SPORT ↘14
MANCHESTER UNITED STUN MANCHESTER CITY IN FA CUP FINAL TO GIVE TEN HAG HOPE OF AVOIDING SACK



SPORT ↘15
POLAND'S IGA SWIATEK EYES PLACE AMONG GREATS WITH FOURTH FRENCH OPEN CROWN



Al Sadd relish 'significant' milestone after Amir Cup triumph

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: The iconic Education City Stadium was in a state of euphoria on Friday night as Al Sadd players and their fans celebrated their Amir Cup triumph after prevailing over Qatar SC in an exciting final.

The Wolves, this time under coach Wesam Rizq, stamped their authority in the prestigious tournament claiming the trophy for a record 19th time. Al Arabi are closest to them with nine crowns.

Colombian midfielder Mateus Uribe scored the winning goal in 118th minute after the regulation time ended in goalless draw, as Al Sadd overcome spirited Qatar SC, who reached the title clash after beating the likes of Al Rayyan and Al Gharafa. The win also completed the season's double for Rizk's men as they also topped the Expo Stars League (ESL).

Baghdad Bounedjah, who captained the side in his last match for Al Sadd, was overjoyed after lifting the trophy.



Al Sadd coach Wesam Rizk and striker Akram Afif pose with the Amir Cup trophy.

"It was the most beautiful moment of my life when I received the trophy from His Highness the Amir," said the Algerian striker.

"This moment will remain in my memory and I want to thank Hassan Al Haydos who gave me the captain's armband. It was a great gesture from him. I have not yet decided about my next destination, for now I will celebrate this great win," Bounedjah, who earlier announced his departure from the club after eight years, said.

Qatar star Akram Afif, who was instrumental for Al Sadd throughout the season, was elated with the triumph.

"This Amir Cup crown, our 19th title triumph is certainly a significant milestone for us," said Afif, who is the front-runner to bag the Best Player accolade at today's Qatar Football Association (QFA) Awards.

"It was a tough match as Qatar SC put up a great fight and I believe our team deserved the victory in the intense match. We maintained our focus to achieve our goal and we are delighted to claim the prestigious title."

Paulo Otavio, who joined the club last year from German club Wolfsburg, also recounted his joy of winning Qatar's most popular tournament.

"This is my first Amir Cup victory and it's amazing after we fought hard for a win," said the Brazilian.

"After winning the League, securing the double this season is fantastic. Al Sadd fans were great and their presence in such a large number in the final really motivated us and brought the best out of us."

Boualem Khoukhi also thanked Al Sadd's supporters, who outnumbered Qatar SC fans during the final.

"Our fans were really a driving force behind our victory in a difficult title clash. Lifting the Amir Cup trophy at the World Cup stadium is a great feeling. We showed great determination and fighting spirit to clinch this honour," he said.

Al Sadd's Sporting Director Mohammed Gholam, meanwhile, said the title was a great motivation for the club ahead of the new season.

"Winning the Amir Cup will serve as a motivation and a boost for the new season. Al Sadd always love the podium, and we are grateful to have finished the season with a remarkable double," he said.

PSG win French Cup and complete trophy double



Paris Saint-Germain players and officials celebrate after winning the French Cup final against Lyon, yesterday. League champions PSG beat Lyon 2-1 to complete the double in Kylian Mbappé's last game for the club. France winger Ousmane Dembele and Spain midfielder Fabian Ruiz scored for PSG in the first half. Lyon defender Jake O'Brien got a consolation goal in the second half. PSG won the league and cup for the first time since 2020 when it achieved a domestic treble by also lifting the now defunct League Cup. Despite losing in the final, Lyon still qualified for the Europa League by finishing sixth in the league. AFP



Barcelona's players celebrate with the trophy. AFP

Barca avenge Lyon defeats to win third women's Champions League

BILBAO: Aitana Bonmati and Alexia Putellas struck to earn Barcelona their third women's Champions League trophy, securing a 2-0 triumph over record eight-time winners Lyon yesterday.

The defending champions had never beaten the French giants, losing in the 2019 and 2022 finals against them, but finally succeeded in Bilbao to compete a spectacular quadruple this season in coach Jonatan Giraldez's last match in charge.

Bonmati pounced after 63 minutes and substitute Putellas finished the job in stoppage time to avenge Barcelona's prior defeats by Sonia Bompastor's side.

Securing their third Champions League trophy from five final appearances across the last six seasons, Barcelona demonstrated that they are the new powerhouse of the women's game.

