nahid Rana in Pakistan, where the right-arm bowler clocked speeds of more



Bangladesh's Litton Das (right) takes part in a practice session at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai ahead of their first Test against India. (AFP)

than 146kph (90mph). Uncapped wicketkeeper Jaker Ali comes into the squad in place of fast bowler Shoriful Islam, who pulled out with a groin injury.

Rohit Sharma will look to India's experienced slow bowling trio of Ravichandran Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel to Test Bangladesh's batting on pitches that are expected to favour the spinners.

Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj will lead the pace attack while Mohammed Shami recovers

from ankle surgery. India welcome back wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant to the Test squad for the first time since he nearly lost his life in a car crash in December 2022.

Pant, an attacking left-handed batsman, is expected to replace Dhruv Jurel behind the stumps.

Virat Kohli is also back for his first Test since facing South Africa at Cape Town in January, having missed India's 4-1 home series win against England for the birth of his second child.

New head coach Gautam Gam-

bhir takes charge of India in a Test for the first time.

After Chennai, the second Test begins in Kanpur on September 27 with both part of the World Test Championship.

India lead the current standings ahead of Australia.

The Tests are followed by a three-match Twenty20 series starting in Gwalior on October 6, moving to New Delhi three days later.

The Test series finishes in Hyderabad on October 12.

SPOTLIGHT

Frustrated NZ, confident Sri Lanka get ready for the two Tests in Galle

AFP
Colombo

New Zealand play Sri Lanka in the first of two Tests at Galle from today as the visitors look to shake off the frustration of their abandoned match with Afghanistan.

On a spin-friendly pitch they face an emboldened Sri Lanka who last week ended a 10-year wait for a Test win in England.

New Zealand's one-off Test against Afghanistan at Greater Noida, near New Delhi, was meanwhile washed out without a ball being bowled.

But skipper Tim Southee said "exciting times" lie ahead with a hectic schedule of eight Tests in 12 weeks on three continents, starting with Sri Lanka.

World Test Championship points are on the line and the Black Caps are third behind India and Australia in the table. Sri Lanka are fifth.

"We haven't played a Test match since March, but exciting times are ahead of us as we play eight games between now and December," Southee told reporters in Galle.

New Zealand will then play a three-Test series away in India beginning in October, before another three-Test series against England back home.

"We are looking forward to making an impact and move forward," Southee added. "We know how important points in these games are."

The tourists will bank heavily on ex-captain Kane Williamson, who has an outstanding record against Sri Lanka, with Southee calling the 34-year-old "vital".

Kane, New Zealand's highest run-scorer in Test cricket and the world's number-two ranked batsman, averages 78 against Sri Lanka, way above his career average of 54.

"He has had a lot of success against Sri Lanka," Southee said. "He's a great performer to have in the side against any opposition."

"His experience will be vital for us in this series."



New Zealand's captain Tim Southee bats in the nets during a practice session on the eve of their first Test against Sri Lanka in Galle yesterday. (AFP)

The first Test, in the imposing grounds beneath the walls of the 17th century Galle Fort, will have a rest day on Saturday when Sri Lanka votes at a presidential election. The final match will also be played at Galle, from September 26.

Galle traditionally helps spin bowling and the New Zealanders have expert advice, having recruited Sri Lanka's skilled former go-to bowler Rangana Herath as spin coach for the tour.

Left-armers Ajaz Patel and Mitchell Santner are their key spin bowlers. Off-break all-rounder Glenn Phillips, as well as Michael Bracewell and left-arm spinner Rachin Ravindra, give them options. Sri Lanka have a strong lineup too, switching bowlers from their winning team against England, where the visitors clinched the third Test by eight wickets at The Oval.

England took the series 2-1 after victories at Old Trafford (by five wickets) and Lord's (by 190 runs).

Sri Lanka have left out pace bowlers Vishwa Fernando and Milan Ratnayake, bringing in left-arm spinner Prabath Jayasuriya and off-spinner Ramesh Mendis.

