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Seifert blitz as New Zealand crush Pakistan to win series 4-1



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Argentina rout Brazil 4-1 to cap World Cup qualification party

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WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Qatar’s focus now on advancing to playoffs, says coach Garcia

Qatar’s remaining two matches are against Iran on June 5 and Uzbekistan on June 10

By Sports Reporter
Doha

With automatic qualification out of reach, Qatar head coach Luis Garcia said the focus now will be on advancing to the Asian World Cup qualifiers playoffs.

Kyrgyzstan sensationally defeated Qatar 3-1 in the Group A match in Bishkek on Tuesday and eliminating Qatar from contention for a top-two finish in the group.

It was a result which not only revived the White Falcons’ campaign but also ended Qatar’s hopes of earning automatic qualification to next year’s World Cup.

“We’re certainly unhappy with this result, because we knew how we were supposed to play, but in the end, the small details made the difference. The red card also affected us, as it came at a time when we could have scored and taken the lead,” Garcia said after the match.

With 10 points, Qatar now face a challenge from fifth-placed Kyrgyzstan (six points) to reach the fourth round. Qatar’s remaining two matches are against Iran on June 5 and Uzbekistan on June 10, while Kyrgyzstan will face eliminated North Korea and Iran in their final two matches.

“We must continue fighting and try to qualify for the World Cup. We must focus on the last two matches where we’ll try to secure our place in the playoffs and then we’ll see what happens in the future,” said Garcia. Qatar will have to contend with two tough opponents in June, with Iran and Uzbekistan their opponents.

Kyrgyzstan’s victory was well-earned, as they outplayed and outworked the two-time Asian champions. Valeriy Kichin gave them the lead just before halftime. Lucas Mendes, who was sent off shortly after,



Qatar coach Luis Garcia reacts during the World Cup Asian qualifier match against Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek on Tuesday. (Reuters)

equalised for Qatar seven minutes into the second half, but Kyrgyzstan proved too strong. Aleksandr Mishchenko and Alimardon Shukurov scored late to secure a famous win for their team.

Kyrgyzstan coach Maksim Lisitsyn paid tribute to his squad after the win. “It was a great effort by the whole team, the entire team. Everything went according to our plan. They made some adjustments on set-

pieces, especially on corners, but we didn’t deviate from our strategy,” said Lisitsyn.

“We adapted and our opponents couldn’t break through successfully. I don’t think we need to talk about the strength of the opponent as our guys were better today.”

Qatar captain Akram Afif shared his disappointment following the defeat to Kyrgyzstan. He said that the team would assess their performance and learn from their

mistakes in the remaining matches. “Our goal is to qualify for the World Cup, and we must give our best to achieve it,” Afif said after the match.

The fourth qualifying round will feature the third and fourth-placed teams from the three third-round groups. These teams will compete in a single match at a centralised venue, with the winner from each group earning a place in the World Cup.

GROUP A STANDINGS						
	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Iran	8	6	2	0	9	20
Uzbekistan	8	5	2	1	4	17
UAE	8	4	1	3	7	13
Qatar	8	3	1	4	-5	10
Kyrgyzstan	8	2	0	6	-6	6
North Korea	8	0	2	6	-9	2

Club World Cup winners to receive up to \$125mn

MANCHESTER: The winners of this year’s 32-team Club World Cup to be held in the US will earn up to \$125mn, FIFA said yesterday.

World soccer’s governing body had announced earlier this month a total prize pot of \$1bn for the June 14-July 13 event, significant in the current climate of financial regulation for clubs.

“FIFA will neither retain any funding for this tournament, as all revenues will be distributed to club football, nor will it touch FIFA’s reserves, which are set aside for global football development through the 211 FIFA Member Associations,” FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in a statement. About half of the \$1bn total will be divided between all 32 clubs, with the amount per club based on sporting and commercial criteria, meaning clubs such as Manchester City and Real Madrid will receive a greater percentage than smaller clubs in a model FIFA developed with the European Club Association. A further \$475mn will be awarded on a performance-related basis, meaning the team with the most wins over a potential seven matches will bank more cash, with a maximum pot of \$125mn available.

Numerous players and coaches, including England captain Harry Kane, have voiced concern over player welfare with the revamped Club World Cup meaning less time off between seasons.

“Of course it’s another summer where you don’t really have a break,” Kane said this week. “I think we’re getting used to it. There’s nothing really we can do about it.”

The Bayern Munich striker said he had high hopes for the event, however, telling FIFA.com that his goal was: “To win it. We’re one of the best teams in the world, without a doubt, so every tournament we go into, the idea is to win.”

FOCUS

Bodyguard arrested for false testimony at Maradona trial

AFP
San Isidro, Argentina

A former bodyguard of Diego Maradona was arrested Tuesday for allegedly giving false testimony in the trial of seven health professionals accused of criminal negligence in the late football legend’s medical care.

Julio Coria left the courtroom in the Buenos Aires suburb of San Isidro in handcuffs after judges ruled in favour of the prosecution’s claim that he had lied under oath.

Coria was present in the house where Maradona died under conditions prosecutors say amounted to negligence, and had tried to revive him with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, according to evidence before the court.

Maradona died on November 25, 2020 at age 60, while recovering at home from brain surgery for a blood clot. He had battled cocaine and alcohol addiction for decades.

His seven-person medical team is on trial for what prosecutors have called the “horror theatre” of the final days of his life.