Barca stars insisted this time they were capable of beating Lyon, adding experience and mental strength to their undoubted talent, and so it proved at a packed San Mames.

Backed by the vast majority of a 51,000 record crowd at a women's Champions League final, Bonmati and her side completed one of the few outstanding challenges remaining to them.

"It's the first time we've beaten Lyon, I'm proud of the team, and we know that with these fans we have, we can't fail," Bonmati told DAZN. — *AFP*

Al Duhail, Al Arabi ready for Qatar Cup final

CHINTHANA WASALA
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Stage is set for a thrilling showdown between Al Duhail and Al Arabi as the two giants face off in the final of the Qatar Handball Cup today.

The title clash, set to take place at the Qatar Handball Association's court promises an exciting match-up and will be a repeat of the 2021 final in which Al Arabi prevailed with a 30-28 score.

On their way to the final, Al Duhail displayed their dominance over former champions and the reigning League champions Al Rayyan, securing an emphatic 35-24 win.

This also secured Al Duhail their fourth Qatar Cup final since 2017.

Unlike Al Duhail, Al Arabi had to overcome a fierce opponent in Al Ahli in the semi-final which eventually ended in a close 30-28 scoreline in favour of the Dream Team.

They have made the final after a two-year break, but the win in 2021, the same year in which Al Duhail won the Asian Men's League title, will boost their confidence ahead of today's title clash.

Despite their history in the tournament, both teams will bank on their key players in their hunt for the prestigious title.



Al Duhail will heavily rely on players in the caliber of Alaaeldein Belrashed who led their charge in the semi-final with seven goals. Hamdi Ayed, Japanese international Chinoski Tokoda, Amin Noureldien, Fasco Silvalivitch, and Qatari veteran Rafael Copote will make up a strong line-up against Al Arabi in today's encounter.

Al Arabi also have an arsenal of players on their side. Most of them played in the team which finished runners-up at last year's Asian Men's Club League Championship and will be looking to secure their maiden title this season.

Meanwhile, in the Amir Cup Handball Championship, the semi-finals will take place on Tuesday, at the same venue. Al Duhail will meet Al Rayyan at 4:30pm in the first semi-final, whereas the defending champions Al Arabi will meet Al Wakrah at 6:30pm.



Al Shaqab League concludes with exciting contests

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Maryam Jassim Al Suwaidi and Mohammed Faisal Al Kohla topped Ladies Class and Future Champions categories respectively while Amer Hamad Al Mansori emerged overall winner in the Junior Champions and Youth Champions categories as the five-leg Al Shaqab League Show Jumping Championship concluded at the Longines Indoor Arena yesterday.

On the final day, Haya Abdulla Al Mohannadi teamed up with Godette to bag 90cm victory in the Ladies Class. The pair clocked a perfect 24.73 secs to clinch the honours. In the same height, Hadi Mansour Al Shahwani notched up the Future Champions title with a flawless show of 60.13 secs with Coco Channel SB. The 80cm win went to Alghala Turky Al Subaey, who guided Al Dafna to an effortless 63.99 secs. Later, Suhaim Hamad Al Yafei steered Just In Time to take title in Youth Champions with a time of 66.55 secs.

During the opening day of the fifth and the final round of the championship on Friday, Amer Hamad Al Mansori astride Levant clocked 27.51 secs in the jump off to win the 100cm contest. Also, Mariam Abdulkarim Abd (Azarro) topped the 60cm class while Al Najla Abdulla Al Khulaifi (Pedro) was victorious in the 40cm.



Action during the Al Shaqab League Show Jumping Championship at Longines Indoor Arena.

Al Ain seal Asian Champions League title

AL AIN: Hernan Crespo's Al Ain steamrollered 10-man Yokohama F-Marinos 5-1 in the Asian Champions League final return leg to lift the trophy for the second time in their history yesterday.

The hosts trailed 2-1 from the away fixture but two goals from Soufiane Rahimi, a Kaku penalty and Kodjo Laba's late double ensured a 6-3 aggregate victory after Yokohama goalkeeper William Popp saw red just before half-time.

Al Ain, the oil-rich United Arab Emirates' most successful club, won the inaugural Champions League final in 2003 and were runners-up in 2005 and 2016.

Harry Kewell's Yokohama were attempting to become the fourth Japanese winners after Gamba Osaka, Kashima Antlers and three-time winners Urawa Red Diamonds.

The win will be all the sweeter for Crespo after the 2005 European Champions League final, when the ex-Argentina international scored twice for AC Milan before Kewell's Liverpool came back to win on penalties.