"We know that it is tough on the seamers, who did so well in England, but given the conditions in Galle, we have to leave out two of them," coach Sanath Jayasuriya told reporters.

AUSTRALIA'S ZAMPA ACCEPTS ASHES CHANCES ARE REMOTE AS 100TH ODI LOOMS

London: Australia's Adam Zampa insists he has come to terms with the idea he will never play in an Ashes Test as he prepares for his 100th one-day international appearance.

The leg-spinner has been a central pillar of Australia's white-ball teams and starred as they won last year's 50-over World Cup with a six-wicket triumph over tournament hosts India in a lopsided Ahmedabad final.

He is now set for another landmark moment in his ODI career, with Zampa poised to win his

100th cap in the first of a five-game series against England at Nottingham's Trent Bridge on Thursday.

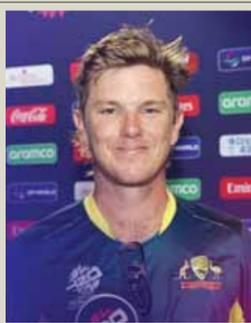
Despite his white-ball success, the 32-year-old Zampa has yet to make his Test debut and now appears resigned to never featuring against arch-rivals England in the Ashes. Nathan Lyon has been the team's first-choice spinner in red-ball cricket for over a decade and the likes of Todd Murphy and Mitchell Swepson appear next in line.

"Realistically, I'm probably not going to play in an Ashes in my

career," Zampa told reporters at Trent Bridge yesterday. "I'm OK with that."

"There's a drive to play Tests"
"We have lots of Test cricket and there's still a bit of drive to play that but, in terms of playing in England or playing in Australia against England, I don't think it's a possibility (for me)."

"I think rivalry in any sport gives depth to the games, you can see that with the Ashes. It's a little bit different to this series in particular, but rivalry is important and the



one against England is always great." Zampa stressed he was happy with what he had achieved in his career thus far, saying: "When you look back as a young guy, playing for your country for the first time, it's not something you really think about...I never thought I'd play this much for Australia."

"Great to be playing 100th ODI"
"So yeah, it's great to be playing that 100th ODI. I have my family here (in England) - my wife, my son, my parents - it's going to

be a nice occasion." Australia will defend their 50-over crown in southern Africa in 2027, but Zampa refused to put a time frame on his international career. "While I'm enjoying playing for Australia, I feel like I'm bowling good enough and want to improve," Zampa told reporters yesterday. "I'll just continue to roll through. "I really love playing for this group, under this coaching staff. "While I'm enjoying it, there's no reason to think about an end date."

ANNOUNCEMENT

Glasgow backed to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games

The future of 2026 edition was thrown into doubt when Victoria withdrew last year citing rising costs

AFP
London

Glasgow was effectively given the go-ahead to stage the 2026 Commonwealth Games after the Scottish government said yesterday it would back the city in hosting a slimmed down version of the troubled multi-sport event.

The future of the 2026 edition was thrown into doubt when the Australian state of Victoria, the original hosts, withdrew last year citing rising costs.

But Commonwealth Games Scotland (CGS) announced in April it had developed a "cost-effective" plan to stage the Games in Glasgow and Scottish health secretary Neil Gray said yesterday: "I was pleased to write to Commonwealth Games Scotland today to inform them that the Scottish Government will give its support for the proposal."

Gray said the government had conducted a "thorough assessment" of the CGS scheme, which is set to see the Games returning to 2014 hosts Glasgow.

He added it would "help to support a new future for the Commonwealth Games and deliver economic and sporting opportu-

nity for Scotland". Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) president Chris Jenkins welcomed yesterday's announcement, which paves the way for a fourth Games in Scotland, with Edinburgh having staged the 1970 and 1986 editions.

"We have been working with Commonwealth Games Scotland and the Scottish government for several months and are delighted to hear CGS has received confirmation of support from the government to enable them to progress with their proposal to host the Games in 2026," he said in a statement.