Jana, one of the player’s five children who is a plaintiff in the case along with her siblings and Maradona’s sisters, told the court that she and her sister Gianinna



Julio Coria, former security of late Argentine football legend Diego Maradona, is escorted after being detained for false testimony at the San Isidro court in San Isidro, Buenos Aires province, Argentina. (AFP)

had visited their father a week before his death but that he was “in bad humour.”

She said Maradona’s psychologist, who is among the defendants, had advised them to hold off on further visits “until he (Maradona) asked to see the family.”

She added that her father was “bloated” during the visit and echoed accounts from other witnesses that there was no medical equipment in the house.

Maradona died of heart failure and acute pulmonary edema – a condition where fluid accumulates in the lungs – two weeks after going under the knife. Coria had tried to resuscitate him until doctors arrived at the house in the upmarket suburb of Tigre, near San Isidro, and declared him dead.

The bodyguard claimed in court Tuesday he had not spoken with

Leopoldo Luque, Maradona’s personal physician and one of the defendants on trial.

But the investigation revealed multiple text messages between the two before and after Maradona’s death. The prosecution interrupted Coria’s testimony several times, accusing him of “contradictions and omissions,” before asking for his arrest.

The seven defendants in the case are accused of “homicide with possible intent” – pursuing a course of action despite knowing it can lead to their patient’s death.

They risk prison terms of between eight and 25 years. Prosecutors allege the footballer was abandoned to his fate for a “prolonged, agonising period” before his death. Nearly 120 witnesses are expected to testify in the long-delayed trial expected to run until July.

ANNOUNCEMENT

UAE sack Bento despite World Cup qualifier win over North Korea

AFP
Abu Dhabi

The United Arab Emirates football association fired coach **Paulo Bento** yesterday, despite the team keeping their hopes alive of qualifying automatically for the 2026 World Cup by edging North Korea 2-1.

“The UAE Football Association has decided to dismiss the head coach of the national team, Paulo Bento, along with his coaching staff,” the association said.

“A replacement is expected to be named soon to lead the team in the Group A 2026 World Cup qualifiers and other official competitions,” it added.



His replacement will coach the team in the two final matches of the World Cup qualifiers against second-placed Uzbekistan on June 5 and second from bottom Kyrgyzstan on June 10.

A win over Uzbekistan would reignite their hopes of reaching the finals. They are four points adrift of the Uzbeks, who are

seeking to reach football’s quadrennial showpiece for the first time.

Bento, 55, was appointed to his position in July 2023, but has overseen a series of inconsistent results in the qualifiers, including a 2-0 loss to Iran in Tehran last Thursday.

The former Portugal and South Korea head coach faced further criticism after his team only beat North Korea in the eighth minute of injury time on Tuesday.

The UAE are third in the group with 13 points – table-topping Iran qualified on Tuesday.

The top two qualify directly for the World Cup, with teams finishing third and fourth in the three Asian groups entering a further round of qualifying.

S Africa take big World Cup lead, but may lose points over Mokoena

South Africa beat Benin 2-0 on Tuesday to lead an African 2026 World Cup qualifying group by five points, but the advantage could be reduced for fielding an ineligible player last week.

Teboho Mokoena helped South Africa beat Lesotho in round five four days ago, but should not have played as he had accumulated two yellow cards, triggering an automatic one-match ban.

A South African Football Association official, who requested anonymity, conceded that Mokoena was cautioned in matchday one against Benin in 2023 and matchday four against Zimbabwe last year.

“The team management were guilty of incompetence ahead of the Lesotho match. Mokoena should not have played,” he told AFP.

“However, FIFA rules state that protests must be lodged within 24 hours of a match ending and my understanding is Lesotho did not do so.”

Lesotho Football Association secretary-general Mokhosi Mohapi told AFP his organisation had “sent a formal inquiry to FIFA and CAF regarding Mokoena”. However, he did not say when the inquiry was sent. The FIFA disciplinary code says “the 24-hour limit (for protests) cannot be extended”.

SPOTLIGHT

Punjab dare to dream under selfless Iyer

Reuters
New Delhi

Punjab Kings' owners will feel the \$3.17mn they splurged on **Shreyas Iyer** was money well spent after the 30-year-old demonstrated selfless leadership in Tuesday's Indian Premier League (IPL) victory against 2022 champions Gujarat Titans.

Perennial underdogs Punjab have reached the IPL final only once when they finished runners-up to Kolkata Knight Riders in 2014, and they came ninth of 10 teams last year.

Iyer guided Kolkata to their third IPL title last year but was then released by the team, opening the door for Punjab to chase the batter's signature and put him in charge of the squad.

A key member of India's victorious Champions Trophy squad, Iyer smashed an unbeaten 97 against Gujarat in Ahmedabad in a 42-ball blitz featuring nine sixes and five fours.

Despite being on the brink of his first IPL hundred, Iyer then gave batting partner Shashank Singh the green light to swing away in their final over instead of asking him to look for a single to bring his captain on strike.

Shashank smashed five fours in that 23-run final over to power Punjab to a commanding 243-5.

"I was going to ask him if I should take a single or something but he only came and told me to not worry about his hundred," said Shashank, who belted 44 not out off just 16 balls. "It takes a lot of heart and courage to say that because obviously hundreds don't come easily in T20, especially in IPL," Shashank added.

Fifties by Sai Sudharshan and Jos Buttler kept Gujarat in the hunt but they could manage only 232-5 despite Sherfane Rutherford's brisk 46 at number four.

