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RUSSIAN TEENAGER ANDREEVA SHOCKS AILING SABALENKA, FACES PAOLINI IN FRENCH OPEN SEMIS



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ROHIT SHARMA PLAYS DOWN INJURY SCARE AFTER INDIA ROUT IRELAND IN T20 WORLD CUP



The Peninsula SPORT

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Qatar ready for Afghanistan game, look to maintain winning momentum



Afghanistan coach Ashley Westwood (right) during a training session in Al Ahsa, yesterday.

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: A new-look Qatar side will take on Afghanistan in the AFC Asian Cup 2027 and FIFA World Cup 2026 joint qualifiers, with coach Marquez Lopez expecting a winning show from his young guns in Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia today.

Following four straight victories in Group A, the Asian champions have already advanced to the third round of World Cup Qualifiers also sealing their place in the next Asian Cup besides securing top spot in the group.

Qatar's winning streak gave Lopez leverage to test his bench strength as he included many youngsters for the remaining two group matches, also including a home clash against India on June 11.

They thrashed Afghanistan 8-1 in November's first leg with Almoez Ali firing a hat-trick in the big win. But the seasoned striker is not part of the team after being rested along with in-form forward Akram Afif and several other senior players with Lopez's first-choice goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham, who recently underwent a surgery, also absent from the squad.

Lopez, however, is confident his young team is capable of keeping Al Annabi's perfect record in the qualifiers intact, in today's "important" game to be played at Prince Abdullah Bin Jalawi Stadium at 7pm (Doha time).

"We have a young squad as we opted to rest senior players but still a win will be crucial to us," said the Qatar coach, who led the side to successful Asian Cup title defence earlier this year.

"We have a long journey ahead in the qualifiers and we want to maintain the winning momentum in the next stage of the qualifiers. We are happy to confirm our berth in the Asian Cup but our mission of qualifying for the World Cup remains, and we must continue giving our best," he added.



Qatar coach Marquez Lopez speaks during a press conference yesterday as Al Annabi player Naif Al Hadhrami looks on.

Naif Al Hadhrami – one of the youngsters in Qatar squad – was confident of living up to coach's expectations.

"We are aiming for full three points in our match against Afghanistan and another win in our last match in the group," said the midfielder.

"The wins would not change our status in the group as we have already qualified, still maximum points will be important for us. Our main goal is to qualify for the World Cup and for that we have to perform consistently and try to win every match."

Qatar, who held a brief training camp in Doha, reached Al Ahsa yesterday and took part in the final training session ahead of the match later in the evening.

Meanwhile, hosts India will take on Kuwait with both the sides eyeing maximum points in Kolkata in other Group A match today.

India are second in the group with four points, having an edge over Afghanistan in the points table on a better goal difference. Kuwait, who lost to Igor Stimac's men in the first leg in November, are on the bottom with three points. They are targeting a win over the home side to revive their hopes of finishing runners-up in the group with Afghanistan up next.

The game will also mark the last international appearance for legend Sunil Chhetri, who has 94 goals in 150 appearances for India. He is only behind Cristiano Ronaldo, Iran's Ali Daei (retired) and Lionel Messi in the list of all-time leading international goal-scorers.

Stimac was hopeful his team would strengthen their chance to reach the third round of World Cup qualifiers for the first time.

"Reaching there (Round 3) will be another step in Indian football history. It will be an amazing thing to have the opportunity to play another 10 games against the best Asian teams and dream big about trying to reach the biggest stage of football," the India coach said ahead of the match.



Qatar players during a training session yesterday.

AFC ASIAN CUP 2027, FIFA WORLD CUP 2026 JOINT QUALIFIERS

TODAY'S FIXTURES

GROUP A
At Prince Abdullah Bin Jalawi Stadium (Al Hasa, Saudi Arabia)
Qatar vs Afghanistan
Kick off at 19:00
India vs Kuwait (Kolkata)

GROUP B
Myanmar vs Japan (Yangon)
DPR Korea vs Syria (Vientiane)

GROUP C
China vs Thailand (Shenyang)
Singapore vs South Korea (Singapore)

GROUP D
Chinese Taipei vs Oman (Taipei)
Kyrgyzstan vs Malaysia (Bishkek)

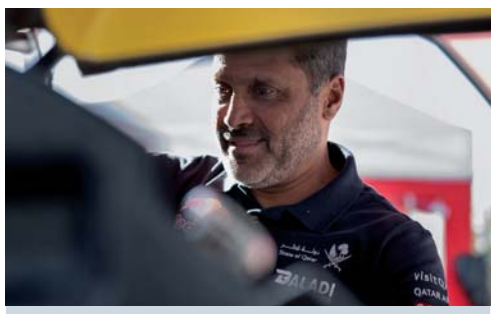
GROUP E
Hong Kong, China vs Iran (Hong Kong)
Uzbekistan vs Turkmenistan (Tashkent)

GROUP F
Indonesia vs Iraq (Jakarta)
Vietnam vs Philippines (Hanoi)