Crespo had promised "hell" for Yokohama and thousands of fans in white robes and headdresses let off flares and chanted outside before packing out Hazza bin Zayed Stadium.

With temperatures still hovering above 30 degrees Celsius (97 degrees Fahrenheit) at the 8:00 pm kick-off, Al Ain were ahead after just nine minutes.

Yahia Nader's sweet backheel wrong-footed the defence and tournament top-scorer Rahimi rifled a low shot into the net for his 12th of the competition.

Ken Matsubara had a fizzing shot tipped wide but Al Ain doubled their advantage in the 34th minute after Shinnosuke Hatanaka brought down Rahimi in the box.

After a VAR review, Uzbek referee Ilgiz Tantashev pointed to the spot and Paraguay international Kaku smashed it into the bottom right, sparking delirium in the stands.


Al Ain's players celebrate with the winner's trophy yesterday. AFP

Al Ain's joy was doused as Yokohama's Yan Matheus stole a bouncing ball from Kouame Kouadio, then turned the defender inside-out and finished left-footed to make it 2-1 and 3-3 on aggregate.

But the half -- which stretched to an extraordinary 62 minutes -- finished badly for Yokohama when goalkeeper William Popp felled the on-rushing Rahimi and was sent off deep into injury time.

After the restart, a depleted Yokohama lived dangerously when Hatanaka, under pressure from Rahimi, parried a deep cross onto his own crossbar.

The visitors were creaking and on 67 minutes, Rahimi picked up a rebound, rounded a defender and lashed it past substitute 'keeper Fuma Shirasaka at his near post.

The goal knocked the stuffing out of Yokohama, who also had Hatanaka stretchered off, and Togolese substitute Laba pierced their porous defence twice in another long spell of injury time.

Al Ain had already won bragging rights over neighbouring Saudi Arabia, whose teams spent more than a billion dollars on players including Cristiano Ronaldo last year, with their Asian campaign.

Crespo's side ousted Ronaldo's Al Nassr in the quarter-finals before halting Al Hilal's top-flight-record streak of 34 consecutive wins when they met in the semis. With their victory, Al Ain also reach the new-look, 32-team Club World Cup, whose inaugural staging is scheduled for June and July next year in the United States. — *AFP*

United stun City in FA Cup final to give Ten Hag hope of avoiding sack

LONDON: Erik ten Hag made a convincing case to be spared the sack as Manchester United upset Manchester City to take the FA Cup with a shock 2-1 victory in yesterday's final.

Ten Hag was reportedly set to be dismissed regardless of the result at Wembley after a troubled campaign that even the United manager described as "terrible" this week.

But United's hierarchy might be having second thoughts after Ten Hag's tactical masterclass ruined City's history bid.

City were hot favourites to win a second successive Premier League and FA Cup double.

Yet Ten Hag found a way to neutralise Pep Guardiola's side as first half goals from Alejandro Garnacho and Kobbie Mainoo put United on course to win the FA Cup for the first time in eight years.


Manchester United's Bruno Fernandes lifts the trophy as he celebrates with teammates after winning the FA Cup final. AFP

Jeremy Doku squeezed an 87th minute strike past Andre Onana's weak attempted save but it was too late to rescue City.

Having ended a turbulent season on a high note, if Ten Hag's two-year reign does end, his exit would provoke memories of fellow Dutchman Louis van Gaal's Old Trafford departure.

Van Gaal was fired just two days after United's FA Cup final victory against Crystal Palace in 2016.

Ten Hag will hope a more apt comparison is Alex Ferguson's 1990 FA Cup final win against Palace, which kick-started his remarkable run after calls for his sacking earlier that season.

Ferguson was in attendance as a match labelled Ten Hag's funeral turned into a triumph for the much-maligned Dutchman. United shareholder Jim Ratcliffe, who has control of football operations at Old Trafford, was also watching from the stands alongside co-owners Joel and Avie Glazer. Linked with Thomas Tuchel, Mauricio Pochettino and Gareth Southgate, among others, there is still plenty for Ratcliffe to ponder after United finished eighth in the Premier League this season -- their lowest final position since 1990 -- and crashed out of the Champions League in the group stage.

Ten Hag believes a lengthy injury list was the root of the problems and can point to the two trophies he has won in three cup final appearances with United as proof of what he can do when his team are at full strength.