Iyer, named player of the match, said their final-over fireworks with the bat proved decisive with Punjab seamer Arshdeep Singh comfortably defending 27 runs in Gujarat's last over.

Born and brought up in the Mumbai cricket tradition, Iyer made a name for himself as a young, hard-hitting batter and useful spinner. His IPL journey has been nothing short of remarkable, with successful stints at Delhi Capitals and Kolkata Knight Riders, the reigning champions. His time at Delhi was especially notable from a PBKS point of view as it marked the beginning of a partnership that is now rekindled in Mohali – the electrifying combination with Ricky Ponting.

Shreyas' IPL career carries some interesting statistics – 3,224 runs in 116 innings, placing him an impressive 26th on the all-time IPL run-getters list. His best season with the bat came in 2020, when he amassed 519 runs.

"Getting those extra 40 runs after the 200, we had set that as the benchmark," Iyer said about the game on Tuesday.

"With the dew coming in, we knew that the scenario would be changing. Thankfully, we were able to execute and the way he (Shashank) performed was simply brilliant."

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27-03-2025



CRICKET

De Kock's hits 97 as Kolkata thrash Rajasthan in IPL

De Kock bosses the chase with his 61-ball innings with six sixes

AFP
Guwahati, India

South Africa's Quinton de Kock struck an unbeaten 97 as holders Kolkata Knight Riders registered their first win of the IPL season with an eight-wicket hammering of Rajasthan Royals yesterday.

Spinners Moeen Ali and Varun Chakravarthy combined to help restrict Rajasthan to 151-9 after KKR elected to field first in Guwahati.

De Kock bossed the chase with his 61-ball innings laced with eight fours and six sixes as Kolkata achieved their target with 15 balls to spare.

He handed his team a quick start, hitting two fours but then lost opening partner Moeen, run out for five.

Skipper Ajinkya Rahane fell after a brisk 18 but De Kock stood firm and along with impact substitute Angkrish Raghuvanshi, who made 22, steered the team home in an unbeaten stand of 83.

De Kock finished with a six off Jofra Archer as Kolkata bounced back from their opening loss to Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

Rajasthan suffered their second straight loss.

Earlier, Kolkata fast bowler Vaibhav Arora dismissed Sanju Samson, bowled for 13, and Chakravarthy and Moeen soon took two wickets each.



Kolkata Knight Riders' Quinton de Kock (left) plays a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Rajasthan Royals at the Barsapara Cricket Stadium in Guwahati yesterday. (AFP)

Wicketkeeper Samson is Rajasthan's regular captain but has been forced to play only as a batter in the first three matches due to an injury.

Chakravarthy, who starred in India's recent Champions Trophy triumph, got stand-in-skipper Riyan Parag out caught behind for 25.

Former England all-rounder Moeen, in for the unwell Sunil

Narine, stifled the opposition with his off-spin and was rewarded with the wicket of Yashasvi Jaiswal for 29.

The 37-year-old and Chakravarthy both struck again as Rajasthan slipped to 82-5 in 11 overs.

Wickets kept tumbling for Rajasthan and despite wicketkeeper-batsman Dhruv Jurel's 33 and 16 from Archer, they settled for a below-par total.

Arora and fellow quick Harshit Rana also took two wickets each.

KKR, under Shreyas Iyer who is now Punjab Kings captain after a \$3.17mn move in the auction, won their third IPL title last year.

BRIEF SCORES
Kolkata Knight Riders 153 for 2 (de Kock 97) **beat Rajasthan Royals 151 for 9** (Jurel 33, Varun 2-17, Moeen 2-23) **by 8 wickets**

FOCUS

Seifert shines as New Zealand hammer Pakistan

AFP
Wellington

Adestructive Tim Seifert ensured New Zealand made short work of their 129-run target to win the final Twenty20 against Pakistan by eight wickets yesterday and take the series 4-1.

Seifert, who made an unbeaten 97 off 38 deliveries, set the big-hitting tone in Wellington with 18 off the first over by Jahandad Khan after being hit on the body with the first ball.

Fellow opener Finn Allen followed with 14 in the second over from Mohammad Ali.

When Jahandad returned in the sixth over Seifert was even more belligerent when he belted 25, including three sixes.

"After I nearly got hit on the head with that first ball I thought there's only one way to play," Seifert said. "A few shots go your way and you're backing yourself and backing your skills and when you do get a match up you commit 100 percent and try to take that bowler down."



New Zealand's Tim Seifert (right) with Jacob Duffy pose with the series trophy after victory during the Twenty20 against Pakistan at Sky Stadium in Wellington yesterday. (AFP)

Seifert's rollicking innings included six fours and 10 sixes.

Allen compiled a bright 27 from 12 deliveries, including five fours and a six, before he was first to fall in the seventh over when New Zealand had reached 93.

Mark Chapman had a short stay and was gone for three before Seifert and Daryl Mitchell (two not out) brought the hosts home as they finished 131-2.

Pakistan captain Salman Agha

said the one positive for him in a lop-sided series was the experience gained by his young squad.

"Obviously they (New Zealand) were outstanding and you have to credit to them. They just outplayed us in the whole series," he said. "But we have a few positives and we'll take that and move forward. We will back them. They will have more games and they will have experience and they will come good."

Pakistan, batting first, struggled before reaching 128-9 on the back of a mid-order rally by Salman and Shadab Khan. The pair came together at 52-5 and put on 54 for the sixth wicket, refusing to be pressured by the New Zealand pace attack which dominated the first half of the innings. Shadab put on 28 off 20 deliveries, including five boundaries, while Salman scored 51 off 39.