'No government underwriting' Jenkins stressed the Glasgow 2026 plan had no need of major public investment – something that could have scuppered the proposal at the outset.

"At the heart of our discussions has been an investment of £100 million (\$132mn) from the CGF and the commitment that Glasgow 2026 would not require financial underwriting from either the Scottish or UK Governments," he said.

Australia's offer of funding part of the costs has also been accepted.

"The additional generous contribution of around £2.3 million from Commonwealth Games Aus-



A freeze frame from the swimming contest of the triathlon competition during the Birmingham Commonwealth Games in 2022. (@thecgf)

tralia to the Glasgow concept will further enhance the Games delivery," said Jenkins.

He added: "We will work closely with CGS to positively conclude final stakeholder discussions with the aim of formally announcing

Glasgow as the host city for 2026 as soon as possible."

The Australian funding effectively represents part of a compensation payment from the Victorian government to the CGF.

Singapore and Malaysia both

decided against staging the 2026 Games on cost grounds, with the Malaysian government saying in March the CGF's offer of £100 million was "not expected to be able to cover the entire cost of organising a large-scale sports event".

But it is now likely the 2026 Games will be significantly reduced, with a total of just 10-13 sports compared to 19 at the 2022 Games in Birmingham.

Victoria was the second successive host to renege on its commitment to stage the Games, after citing a projected cost of more than A\$6bn (£3.13bn, \$4.09bn).

In 2015, Durban was named as 2022 host.

But 17 months later the South African city was stripped of the Games amid financial problems before Birmingham stepped in – the fifth time in the last six editions the event has been staged in either Britain or Australia.

The Commonwealth Games, held every four years, evolved out of the British Empire Games and is still made up mainly of countries once subject to British imperial rule.

Its relevance, in an age where regional events such as Asian or European championships have assumed greater importance, has long been questioned.

But its supporters argue it gives athletes valuable experience of a multi-sport event, leaving them better prepared to compete at a pinnacle event such as the Olympic Games.

GOLF

Spieth expects to be ready for the start of 2025 season

Reuters
New York

Jordan Spieth said he is progressing well following wrist surgery and expects to be ready for the start of the 2025 PGA Tour season.

"I think that by 2025, by Jan. 1, it's my goal to be tournament-ready," Spieth told *Golfweek* in a Q&A published yesterday.

"And for me, that would be not just going out and seeing how it feels, you know, but expecting to play at my ceiling."

Sporting a cast on his left wrist in his first public appearance since his surgery, Spieth appeared at a fundraiser at Brookhaven Country Club just outside Dallas.

Spieth, 31, initially injured his wrist in 2023.

He last competed in the FedEx St Jude Classic at TPC Southwind in Memphis in mid-August.

"I would say the No. 1 reason why I ended up getting it done was because it affects my way of life at home," he said.

"Like when it would dislocate and I couldn't get it back in, it would happen when I'm getting my daughter out of the bath,



A file picture of American golfer Jordan Spieth in action in June 2023. (@JordanSpieth)

I'm putting a sweatshirt on or it just so random that it was like, I didn't want it to continue, and it happened more and more. And it wasn't going to heal itself based on a number of different docs and scans and whatever. So it's just inevitable."

Spieth has three major wins and 13 overall victories on the PGA Tour, but none since the RBC Heritage in April 2022. He began the 2024 season with a third-place showing at The Sentry and tied for sixth at the WM Phoenix Open, but he had only one more

top-10 the rest of the year while missing seven cuts.

Spieth did not earn entry into the 2025 season-opening tournament, The Sentry. He is, however, able to play in the Sony Open in Hawaii on Jan 9-12 at Waialae Country Club.

JABEUR ENDS SEASON DUE TO SHOULDER INJURY



London: Tunisia's Ons Jabeur has been forced to end her 2024 season prematurely due to a niggling shoulder injury, the three-times Grand Slam runner-up said. The 30-year-old has slipped to 22nd in the world rankings this year amid fitness struggles and pulled out of Cincinnati, Washington and the US Open with the shoulder problem after missing the Paris Olympics due to concerns over her knee. "This year has been extremely hard for me and as athletes, we know that recovery is part of the journey," Jabeur said on social media.