Ten Hag ended United's six-year trophy drought by winning the League Cup last year and has now avenged their 2-1 loss to City in the FA Cup final 12 months ago despite finishing 31 points behind the champions this term. United will also qualify for the Europa League, avoiding a first season without European action since 2014-15. — *AFP*

Pacer Archer stars on international return as England beat Pakistan

BIRMINGHAM: Jofra Archer claimed two wickets on his long-awaited return to international cricket as England beat Pakistan by 23 runs at Edgbaston to move 1-0 up in the four-match T20 series.

England captain Jos Buttler won man-of-the-match after he smashed 84 off 51 balls to set the hosts a target of 184.

But it was Archer's return that caught the eye as he made a case for selection in next month's T20 World Cup in the United States and West Indies no harm.

The fast bowler has been beset by elbow injuries since his starring role in helping England win the 50-over World Cup in 2019.

On his first international appearance for 14 months, and first on home soil since 2020, Archer bounced back from an expensive first over, which went for 15 runs, to finish with two for 28.

Muhammad Rizwan was removed in the first over by Moeen Ali and Reece Topley took three wickets for 41.

Buttler was the star of the England batting with three sixes and eight fours.

He was ably supported by 37 from Will Jacks and Jonny Bairstow's 21 but England failed to build on the platform given to them by their skipper.

Five wickets fell for just 25 runs as Pakistan battled back with Shaheen Shah Afridi the pick of the bowlers, taking 3-36.

Fakhar Zaman's 45 from 21 balls gave the Pakistan chase some impetus,but after he departed the pace of Archer, Topley and Chris Jordan ripped through the tourists' tail with four balls to spare.

England lead the four-match series 1-0 after the first match was washed out on Wednesday. — *AFP*

Early own-goal gives Al Ahly 12th CAF Champions League crown

CAIRO: An early own-goal by Roger Aholou gave Al Ahly of Egypt a tense 1-0 win over Esperance of Tunisia in Cairo yesterday, and a record-extending 12th CAF Champions League title.

Ahly triumphed 1-0 on aggregate after a goalless first leg of the final to win back-to-back titles in the elite African club competition for a fourth time.

They also became only the third team to win the Champions League with an unbeaten record having won nine and drawn five of 14 qualifying, group and knockout matches

Victory for Ahly completed a double for Cairo clubs as arch rivals Zamalek won the second-tier CAF Confederation Cup last weekend.

Ahly coach Marcel Koller made one enforced change from the first leg with Karim Fouad replacing Ali Maaloul, who went off injured after only seven minutes in Tunisia last weekend.

Goalkeeper Mostafa Shobeir, who had not conceded in eight matches ahead of the second leg after replacing injured captain Mohamed el Shenawy during the group stage, retained his place.

Esperance coach Miguel Cardoso, seeking the first trophy of his managerial career that included spells in his native Portugal, France, Spain and Greece, chose an unchanged side.



Al Ahly players celebrate with the winner's trophy. AFP

Goalkeeper Amanallah Memmiche, who had kept 12 clean sheets in 13 previous Champions League matches this season, had to pick the ball out of the net after just four minutes in Cairo.

Ahly captain and centre-back Ramy Rabia headed a corner goalwards and the ball deflected off Esperance midfielder Aholou and into the corner of the net.

Roared on by a predominantly red-clad sell-out crowd in the 75,000-capacity Cairo International Stadium, Ahly threatened to overwhelm Esperance with relentless attacks.

Wessam Abou Ali fired narrowly wide, South African Percy Tau hit the side netting with a fierce drive and Memmiche parried a goal-bound shot away to foil Hussein el Shahat.

A poor free-kick at the other end by Yan Sasse -- one of two Brazilians in the Esperance line-up -- summed up a first half which ended with the Tunis outfit lucky to be just one goal behind.

Ahly were less dominant as the second half unfolded and had a narrow escape just past the hour when a Sasse drive beat Shobeir only to finish off target.

The anxiety of Ahly, as they clung to a one-goal advantage on the night and on aggregate, became clear with 20 minutes left when Shobeir was warned by the Congolese referee for wasting time.

Koller introduced attackers Mohamed 'Afsha' Magdy and Mahmoud Kahraba 12 minutes from time as Ahly sought the second goal that would almost certainly kill off the Esperance challenge.

Magdy came close to scoring two minutes from time when his free-kick from just outside the area rebounded off the crossbar with Memmiche beaten. — *AFP*

Al Tamimi falls in semi-final


Qatar's Abdulla Al Tamimi went down to top seed Tarek Momen of Egypt in the semi-finals of the QSF 3 Squash Championship in Doha yesterday. Fourth seed Al Tamimi lost in straight games 10-12, 6-11, 10-12 at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex. In the final today, Momen will take on third seed Eain Yow Ng of Malaysia. Asian Games champion Eain Yow Ng needed 61 minutes to beat fifth seed Dimitri Steinmann of Switzerland 11-6, 11-8, 13-15, 11-5 in the other semi-final.