Both fell to Jimmy Neesham, the pick of the New Zealand bowlers with impressive figures of 5-22, his maiden five-wicket bag in T20Is, from his four overs.

Jacob Duffy, who took 2-18, started the Pakistan batting rout when he claimed the first wicket in the second over with the removal of Hasan Nawaz for his third duck in the series. He added Omaid Yousuf in his following over as Pakistan struggled to cope with Duffy's swing and seam movement

BRIEF SCORES
New Zealand 131 for 2 (Seifert 97*) **beat Pakistan 128 for 9** (Agha 51, Neesham 5-22) **by eight wickets**

COMMENT

Players' union calls for reform of 'chaotic' global cricket calendar

AFP
London

The World Cricketers' Association issued a blunt assessment about the state of the game yesterday as it urged officials to create defined windows in a "chaotic" schedule and provide a fairer distribution of the sport's riches.

The global players' union comments formed part of a review that took six months to compile and included the views of both current and former professionals, administrators and commercial partners.

It concluded that the unchecked growth of Twenty20 franchise cricket is creating a stranglehold that leaves the current "chaotic, inconsistent and confusing" international schedule "at genuine risk".

The WCA's most striking solution to that problem is a complete overhaul of the International Cricket Council's existing future tours programme.

The current set-up, which dictates the bilateral obligations for each country, allows for huge differences between the sport's wealthiest and poorest leading nations.

The players' union wants four distinct international windows each year, alongside divisional structures for all three formats – Tests, one-day internationals and T20s – taking in promotion and relegation based on results and

feeding into World Cup qualification.

The new plans are proposed to take effect in men's cricket from 2028 and women's cricket in 2029 – when the existing agreements expire.

The WCA, many of whose members benefit financially from franchise tournaments, hopes this will allow international cricket "to co-exist with the growing T20 leagues rather than compete with them, thereby ensuring its future survival".

Paul Marsh, chair of the sub-committee who produced the report, said: "Whilst there are a number of positive trends in cricket, there is no doubt that global cricket is at an inflection point."

"Many of the issues highlighted in the report are challenging, but they need to be discussed if we are to create a more sustainable future in more than just a few countries."

Marsh, a son of the late Australia cricket great Rodney Marsh, added: "Creating a clearer global calendar and incorporating more consistency across formats along with greater competition integrity and context for international cricket, will benefit cricket and all of its stakeholders hugely."

The WCA report also called for a new revenue model to combat the current financial dominance of India, England and Australia and modernisation of the ICC based on principles of "shared ownership, independence, and representation reflective of the whole sport".

Reports: Red Bull axing Liam Lawson after just two races

London: Red Bull is set to replace **Liam Lawson** just two races into the 2025 Formula 1 season, according to multiple reports.

Following an emergency meeting in Dubai, the F1 team has decided to promote Yuki Tsunoda from its Racing Bulls team to partner with four-time reigning world champion Max Verstappen, according to Dutch outlet De Limburger.

Lawson, 23, was selected in December by team principal Christian Horner to replace Sergio Perez, who reached an agreement to part ways with Red Bull after four years.

Tsunoda was among those who was also in consideration for the seat, as was Isack Hadjar. However, the team ultimately decided to go with Lawson, who had been on the Red Bull junior team since 2019 and took over Daniel Ricciardo's seat during last season.

The New Zealander entered 2025 with 11 F1 starts to his credit but has been unable to keep pace to begin 2025 in the RB21 car. Lawson failed to get out of Q1 in Australia and China and has yet to register a point for the team with P15 and P12 finishes. He was the slowest car on the grid during both the sprint and qualifying sessions in China.

Honda has been a significant proponent of Tsunoda's, reportedly offering millions of dollars for the 24-year-old Japanese star to get an opportunity to race alongside Verstappen in his fifth F1 season.



Tsunoda is expected to take over Lawson's seat at his home circuit at the Japanese Grand Prix, with Lawson returning to team with Hadjar at Racing Bulls.

Verstappen 'disagrees'

According to the Dutch publication *De Telegraaf*, Verstappen "disagrees with management's decision to intervene so soon." Red Bull finished third in the 2024 constructors' championship, and currently sits behind McLaren and Mercedes two races into 2025.

That's with Verstappen contributing all 36 points to the team so far. The Racing Bulls are ninth, with Tsunoda contributing all three of the team's points while showing impressive pace.

FOCUS

Pogacar eyes Paris-Roubaix title glory

AFP
Paris

Three-time Tour de France champion Tadej Pogacar will bid to avenge his defeat by Mathieu van der Poel in the Milan-San Remo and race in the Paris-Roubaix, another of the ‘Monuments’, for the first time, his team UAE announced yesterday.

The 26-year-old Slovenian will be the first reigning Tour de France champion to tackle the most dangerous of the Monument races since Greg Lemond in 1991 – the American finished 55th. Cycling legends Bernard Hinault and Eddie Merckx also tried to win the one-day race in 1982 and 1975 respectively, a year after winning the Tour de France. Neither was successful although Merckx finished second, edged out on the line by Roger De Vlaeminck.

However, they both achieved perhaps an even greater feat in landing the two races in the same year, with Merckx doing the double in 1970 and Hinault in 1981. Victory on April 13 would set Pogacar up nicely to join that elite duo. He already has seven Monu-

ment victories to his credit, including the 2023 Tour of Flanders. “It was initially planned for Tadej Pogacar to participate in both the E3 Saxo Classic and Gent-Wevelgem,” read UAE’s statement.