GROUP G
Pakistan vs Saudi Arabia (Islamabad)
Jordan vs Tajikistan (Amman)

GROUP H
Bahrain vs Yemen (Riffa)
Nepal vs United Arab Emirates (Dammam)

GROUP I
At Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium (Doha)
Palestine vs Lebanon
Kick off at 17:00
Bangladesh vs Australia (Dhaka)



Al Attiyah battles to keep title hopes alive in Argentina

Seth Quintero of the US won the stage three of the Argentina's Desafio Ruta 40 yesterday, with Qatar's Nasser Al Attiyah finishing second. Al Attiyah, who is defending his FIA World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC) title, was second overall after he finished one minute nine second behind Quintero. Yazeed Al Rajhi, who was third yesterday, is still perched at the summit of the overall leader board with Al Attiyah trailing by 2:21 secs. With closest rival Carlos Sainz not entering the fourth round in Argentina, Al Attiyah has an excellent chance to increase his 12-point lead in the Drivers' Championship but has so far struggled to make an impression. Yesterday, Al Attiyah started strong, but an untimely puncture pushed him down the table. However, Al Attiyah made a final push in the last 100 kilometers to keep his title chances alive.



Upbeat Palestine eye history in Lebanon clash

CHINTHANA WASALA
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Palestine will be aiming to create history by progressing past the second round of the FIFA World Cup qualifiers for the first time when they take on Lebanon in the joint qualifiers in Doha today.

The match will kick off at 7:00pm at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

With seven points in their account, gained through two wins and a draw, Palestine are placed second in Group I which is led by Australia (12 points), while Lebanon are third with two points earned through two draws. Bangladesh are fourth in the group with just one point and have already lost their chances of advancing.

A draw against Lebanon will be more than sufficient for Palestine to secure their place in the third round of the World Cup qualifiers and confirm their ticket to a fourth consecutive AFC Asian Cup Finals.

On the other hand, Lebanon must win their remaining two matches, including today's fixture and Tuesday's match against Bangladesh, to keep their hopes alive.

Palestine coach Makram Daboub said his team was targeting a win.

"We respect the Lebanon but our objective is to win to officially qualify for the 2027 Asian Cup and the third stage of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers," Daboub told a pre-match press conference at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.

Palestine captain Musab Al Battat said the match against Lebanon is crucial. The seasoned midfielder added the team is eyeing to advance in the qualifiers.

"Palestine have good elements in the team, and the new names will be a strong addition," Al Battat added.

The Palestine outfit has changed a lot since the two teams last met in UAE in November. Their meeting ended in a goalless draw, but the Palestinian team has been able to strengthen its ranks with several high profile players, adding more pressure to Lebanon ahead of today's match. Notable among them is the Swedish AIK Stockholm striker Omar Faraj, who had previously represented the Swedish national team before deciding to switch to his home country, same as his compatriot Mustafa Zidane and Al Ahly (Egypt) striker Wissam Abu Ali, who played for youth teams in Denmark.

Meanwhile, Lebanon will have to be aware of the challenge they will face without injured midfielder-striker Bassel Jradi and defender Ali Tneich, who is suspended due to an accumulation of warnings. Lebanon coach Miodrag Radulovic described their absence as a significant loss for the team

"These two players are essential options and key to our game, consistently making a positive impact in our matches," Radulovic said.

Radulovic and his men arrived in Doha well in advance to prepare for today's clash, and the Montenegrin coach stated he is satisfied with all the homework his team has done.

"From the first day in this camp, I was satisfied with the players' work, their discipline, and the general atmosphere. We know that a big match awaits us. Only a victory will benefits us, and that is what we all need," Radulovic said.

Lebanon player Omar Chaaban Bughail said, "Our goal is to win the match against Palestine, as it is very important for the country. Our duty on the offensive line is to score goals, and I have shown a good level with my team in England. I want to replicate that with the national team."

Australia, along with Qatar, Iraq, Iran, Uzbekistan, and the United Arab Emirates, have each clinched their places in the next round, also securing their berths in the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 Finals.



Palestine players take part in a training session in Doha.



Lebanon players in action during a training session.

Andreeva shocks ailing Sabalenka, faces Paolini in French Open semis

PARIS: Mirra Andreeva became the youngest Grand Slam semi-finalist for 27 years with a shock win over Aryna Sabalenka yesterday at the French Open, after fourth seed Elena Rybakina was knocked out by Italy's Jasmine Paolini.

Andreeva, aged just 17 and 29 days, fought back from a set down against Australian Open champion Sabalenka, who appeared to be hampered by illness, to win 6-7 (5/7), 6-4, 6-4 and set up a last-four meeting with Italy's Jasmine Paolini.

The Russian is the youngest woman to reach the last four at a Slam event since Martina Hingis at the 1997 US Open, and the youngest at Roland Garros since Hingis, also that year.

"Me and my coach, we had a plan today but again I didn't remember anything. I just try to play as I feel," said Andreeva.