Rooney appointed Plymouth manager

LONDON: Former England and Manchester United captain Wayne Rooney was appointed as the new manager of Championship side Plymouth yesterday.

A move to Argyle is the fourth managerial role of Rooney's coaching career, which has so far failed to live up to his stellar playing days.

"Taking this role at Plymouth Argyle feels like the perfect next step in my career," said Rooney in a club statement.

"This is an opportunity to be part of an exciting project. I look forward to helping to build a squad of players to play expansive football - and to entertain the Green Army."

The 38-year-old was sacked after just 83 days in charge of Birmingham earlier this year. Rooney won just two of his 15 matches in charge of the Blues, which contributed to their relegation to League One. He previously had a short spell with former club DC United in Major League Soccer. — *AFP*


Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc poses after winning the qualifying session of the Formula One Monaco Grand Prix. AFP

Leclerc takes Monaco Grand Prix pole

MONACO: Ferrari's Charles Leclerc snatched pole position at his home Monaco Grand Prix yesterday as Max Verstappen could only finish sixth fastest.

The 26-year-old Monegasque driver, who has never managed a podium finish at his home race, clocked a best lap of one minute and 10.270 seconds to outpace Australian Oscar Piastri of McLaren by 0.154 seconds.

It brought Leclerc his third Monaco pole position and ended Verstappen's run of seven straight poles this year.

World championship leader Verstappen struggled for Red Bull. Spaniard Carlos Sainz of Ferrari and British driver Lando Norris of McLaren are on the second row on the narrow streets of the Principality, where overtaking is difficult. — ***AFP***

F1 MONACO GRAND PRIX LINEUP

1. Charles Leclerc, Monaco, Ferrari, 1 minute, 10.270 secs.
2. Oscar Piastri, Australia, McLaren, 1:10.424.
3. Carlos Sainz Jr, Spain, Ferrari, 1:10.518.
4. Lando Norris, Great Britain, McLaren, 1:10.542.
5. George Russell, Great Britain, Mercedes, 1:10.543.
6. Max Verstappen, Netherlands, Red Bull Racing, 1:10.567.
7. Lewis Hamilton, Great Britain, Mercedes, 1:10.621.
8. Yuki Tsunoda, Japan, Racing Bulls, 1:10.858.
9. Alexander Albon, Thailand, Williams, 1:10.948.
10. Pierre Gasly, France, Alpine, 1:11.311.
11. Esteban Ocon, France, Alpine, 1:11.285.
12. Nico Hulkenberg, Germany, Haas, 1:11.440.
13. Daniel Ricciardo, Australia, Racing Bulls, 1:11.482.
14. Lance Stroll, Canada, Aston Martin, 1:11.563.
15. Kevin Magnussen, Denmark, Haas, 1:11.725.
16. Fernando Alonso, Spain, Aston Martin, 1:12.019.
17. Logan Sargeant, USA, Williams, 1:12.020.
18. Sergio Perez, Mexico, Red Bull Racing, 1:12.060.
19. Valtteri Bottas, Finland, KICK Sauber, 1:12.512.
20. Guanyu Zhou, China, KICK Sauber, 1:13.028.

Aleix Espargaro wins Catalunya MotoGP sprint

MONTMELO: Spanish rider Aleix Espargaro, who announced he is retiring at the end of the season earlier in the week, won the Catalunya MotoGP sprint race yesterday.

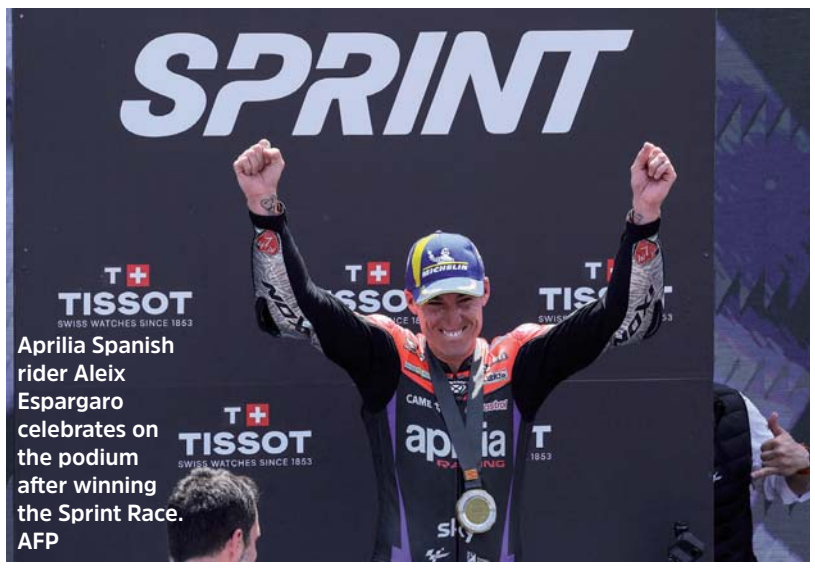
The 34-year-old Aprilia rider -- who hails from Catalonia -- benefitted from a final-lap crash by two-time defending world champion Francesco Bagnaia.