“However, after discussions with the team, it has been decided that he will adjust his calendar to focus on the Tour of Flanders and Paris-Roubaix instead, aiming for peak form in those iconic races.”

The change of plan is a victory for Pogacar, who has said he prefers the one day races to multi-stage ones, as he had argued to compete in the Paris-Roubaix, against the wishes of the team directors who were concerned about the possibility of injury. Paris-Roubaix is considered the most dangerous race of them all, largely owing to its six million cobble stones, many of them uneven, which has resulted in serious injuries to the riders.

Mauro Gianetti, UAE team manager, highlighted their concerns for the best paid member of the peloton – he is believed to earn €8mn (\$8.6mn) a year – in the one-day races after he had fallen in the Strade Bianchi before getting back up to win it. “A bad fall could put a question

mark over his competing in the Tour de France and maybe the rest of the season,” said Gianetti. “He has enough time in his career to ride in the Paris-Roubaix.”

However, his decision, after finishing third in the Milan-San Remo, delighted Paris-Roubaix race director Thierry Gouvenou.

“It is a huge moment for cycling,” said Gouvenou. “It has been a long time since we had a Tour de France winner who is a genuine contender to win the Paris-Roubaix. He is going to face a challenge suited to his talent.”

Gouvenou, though, believes Pogacar is up against it with rivals like Dutch ace Van der Poel, Belgian Wout Van Aert and Italy’s Filippo Ganna, who was second in the Milan-San Remo.

“If Van Der Poel is at the top of his game, it will be very difficult for Pogacar,” said Gouvenou. “He is going to race on a route that is not suited to him.

“If ever he wins Paris-Roubaix it will be against the odds. But that is what we all expect: to see champions up against it.

“This race could make him even greater than he is now.”



UAE Team Emirates team's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar wearing the best young rider's white jersey (right) cycles across a cobblestone sector with the pack of riders during the 5th stage of the 109th edition of the Tour de France cycling race in northern France, on July 6, 2022. (AFP)

TENNIS

Philippines teen Eala ousts Swiatek from Miami Open

Eala is the third wild card to reach the last four in Miami, following Henin in 2010 and Azarenka in 2018

Agencies
Miami Gardens, United States

Teenage wild card Alexandra Eala turned in the most remarkable performance so far of her history-making breakout run at the Miami Open, ousting No. 2 seed Iga Swiatek 6-2, 7-5 to make the first WTA semi-final of her career.

Eala, 19, is the first player from the Philippines to reach a tour-level semi-final, and is now guaranteed to become the first Filipina to be ranked inside the Top 100 of the PIF WTA Rankings next Monday.

“It’s just surreal,” said Eala. “I’m trusting my shots and I have a great team to tell me that I can do it,” she said. She is the third wild card to reach the last four in Miami, following Justine Henin in 2010 and Victoria Azarenka in 2018 – both of whom were former World No. 1s returning from extended breaks.

No. 140-ranked Eala, whose run this fortnight has also included wins over Jelena Ostapenko and Madison Keys, is just the second wild card to defeat three or more Grand Slam champions in a single tour-level event, following Elin Svitolina at Wimbledon 2023. Prior to Miami, she had never de-



Alexandra Eala of the Philippines hits a forehand against Iga Swiatek of Poland on day nine of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. **Right:** Novak Djokovic of Serbia celebrates after his match against Lorenzo Musetti of Italy. (AFP/Reuters)

feated an opponent in the Top 40, nor faced one in the Top 20.

The result is just Swiatek’s third loss to a player ranked outside the Top 100 in a WTA main draw. Previously, she fell to Karolina Muchova (No. 106 at the time) in the first round of Prague 2019 and Ana Konjuh (No. 338 at the time) in the third round of Miami 2021.

Superstar Djokovic on a roll

Novak Djokovic won 12 of the last 14 games of his match against Lorenzo Musetti to crush the Italian 6-2 6-2 and move into the quarter-finals of the Miami Open in his best performance since the Australian Open.

The momentum in the rain-delayed match seemed to swing in

Djokovic’s favour when he complained to the chair umpire in the opening set over a serve clock warning. That frustration seemed to spark the Serbian, who broke the next game for a 4-2 lead and never looked back in the presence of an adoring crowd that included tennis greats Serena Williams and Juan Martin del Potro.

Next up for fourth-seeded Djokovic is American Sebastian Korda, who prevailed 6-4 2-6 6-4 over veteran Frenchman Gael Monfils earlier in the day.

Argentine Francisco Cerundolo upset three-times major finalist Casper Ruud 6-4 6-2 to reach the quarter-final of the tournament for the third time in four years.

On the women’s side, Italian sixth-seed Jasmine Paolini saved seven of the eight break points she faced to defeat Magda Linette and reach the semi-finals. Paolini will next face world number one and first-time Miami semi-finalist Aryna Sabalenka, who beat China’s Zheng Qinwen 6-2 7-5 in a rematch of their 2024 Australian Open final.



CYCLING

Ayuso pips Roglic to Tour of Catalonia stage three victory in a frantic finish

AFP
Barcelona

Home favourite Juan Ayuso snatched victory on stage three of the Tour of Catalonia fractionally ahead of 2023 winner Primož Roglic and climbed to the top of the general classification yesterday.

The UAE Team Emirates rider passed Roglic in the final metres and the Slovenian could not battle his way back in front as they sprinted across the line in a photo finish.