"Due to my ongoing shoulder injury, my medical team and I have made the difficult decision to step off the tennis circuit for the rest of the season." Jabeur said she will dedicate her

time to charitable projects while recovering and return to action in Australia early next year. She said: "While I'm taking time to heal, I'll be dedicating myself to charity work and ensuring that we make a real difference in the world."

The former World No.2 is currently No.22 in the PIF WTA Rankings, having fallen out of the world's Top 10 in July. She had previously spent all but one week inside the elite ranking range since October of 2021 (She was ranked No.11 for the week of Jan. 31, 2022.)

Jabeur reassured fans to close her post that she will be back in action Down Under in Australia to begin the 2025 season. "Thank you for all your support, and I can't wait to come back stronger," she wrote.

SPOTLIGHT

American gymnast Chiles appeals decision that stripped her of bronze medal won at Paris 2024

Reuters
New York

US gymnast Jordan Chiles yesterday filed an appeal in the Federal Supreme Court of Switzerland to overturn a decision that stripped her of her Olympic bronze medal in the women's floor event at the Paris Games.

Chiles was forced to give up the medal when the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) last month ruled in favour of an appeal by Romanian gymnast Ana Maria Barbosu, who was subsequently awarded the bronze.

Barbosu and her team had appealed to CAS that an inquiry filed by the US team over the results of the floor exercise, which led to Chiles's initial score being revised upwards, had been registered four seconds after the one-minute deadline allowed by the International Gymnastics Federation.

The success of the Romanian appeal meant Chiles's score was reduced and she fell out of third place behind Brazilian winner Rebeca Andrade and silver medalist Simone Biles, her American teammate.

In the appeal, lawyers for Chiles argue that CAS refused to consider video footage that "unequivocally proves" that the inquiry was



Jordan Chiles of the US celebrates with her medals she won after the women's floor exercise competition at the Paris 2024 Olympics at Bercy Arena, Paris, France, on August 05, 2024. (Reuters)

submitted in time. They also argue that Hamid Gharavi, the president of the CAS panel that revoked Chiles's bronze medal, had a conflict of interest.

"Mr Gharavi has acted as counsel for Romania for almost a decade and was actively representing Romania at the time of the CAS arbitration," attorneys for Gibson, Dunn &

Crutcher LLC said in a press release. The lawyers also said that Chiles was only notified of the CAS hearing a few hours before it began, not giving her the necessary time to prepare a defence.

"From start to finish, the procedures leading to the CAS panel's decision were fundamentally unfair, and it is no surprise that they resulted in an unjust decision," the lawyers said yesterday.

USA Gymnastics and the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee all voiced their support for Chiles's appeal.

A decision from the court is expected in the next four to six months, a source told Reuters. In an Instagram post last month, Chiles called the CAS decision "unjust" and a "significant blow."

The Olympian, who also won team gold with Biles in Paris, has said she would fight on and holds out hope that she will ultimately prevail.

"I am now confronted with one of the most challenging moments of my career," she said in the post.

"I will approach this challenge as I have others – and I will make every effort to ensure that justice is done. I believe that at the end of this journey, the people in control will do the right thing."

TENNIS

Raducanu into Korea Open second round

AFP
Seoul

Emma Raducanu got her Korea Open campaign off to a winning start with a hard-fought 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7-5) victory over American Peyton Stearns yesterday.

Britain's Raducanu is looking to make an impact in Seoul after a string of last-minute withdrawals, including world number one Iga Swiatek, US Open runner-up Jessica Pegula and former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina.

The 2021 US Open champion Raducanu, ranked 70th in the world, had to dig deep to beat her 48th-ranked opponent in steamy conditions in a match that lasted 2hr 43min.

"I'm proud to have made it through to the next round," said the 21-year-old Raducanu, who is unseeded.