Espargaro could cap a momentous week by adding the main MotoGP race today -- he did the double last year -- for which he starts on pole.

Whilst he confirmed his excellent form there was a boost for six-time world champion Marc Marquez.

The 31-year-old Ducati-Gresini rider finished second in the sprint after a poor qualifying session in which he posted only the 14th fastest time.

Championship leader Jorge Martin was not at the peak of his powers, but the Spaniard battled hard on his Ducati-Pramac to finish fourth and extend his lead in the standings.



Aprilia Spanish rider Aleix Espargaro celebrates on the podium after winning the Sprint Race. AFP

Bagnaia looked set to reduce the lead by 12 points as he went into the final lap with a clear lead, but his hopes turned to dust on the fifth corner.

He slipped from second in the standings to fourth as Marquez and his Ducati teammate Enea Bastianini overtook him.

Marquez trails Martin by 37 points going into the sixth race of the campaign -- Bagnaia is 44 points off the pace.

Bagnaia was not the only rider to crash out, Spain's Raul Fernandez and Brad Binder of South Africa coming to grief when they also led.

Earlier Espargaro had produced a sublime performance in qualifying.

"I do not have 100 pole positions to my name," said Espargaro, who is seeking a fourth MotoGP success.

"Therefore, even if it is just the qualifying I am very happy to have achieved this at home.

"I made several errors on my first fast lap but my second is perhaps the best one of my life." — ***AFP***


Spain's Rafael Nadal takes part in a practice session. AFP

Rafael Nadal says this might not be his last French Open

PARIS: This might not turn out to be Rafael Nadal's last French Open, after all. The 14-time champion at Roland Garros said yesterday that he is not 100% sure he won't play again at the Grand Slam tournament.

Nadal has missed much of the last two seasons because of hip and abdominal muscle issues, and he is just 7-4 in 2024. There had been some doubt after a lopsided loss at the Italian Open two weeks ago whether he would even enter the clay-court event in Paris at all.

But he did show up, and has been practicing this week. Nadal, who turns 38 on June 3, was drawn to face No. 4 seed Alexander Zverev in a showdown that will be everyone's focus tomorrow.

Asked Saturday whether he had decided if this will be his final French Open, given that everyone is assuming it will be, Nadal smiled and replied: "Don't assume that."

"It's a big, big chance that it's going to be my last Roland Garros," he said. "But if I have to tell you it's 100% my last Roland Garros, sorry, but I will not. Because I cannot predict what's going on." — ***AP***

Swiatek eyes place among greats with fourth French Open crown

PARIS: Iga Swiatek said she is "confident" ahead of her bid to become only the fourth woman to win four Roland Garros singles titles in the Open era.

The world number one could also become the first player to lift three successive women's titles in Paris since Justine Henin in 2007 when the French Open gets underway today.

Swiatek is a strong favourite after dominating on clay again this season, arriving in Paris off the back of WTA 1000 victories in Madrid and Rome.

The only female player in history to complete a Madrid-Rome-Roland Garros treble in the same season is Serena Williams.

But Swiatek, who faces French qualifier Leolia Jeanjean in the first round, is not daunted by what she could achieve.

"I would lie if I would say I'm not nervous, because everybody is, I think," Swiatek told reporters on Friday.

"There is a lot of pressure, especially when you play well and you already know that you can achieve this step, people are expecting it to happen again and again and again.

"So there is pressure, but I wouldn't say I'm more nervous than usual... I'm also pretty confident with how I'm playing right now and with the work we have been doing."

The 22-year-old Pole has plenty of years ahead of her to chase records but is wasting little time -- her four WTA 1000 titles this season have taken her career total to 10.