Barcelona-born Ayuso triumphed after a gruelling 218-kilometre ride from Viladecans through snow-capped hills to a mountain finish at La Molina.

Roglic is second overall, trailing Tirreno-Adriatico winner Ayuso by six seconds, with another Spaniard, Mikel Landa third, 11 seconds off the top.

Ayuso and 35-year-old veteran Roglic, a four-time Vuelta a Espana winner, are the leading contenders for the overall classification with reigning champion Tadej Pogacar not competing.

“(Winning overall) is the main goal, but here it’s very important to win stages because they also come with bonus seconds and many years this race has been decided by less than 10 seconds,” Ayuso told *Teledепorte*.

The 22-year-old secured 10 bonus seconds after crossing the line in just over five hours 49 minutes, while Roglic took six and Soudal-Quick-Step’s Landa four.



Team UAE’s Juan Ayuso (centre) and Team Bora’s Primož Roglic (right) sprint to cross the finish line in first and second place respectively followed by Team Soudal-Quick Step’s Mikel Landa (left) during the 3rd stage of the 2025 Volta a Catalunya cycling tour of Catalonia yesterday. (AFP)

Today’s stage four is another mountainous run, taking riders 188.7 kilometres from Sant Vicenc de Castellet to Montserrat. The seven-day race ends on Sunday in Barcelona with the ascent of Montjuic to the Olympic stadium, where La Liga leaders Barcelona currently play home games.

Dozens fall as Molano wins chaotic Brugge-De Panne

Team UAE’s Colombian sprinter Sebastian Molano avoided a series of falls that took out dozens of his rivals to win the one-day Brugge-De Panne classic yesterday ahead of form fast man Jonathan Milan.

Molano launched a long range sprint from 500m to edge home ahead of Mi-

lan and the Estonian Madis Mihkels.

The final 5km were a reminder of how dangerous road cycling can be with a number of riders hitting the tarmac in the frantic run up on narrow streets with tram tracks and road furniture adding to the hazards.

“That was without doubt one of the most dangerous races I’ve ever been involved in. The main challenge was staying on the bike,” said Molano.

Top Belgian sprinters Jasper Philipsen and Tim Merlier both crashed as did another Belgian Arnaud De Lie.

“Given the chaos I decided to go from far out and when I saw nobody was following I put my head down,” said Molano.

McIlroy locked in on present in Houston, not future in Augusta

Houston, Texas: Rory McIlroy insists he’s not looking past this week’s Texas Children’s Houston Open, even with the Masters Tournament coming around the corner.

McIlroy will look to record his third win of the season this weekend when he tees off today at Memorial Park Golf Course.

The World’s No. 2 golfer is making his first appearance at the tournament since 2014.

“I just want to get a card in my hand and shoot scores and hopefully get myself in contention and try to win another golf tournament,” McIlroy said yesterday. “It’s not as if I’m playing here this week and thinking about two weeks’ time. I’m here, I’m in the present, I’m trying to do my best this week and trying to win this golf tournament.”

The Masters will be played April 10-13 at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia.

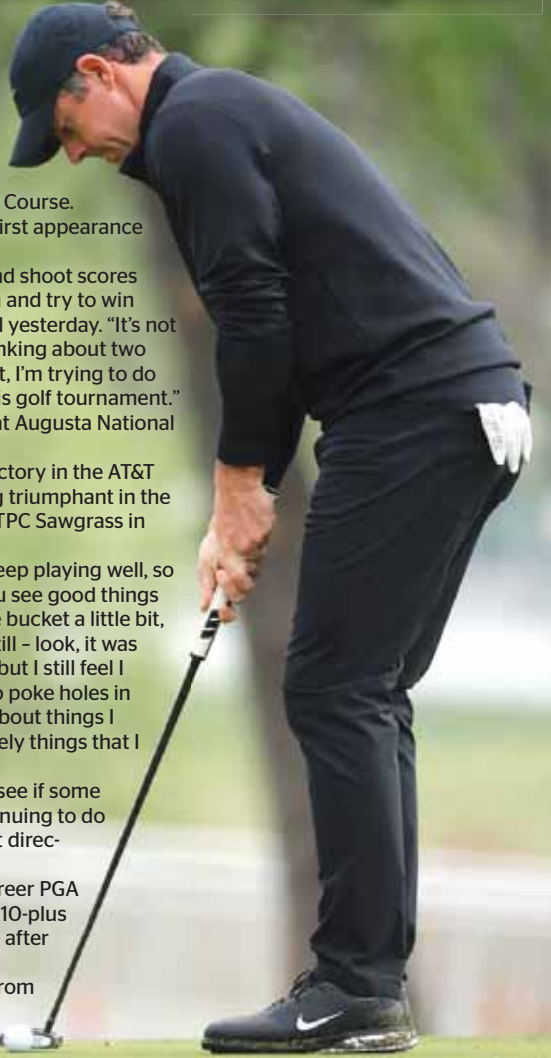
McIlroy, 35, began the season with a victory in the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am before emerging triumphant in the Players Championship on March 17 at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

“I’m obviously playing well, I want to keep playing well, so I think every round you play where you see good things you’re sort of filling up that confidence bucket a little bit, so I want to see that,” McIlroy said. “I still – look, it was great to get a win a couple weeks ago but I still feel I could have played a lot better. I tried to poke holes in a lot of my game last week and think about things I could do better, and there were definitely things that I could work on or do better.

“It’s a good opportunity to go out and see if some of the work I did at home and I’m continuing to do here, hopefully it’s all going in the right direction.”