"Thank you to everyone for sticking around and watching us. It was tough, it was very humid, the balls were bouncing around a lot."

Raducanu's next opponent will be China's Yue Yuan, the eighth seed.

"It was a tough match to get through," added Raducanu.

"I haven't played many matches in the last few months and Peyton is a really good player in really good form, so I'm pretty pleased."

Raducanu, who has failed to build on her stunning US Open success, stormed into a 4-1 first-set lead but let her opponent come back before edging her in the tie-break. Raducanu struggled to shake off Stearns in the second set and could not finish the job when serving for the match at 5-3.

She had to battle some more to take the second set to a tiebreak but then rode a late surge of momentum to clinch the match in straight sets.

American Hailey Baptiste joined her in the second round after beating compatriot and former US Open champion Sloane Stephens 7-6 (7/4), 6-2.

Sixth seed Yulia Putintseva of Kazakhstan was knocked out after a 6-3, 7-6 (7/5) loss to American Amanda Anisimova.

SPOTLIGHT

PSG ready to create new stars, manager Enrique says

Reuters
Paris

Paris St Germain's young team may be less experienced than their previous sides but they are full of energy and primed for success as they begin their Champions League campaign without striker Kylian Mbappe for the first time in seven years.

After joining the club in 2017 Mbappe helped PSG reach the final in 2020 when they lost to Bayern Munich. PSG are set to host Spain's Champions League debutants Girona today boasting an impressive attack with the likes of Bradley Barcola, Ousmane Dembele and new signing Joao Neves, 19, who already has four assists in four league games.

"I have always wanted my players to be

motivated for every game. I can use each of the six forwards we have," manager Luis Enrique said yesterday.

"They are ready, and we're a versatile team and it's great to have all those options because the season is going to be long. We need to create our own stars. We need to adapt, convince the players of the way to play. I'm very motivated and I'm delighted to have the club's trust and I'm trying to repay them by delivering results. We have a clear project that was set out last season.

PSG captain Marquinhos added: "We always have the target of going deep into the competition. I think my teammates are the best in the world, even if there are no big names or stars, I am proud of my team."

Midfielders Warren Zaire-Emery and Vitinha have returned from injury, though goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma has been ruled out with a thigh injury and

25-year-old Russian Matvey Safonov could therefore be handed his first start.

Spaniard Luis Enrique added that he was pleased with the squad and it was too early to jump to conclusions about their lack of experience. "I don't put any limits on my players. Experience is important but I see many experienced players making the same mistakes. It's difficult to calculate the percentage of experience needed," he added. "I think we are selfish as coaches we always want the team to win. It will take a few months and we will see how the team evolves and develops."

Luis Enrique heaped praise on Girona coach Michel, who led his team to a third-place finish in La Liga last season. "I must acknowledge that no one expected to see them here. It is their first time but I watched all their games last season, they play great football," he said.



Paris Saint-Germain's head coach Luis Enrique speaks at press conference yesterday on the eve of the Champions League match against Girona FC. (AFP)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Akanji fears 'tough' schedule as Man City brace for Inter

'When do we go on holidays? There are no breaks in winter'

AFP
Manchester

Manchester City are braced for their Champions League reunion with Inter Milan at the start of an expanded tournament that will be "so tough" for the 2023 winners.

Pep Guardiola's side beat Inter 1-0 in the final two seasons ago as Rodri's goal clinched their first Champions League crown on a memorable night in Istanbul. Inter visit the Etihad Stadium today in City's first experience of the competition's new format, in which 36 teams compete in one table and play eight fixtures each instead of the traditional group stage with six matches.

City defender Manuel Akanji is not a fan of the new model because of the extra burden it will place on players in a gruelling season which will conclude with Guardiola's men competing in the Club World Cup in the United States. "It's getting more complicated with the league. You play different teams, and then Inter don't have the same opponents as us. It's just got bigger, more games," Akanji said.