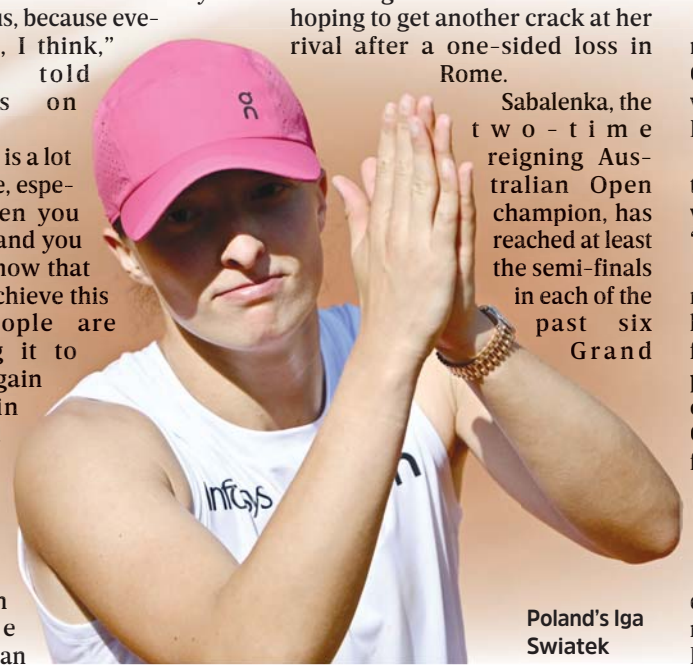
That is already only 13 short of Serena Williams' all-time record.

With four Grand Slam titles, Swiatek has not struggled to translate that form to the major tournaments in the past.

Swiatek is aiming to join Chris Evert, Steffi Graf and Henin in lifting the Coupe Suzanne-Lenglen four times in the Open era.

The biggest obstacle standing in her way is Aryna Sabalenka. The Belarusian missed three match points before losing to Swiatek in a thrilling Madrid final and will be hoping to get another crack at her rival after a one-sided loss in Rome.

Sabalenka, the two-time reigning Australian Open champion, has reached at least the semi-finals in each of the past six Grand Slam events. She is also the only woman to beat Swiatek in a final on clay -- in Madrid last year -- since the Pole lost her first WTA title decider as a teenager in 2019 at a low-key event in Switzerland.


Poland's Iga Swiatek

Sabalenka has an 8-3 losing record against Swiatek, but insisted after Rome that she wanted to face her again in Paris.

"She (Swiatek) definitely motivates me a lot to get better, and I think I improve so many things just because of her," said the world number two, who opens her campaign against Russian teenager Erika Andreeva.

"She kind of like pointed on the things I wasn't good at, and motivated me to get better at.

"I think it's just amazing what we are doing, and I really hope we can keep doing the same or even better."

Sabalenka had never even reached the second week at Roland Garros until last year, when she was knocked out by Karolina Muchova in the semis.

Elena Rybakina, the only player to defeat Swiatek on clay this year, was being touted as part of a new 'big three' 12 months ago.

But the Kazakh has failed to make the last four at a Slam since losing the 2023 Australian Open final to Sabalenka and has been passed in the rankings by US Open champion Coco Gauff. American Gauff, playing in a major for the first time since turning 20, will be hoping to go one better than when she lost the 2022 French Open showpiece to Swiatek.

Third seed Gauff faces Russian qualifier Julia Avdeeva in the first round, while Rybakina takes on Belgium's Greet Minnen. — ***AFP***

Keys seals maiden WTA clay-court title in Strasbourg

STRASBOURG: In-form American Madison Keys warmed up for the French Open by winning the first WTA title on red clay of her career with victory over compatriot Danielle Collins in Strasbourg yesterday.

The 29-year-old Keys, who also reached the semi-finals in Madrid and quarter-finals in Rome this clay-court swing, eased to a 6-1, 6-2 win.

It was the world number 16's eighth career Tour-level title and first on red clay, after a 2019 success on green clay in Charleston.

Playing her final season before retirement, Collins won the Miami Masters in March and claimed the clay-court title last month at Charleston.

Keys will start her campaign at Roland Garros, where the French Open starts today, against Mexican Renata Zarazua, while Collins plays Caroline Dolehide. — ***AFP***


Norway's Casper Ruud raises the trophy. AFP

Ruud wins third Geneva title ahead of Roland Garros

GENEVA: Casper Ruud did double duty yesterday and won back-to-back matches to take his third Geneva Open title in four years.

Ruud won the final 7-5, 6-3 against Tomas Machac, who eliminated Novak Djokovic in the only semifinal completed Friday, returning on court less than three hours after having defeated Flavio Cobolli.