McIlroy has four major titles and 28 career PGA victories on his resume, however he is 10-plus years removed from his last major title after winning four in a four-year span.

The Masters is the only prize missing from his career Grand Slam.



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland hits a putt on the 14th green prior to the Texas Children’s Houston Open 2025 at Memorial Park Golf Course in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

FOCUS

Argentina rout Brazil to cap World Cup qualification party

‘IT’S HARD TO TALK ABOUT IT IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT... IT’S EMBARRASSING’

AFP
Buenos Aires

Argentina celebrated their 2026 World Cup qualification with a dazzling 4-1 thrashing of arch-rivals Brazil in Buenos Aires on Tuesday.

Julian Alvarez, Enzo Fernandez, Alexis Mac Allister and Giuliano Simeone sealed an emphatic win for the world champions, who had been assured of their World Cup berth after Bolivia's 0-0 draw with Uruguay earlier Tuesday.

That goalless stalemate ensured a festive atmosphere at the Estadio Monumental before a ball had been kicked and Argentina kept the party going with a blistering performance.

Atletico Madrid forward Alvarez opened the scoring after just six minutes, latching onto Thiago Almada's through ball and dinking a close-range finish past Brazil goalkeeper Bento. It got better for Argentina six minutes later when Chelsea's Fernandez tucked away the hosts' second goal of the night after Brazil's back four failed to deal with a low cross.

With Brazil being run ragged by a rampant Argentina, they were thrown a lifeline on 26 minutes after a blunder by Cristian Romero gifted a goal to Mattheus Cunha.

Tottenham defender Romero was caught in possession 25 yards from goal, allowing Cunha to steal in and drive a low shot past Emiliano Martinez to make it 2-1. But



Argentina players celebrate their victory in the 2026 FIFA World Cup South American qualifiers match against Brazil at the Mas Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires province. (AFP)

any hopes of a Brazilian fight-back were snuffed out in the 37th minute with a superb goal from Mac Allister. Almada was once again the creator, lofting a pass into the area which Mac Allister

met with a first-time volley to make it 3-1.

With Argentina in complete control, Simeone then brought the house down with a 71st minute strike to make it 4-1 – his first

international goal. Simeone, the 22-year-old son of Argentine legend Diego Simeone, somehow blasted into the roof of the net from an acute angle to crown a dominant performance by the

hosts. The win means Argentina have qualified for next year's finals in the United States, Mexico and Canada with four games to spare.

The Argentines lead the 10-team qualifying group with 31

points from 14 games and are guaranteed one of the six automatic qualifying slots awarded to South America. Brazil are fourth.

Brazil captain Marquinhos apologised to the fans after the defeat. "What we did here today can't happen again," he told Brazilian TV Globo. "It's hard to talk about it in the heat of the moment... It's embarrassing. We started the game very badly, far below what we could do and they're on a great run of confidence. They knew how to play smart ... I'm sorry for our fans"

In other South American games, Ecuador stayed on course for qualification with a 0-0 draw against Chile in Santiago. Ecuador are second in the standings, eight points adrift of Argentina on 23 points. Uruguay's draw with Bolivia – and Brazil's heavy loss – allowed them to move up to third place on goal difference.

Colombia meanwhile missed the chance to close the gap on the leaders after a 2-2 home draw with Paraguay in Barranquilla.

Goals from Luis Diaz and Jhon Duran fired Colombia into a 2-0 lead after just 13 minutes but Paraguay grabbed a share of the points with goals from Junior Alonso and Julio Enciso. Venezuela boosted their hopes of a first-ever World Cup qualification with a 1-0 win over Peru in Maturin. Salomon Rondon's 41st-minute penalty secured three precious points for Venezuela, who are the only South American team never to have qualified for the World Cup.

BOTTOMLINE

Japan display talent and ambition to scale new heights at World Cup

AFP
Tokyo

Japan have never gone beyond the last 16 at a World Cup but they have set themselves the ambitious target of winning next year's tournament after dominating in Asian qualifying.

Hajime Moriyasu's side became the first team to punch their ticket to the 2026 competition in the United States, Canada and Mexico when they beat Bahrain 2-0 last week in Saitama.

With their place sealed, they followed that up with a 0-0 home draw with Saudi Arabia, giving them 20 points from eight games with 24 goals scored and two conceded in the third round of qualifiers. Japan are 15th in the FIFA rankings and Moriyasu and his players firmly believe they can become the first Asian team to lift the World Cup next summer. "We're aiming to win it," said Crystal Palace midfielder Daichi Kamada, one of five English Premier League players in the squad. "That's what we all keep saying. Our goal is to win the World Cup."

Japan have reached the last 16 four times since making their first World Cup appearance in 1998. They stunned Germany and Spain to reach the knock-out stage at the 2022 tournament in Qatar but lost on penalties to Croatia.

"That showed us that we had a chance, which was a big thing for me," said Moriyasu.

"The Japan Football Association has been saying that we want to win the World Cup by 2050 and we are taking on the challenge to improve so that we can make it happen."

Moriyasu knows that his team are not there yet and said they have to "improve in every department" before heading to North America.

He can call on more Europe-based players than ever, with 11 appearing in this season's UEFA Champions League. Captain Wataru Endo has become an important part of Liverpool's squad while Kaoru Mitoma has developed into one of the best wingers in the Premier



Japan's players pose before the start of the 2026 FIFA World Cup Asian qualification match against Saudi Arabia in Saitama. (AFP)

League at Brighton. Real Sociedad's Takefusa Kubo is one of the best attackers in the Spanish league. Japan have more strength in depth than ever before but Endo says there is no friction between players competing for starting places. "We all have to think about what's best for the team and everyone understands that," he said.