"Then we have the Club World Cup at the end of the season. It's just game after game and I don't know how it will work out over the next couple of years. It's so tough, you don't just think about this season but also next season. When do we do holidays? There are no breaks in winter. If we are lucky we get two weeks and then we need to be back and into next season. There's no end to it. I don't know how it works out. Maybe I'll retire at 30!"

Despite his complaints, the 29-year-old Akanji is relishing the chance to face Inter again after that treble-winning triumph 15 months ago. It was a cathartic victory for City after a series of crushing Champions League disappointments during the Guardiola era, including a 2021 final loss to Chelsea.

City had to dig deep before Rodri finally broke down Inter's well-drilled defence in the second half of a tense clash at the Ataturk Stadium. "I'm looking forward to it, even with the new format," Akanji said. "I think the old one was better but we go up against the best teams still and we start with a great game against Inter. The last time we played them was in the final, so good memories for us."

City's Champions League title defence was ended by eventual winners Real Madrid last season, with the Spanish side emerging victo-



Manchester City's Manuel Akanji (right) and Erling Haaland train yesterday. (Reuters)

rious from a quarter-final penalty shoot-out in Manchester. But City's latest painful European exit stung a lot less thanks to the warm memories of their victory against Inter.

It will be fascinating to see how Guardiola goes about competing for another European title and a fifth successive Premier League crown amid the financial breaches case that could plunge the club into turmoil.

The independent commission hearing into 115 Premier League charges of alleged financial breaches against City began on Monday.

City strongly deny any wrongdoing but potentially face a severe points deduction or even expulsion from the league if the verdict, which is not expected until 2025, finds them guilty. In the meantime, City extended their 100 per

cent start to the Premier League season with a 2-1 win against Brentford on Saturday.

Significantly, influential Spain midfielder Rodri played his first 45 minutes of the season in the second half after a hamstring injury suffered in the Euro 2024 final victory against England.

With England defenders John Stones and Kyle Walker also making their first starts this term, Guardiola is close to having all his stars available just in time for a hectic period.

"Rodri came on there and played really good. He played 45 and I asked him how did he feel and he said he felt good. He is so important for us," Guardiola said. "Kyle the first minutes, John the first minutes. It's really good to have that."

FOCUS

City's Rodri warns of strike action over fixture increase

AFP
Manchester

Manchester City midfielder Rodri has warned leading footballers could go on strike if clubs continue to face an ever-expanding schedule.

City, the 2023 Champions League winners, face Italian giants Inter Milan at the Etihad Stadium today, in their first match of the competition's new league phase. The expanded 36-team tournament will see all clubs play eight league fixtures, with 16 teams to play in an extra two-legged play-off round before the last 16.

City will also compete in an expanded Club World Cup at the end of the season.

"I think we are close to that. I think if you ask any player he will say the same," said Rodri when asked yesterday if there was a possibility of players going on strike.

"It is not the opinion of Rodri or whatever. I think it's the general opinion of the players. And if it keeps this way, there will be a moment where we have no other option, I really think, but let's see," he added. "I don't know what's going to happen, but it's something that worries us because we are the guys that suffer."

City could play as many as 75 games this season, with international players set for an even heavier workload. "From my experience between 40-50 is the amount of games in which a player can perform in the highest level," Rodri, who made his first City appearance of the season in Saturday's win over Brentford, said. "After that you drop because it is impossible to sustain the physical

level... Someone has to take care of ourselves because we are the main characters of this sport or business or whatever you want to call it."

City manager Pep Guardiola was more reserved, however, saying: "We are in our first game, then the second and we will see what happens in the last games to go through. It is not necessary to look now. It's in the future. We will see."

Rodri's comments echoed those of Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson, who said players were being ignored by football chiefs when it came to the issue of fixture congestion. Liverpool were away to AC Milan on last night their opening fixture. "Sometimes nobody asks the players what they think about adding more games," Alisson told reporters on Monday. "Maybe our opinion doesn't matter, but everybody knows what we think about having more games. Everybody's tired of that."