He rallied from a slow start at 10.30 a.m. to beat Cobolli 1-6, 6-1, 7-6 (4) in a match delayed on Friday because of heavy rain.

Seventh-ranked Norwegian Ruud saved a match point at 5-4 in the deciding set. In the final later, he saved a set point when 5-4 down in the first set and Machac double-faulted. Ruud now heads to Paris for the French Open, where he was the beaten finalist in the past two years, first against Rafael Nadal, then against Djokovic. Main-draw matches start Sunday at Roland Garros.

Ruud's 12th career title was his 11th on clay courts, his fifth in Switzerland and third in Geneva. He also won the title in 2021 and 2022. — ***AP***

Wawrinka 'lucky enough to play, sometimes beat' the 'big three'

PARIS: Swiss tennis great Stan Wawrinka told AFP that he was "lucky enough to play and sometimes beat" the 'big three' of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, as the triple Grand Slam winner reflected on a golden era for the sport.

The 39-year-old is preparing for his 19th French Open where he will take on the retiring Andy Murray in the first round -- the only other player to have won three Grand Slams outside the 'big three' since Federer's first in 2003.

With Federer retiring in 2022, Nadal playing his last season and Djokovic, despite still being world number one, recently turning 37 and not having won a title in 2024, tennis is moving inexorably towards a new era.

"I was lucky enough to be able to play alongside them (the big three) and sometimes beat them," said Wawrinka.

A winner of three Grand Slam titles, Wawrinka truly did it the hard way -- beating Nadal in Australia in 2014, Djokovic in Paris in 2015 and the Serb again in the 2016 US Open. — ***AFP***

Cummins targets another title as Hyderabad face Kolkata in IPL final

CHENNAI: Australia's World Cup-winning captain Pat Cummins will need a spectacular turnaround to secure another major title today, when his Sunrisers Hyderabad face Kolkata Knight Riders in the Indian Premier League final only five days after a heavy loss.

Hyderabad beat Rajasthan Royals by 36 runs in the last qualifier in Chennai on Friday to secure a place in their third IPL final.

But that win came after a crushing eight-wicket defeat by two-time champions Kolkata in the first play-off in Ahmedabad on Tuesday. Hyderabad's only title in the world's most lucrative T20 tournament came in 2016 under another Australian, David Warner.

Fast bowler Cummins, for whom Hyderabad paid $2.5 million in the IPL auction, led Australia to both the world Test championship title and an ODI World Cup triumph last year.

"Very practical guy, very humble, very empathetic with his fellow team-mates and coaching staff," Hyderabad assistant coach Simon Helmot said of Cummins.

"He is into the statistics, gets the information he needs against a particular opposition in certain conditions. Doesn't waste time in team meetings, our team meeting today went for 35 seconds," he told reporters.

Hyderabad have racked up record IPL totals of 277 and 287 in a high-scoring tournament, with Cummins' astute leadership and rotation of bowlers also an advantage when defending totals. Standing in Cummins' way will be fellow Australian and Kolkata quick Mitchell Starc, who rattled Hyderabad's top order in the first qualifier.

Left-arm quick Starc became the most expensive player in IPL history when Kolkata paid $2.98m for his services, overtaking Cummins in the same auction in December. Starc justified the outlay when he returned figures of 3-34 at the world's biggest cricket stadium on Tuesday, including bowling fellow Australian and Hyderabad opener Travis Head for a duck.

Kolkata, led by India's Shreyas Iyer, have been the side to beat in the competition and topped the 10-team table with 20 points in the league phase.

Apart from the big signing of Starc, Kolkata brought Gautam Gambhir on board as mentor after the former India batsman led the team to two titles in 2012 and 2014. Kolkata beat home side Chennai Super Kings to lift their first title the last time they played a final at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium.

"I'm very confident that KKR are going to win here," Australian cricketer-turned-commentator Matthew Hayden told Star Sports, pointing out that a few days off had given them the opportunity to understand their opponents' strengths and weaknesses. Kolkata have lost just three matches all season, with all-rounder Sunil Narine promoted to open the innings and leading their batting charge with 482 runs, including a century.

Spinner Varun Chakravarthy and fast bowler Harshit Rana have also shared 37 wickets between them.

However, Kolkata's bowlers will be wary of Hyderabad's left-handed opening pair of Head and Abhishek Sharma, who have given their team many strong starts. Head has scored 567 runs, with a century and four fifties, to stand fourth in the IPL batting chart led by Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli on 741. — ***AFP***