"I think that's a particular strong point among Japanese people. I think Japan are the strongest when it comes to team unity."

Japan have often performed best at World Cups when expectations have been low.

They narrowly lost to Belgium in the last 16 at the 2018 tournament in Russia just two months after firing their coach.

They went to the 2014 World Cup in Brazil confident that they could make a splash but returned home early after a dismal display in the group stage. Defender Yuto Nagatomo, who has played at a record four World Cups, said: "We have improved but if you overestimate your

own ability and are too pleased with yourself, that's when it all starts to fall apart."

The 38-year-old, who has won 142 caps for Japan, added: "I personally experienced that at the World Cup in Brazil and I think that's the danger. "It's OK for everyone to know that they are good players, but you have to back it up every day in training."

Japan cannot be accused of lacking ambition, with Endo calling for fans to buy into their goal of winning the World Cup in an on-pitch address after sealing qualification. That may be seen as unrealistic by some, but as Spain and Germany found out in Qatar, Japan are a threat.

"What's important from this point is not the results but the process," said Endo.

"Until now we've been trying to qualify so we've needed to get results.

"If we want to win the World Cup, how we use our time between now and the tournament is crucial."

SPOTLIGHT

Flick concerned over Barca players' recovery time ahead

Reuters
Barcelona

Barcelona's national team players have not recovered in time for the La Liga game at home to Osasuna, manager Hansi Flick said yesterday, expressing his disappointment over the re-scheduling of the game soon after the international break.

La Liga leaders Barca face Osasuna on Thursday after the game was postponed earlier this month due to the death of the Catalan club's doctor Carles Mirnaro Garcia.

Flick said "the players from Spain, France, and the Netherlands need to recover" as they were on international duty during the break and "it's not the best situation for them."

Thirteen Barca players have been on international duty.

Spain called up Pau Cubarsi, Pedri, Dani Olmo, Lamine Yamal and Ferran Torres, Netherlands featured Frenkie de Jong, France included Jules Kounde and Poland had Robert Lewandowski. Fermin Lopez, Pablo Torre and Gerard Martin were with Spain under-21s.

"The players have played with their national teams, and that's bad. Now we have to play against Osasuna, and we have to talk about whether it's the right time ... I'm not happy. There are other leagues that do it differently," he told reporters.

"I can't change that. That's my personal opinion. But we're going to play, we're not making excuses. The team is ready and

we have to strive for the best performance. We're going for it.

"The quality of the team is good and we can beat anyone even if the players don't get the optimal rest."

Barcelona duo Raphinha and Ronald Araujo will be unavailable on Thursday as they played for Brazil and Uruguay respectively in World Cup qualifiers.

"They won't play or be in the team. They're out. The flight is long and it's not the most optimal situation. They have to train," Flick said.

"They have to recover and train, and then we'll see on Sunday. But the team is fantastic, and we have to fight for the three points. When we win and get three more points, it will be the best reaction we can give."

Barca host Girona in La Liga on Sunday. Flick said Pau Cubarsi is also unavailable and will require "three days of recovery", however Eric Garcia, Inigo Martinez and Robert Lewandowski will play against 14th-placed Osasuna.

Barcelona, who are level on 60 points with second-placed Real Madrid, face a packed schedule over the next 20 days, with seven matches across La Liga, the Copa del Rey and the Champions League but Flick said it was not a huge challenge for them.

"I've spoken to the rest of the staff and the physios ... and we've talked about what we can do to help the players recover better," the 60-year-old said.

"They've told me they're fit, fine. Playing every three days isn't a big deal for them and I believe them."



Barcelona's coach Hans Flick.

Kane eyes Shilton record as caps pile up in England's 'new era'

England captain Harry Kane believes he can become his country's longest-serving international and cap his career with World Cup glory in 2026.

The 31-year-old striker made his 105th appearance in Monday's 3-0 qualifying win over Latvia, also finding the net for his 71st international goal.

That game was Kane's 105th in England colours to stand just 20 games behind goalkeeper Peter Shilton's all-time national record. "It's definitely there. I've made it clear I want to play for England as long as possible," said Kane.

"Of course leading up to the World Cup, there are plenty of games before then and hopefully eight games in that tournament.

"It's 10 years this week (Thursday) since I played for England for the first time. It's been a great journey, a lot of ups, a lot of downs." He added: "Now it's a new era, a new chapter and I'm even more excited to hopefully have more years here and get far in tournaments and have those special moments in this country and try to give the fans what we all so desperately want, which is to win a major trophy."

Meanwhile, Kane said players do not have a voice when it comes to scheduling but he would never refuse to play as he goes in search of trophies.

With an increased Champions League schedule, a bigger World Cup and the recent expansion of the European Championship, top players are playing more games than ever.

Kane's Bayern Munich club are in contention for the Champions League and involved in this summer's revamped Club World Cup. With an international window sandwiched in between, Kane

could go without a meaningful summer break.

"I don't think the players are listened to that much, if I'm totally honest. But also everyone wants their piece, their tournament, their prize, and the players are kind of the people who have to get on with it," he said.

"But it is what it is. I love playing football, so I'm never going to complain about playing football. "I think if you manage it well, with your coaches and your manager and your clubs, there are ways of getting more rest in certain moments."