England's Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) is involved in two separate legal challenges to FIFA, the sport's global governing body, over the calendar and its introduction of a 32-team Club World Cup. "This is the year when we can look at the calendar and say clearly 'This doesn't work! Players see that and they are now experiencing it,'" PFA chief executive Maheta Molango, responding to Rodri's comments, said. "Those who run the game must now sit up and take notice."

FIFA is yet to reply to Rodri's remarks, but has previously slammed European leagues for their "commercial hypocrisy".

"Those leagues apparently prefer a calendar filled with friendlies and summer tours, often involving extensive global travel," FIFA said in July.



Manchester City's Spanish midfielder Rodri. (AFP)

Marseille complete signing Rabiot

Marseille: French club Marseille announced the signing of midfielder Adrien Rabiot, with whom they had already reached an "agreement in principle".

The French international Rabiot was a free agent since leaving Juventus in July after five years in which he won the 2020 Serie A title and two Italian Cups. "Marseille are delighted to announce the signing of Adrien Rabiot. The 29-year-old midfielder has signed a new contract... after passing his medical," said the Ligue 1 club.

Rabiot has played 48 times for France and was a runner-up at the last World Cup in Qatar. He also played five times at Euro 2024, where France were eliminated in the semi-finals by eventual winners Spain.

Marseille are off to a good start in the French top flight this season under new coach Roberto De Zerbi and Saturday's win over Nice.

RONALDO'S NASSR PART WAYS WITH COACH CASTRO

Cristiano Ronaldo's Saudi club Al Nassr announced the departure of Portuguese coach Luis Castro, a day after starting their AFC Champions League Elite campaign with a disappointing draw. Monday's 1-1 stalemate with Iraq's Al Shorta in the Asian competition compounded a slow start to the domestic season with the current contract of Ronaldo, 39, due to expire next summer. Castro, 63, is the third coach to depart Al Nassr since Ronaldo's groundbreaking arrival in early 2023 on a contract that was said to net him 400mn euros over two-and-a-half years.

Frenchman Rudi Garcia quickly left that April, followed by a brief stint by Croatian coach Dinko Jelenc before Castro was appointed in July last year.

The highly decorated Ronaldo is yet to win a Saudi trophy with the Riyadh club.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Spurs manager Postecoglou taken aback by criticism of his second season success claim

AFP
London

Tottenham Hotspur manager Ange Postecoglou insisted yesterday he had done nothing more than say "something true" as he defended his comments regarding "always winning things" in a second year at a club. The 59-year-old Australian, following Sunday's 1-0 loss at home to Arsenal in the north London derby, was asked about his pre-season comments of delivering a trophy during a second campaign as he had done in Scotland with Celtic.

Postecoglou replied "nothing's changed", as he attempts to build on last season, when he steered Spurs to fifth place in the Premier League. Former Australia boss Postecoglou also won silverware at South Melbourne and Brisbane Roar as well as in Japan with Yokohama F Marinos.

He now takes Tottenham to second-tier Cov-



entry in the third round of the League Cup today, reviving memories of the Sky Blues' 1987 FA Cup final win over Spurs. It is now 16 years since Tottenham last lifted a major trophy, the 2008 League Cup, and Postecoglou was asked again about his remarks regarding winning silverware this season.

"It is amazing, isn't it? I just stated a fact and it seems like am I supposed to just lie or just say it never happened?" Postecoglou said at a press conference. "It is confusing to me that people are making a big deal out of something - surely I am supposed to answer something that is true?"

"Like if I don't win in the second year this year, and I come out next year and say, 'well I always win in it'... well no, actually it is not true. But I have just said something that is true and it seems like it has upset a lot of people for some reason."

Postecoglou added: "Do you really think it's me sort of boasting? How am I supposed to answer something that is true? Is it to say, 'well, actually, it wasn't that important."

"They were easy competitions, and they don't mean anything? If you have achieved something, aren't you supposed to say, 'yes I have and that's what I hope to do again'? I am not really sure why people misconstrue it as me trying to boast about something. I have answered a question which is true?"