Sabalenka called for multiple medical time-outs as she complained of not feeling well and Andreeva, playing in her maiden Slam quarter-final, eventually took advantage with a composed display.

The world number 38 completed a memorable win in style after almost two-and-a-half hours with a brilliant lobbed winner, delighting the Court Philippe Chatrier crowd.

"I was also a little surprised as you guys cheered for me, I didn't expect that so thank you very much for cheering me today," she told the spectators.

Sabalenka had been targeting a seventh straight Slam semi-final and had won 11 consecutive matches at the majors following her second Melbourne title earlier this year.

Andreeva will play 12th seed Paolini for a spot in the final on Thursday after her own surprise 6-2, 4-6, 6-4 victory over former Wimbledon champion Rybakina.

Paolini made just one unforced error in a dominant opening set, but her level dropped after breaking to lead 4-3 in the second, allowing Rybakina to force a decider.

But she edged a topsy-turvy third set which featured five breaks of serve to secure a deserved victory, as a wayward Rybakina exited the tournament in a blaze of 48 unforced errors.

The 28-year-old Paolini, who was playing in her first Grand Slam quarter-final, continued a brilliant week for Italian tennis after Jannik Sinner also made his maiden French Open semi-final and took the men's world number one ranking.

It is the first time Italy have had semi-finalists in both the men's and women's singles at a Slam event in the Open era.

Meanwhile, Novak Djokovic had been due to face Casper Ruud in a repeat of last year's final, but the 24-time Grand Slam champion's title defence was abruptly ended by a knee injury he suffered during his dramatic last-16 victory over Francisco Cerundolo.

Media reports suggested Djokovic was set to undergo surgery, which would put his participation at Wimbledon and the Paris Olympics in doubt. Sinner will usurp Djokovic as world number one next week and the Italian goes up against Carlos Alcaraz in tomorrow's men's semi-finals. — ***AFP***

The Russian is the youngest woman to reach the last four at a Slam event since Martina Hingis at the 1997 US Open, and the youngest at Roland Garros since Hingis, also that year.



Mirra Andreeva celebrates after winning against Aryna Sabalenka. AFP



Jasmine Paolini celebrates after winning against Elena Rybakina.



Antonio Conte

Antonio Conte named new Napoli coach

ROME: Former Chelsea and Tottenham coach Antonio Conte was hired by Napoli yesterday as the deposed Serie A champions try to bounce back from their disastrous league title defence.

"Welcome Antonio," the club's president and owner Aurelio De Laurentiis wrote on X, formerly Twitter, accompanied by a photograph of Conte signing his contract.

Conte, who has also coached Juventus and Inter Milan, has signed a three-year deal which according to Italian media is worth €8m ($8.7m) per season.

He is the fifth Napoli coach of the last year in a chaotic period for the club which in the 2022-2023 season won their first Serie A title since 1990, when Diego Maradona was still strutting his stuff.

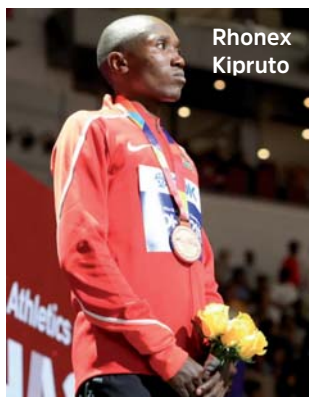
But the coach who won the title, Luciano Spalletti, left last summer and southern Italy's biggest club went through three managers on their way to a dismal 10th-place finish this season.

Napoli ended the season 41 points behind new champions Inter as Rudi Garcia, Walter Mazzarri and Francesco Calzona all failed to live up to Spalletti's historic title win.

Spalletti is now in charge of the Italian national team.

Conte has been charged with taking Napoli back up the table, and has a pedigree which will give fans hope of a quick turnaround in fortunes.

The 54-year-old has won four Serie A titles, three with Juve and one with Inter in 2021, and was also a Premier League winner with Chelsea in 2017. — ***AFP***



Rhonex Kipruto

Kenya's Kipruto gets six-year doping ban

PARIS: Kenya's 10 kilometres road race record holder Rhonex Kipruto has been banned for six years for doping and his world mark cancelled, the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) announced yesterday.

Kipruto was banned until May 10, 2029 after the AIU's disciplinary tribunal ruled "irregularities in his Athlete Biological Passport (ABP) resulted from doping".

Rejecting Kipruto's defence, the tribunal concluded the "cause for the abnormalities in the ABP is more likely to be due to blood manipulation" and there was "no other plausible explanation".

The 24-year-old had been provisionally suspended on May 11 last year after irregularities in his biological passport going back to July 2018 were detected.

ABP monitoring selects biological variables in athletes over time and allows sanctioning without a positive doping test in the event of unanimity of a panel of experts.

Kipruto took the 10,000 metres bronze medal at the 2019 world championships in Doha.

He set the 10km record of 26 minutes 24 seconds in Valencia in 2020 but finished a disappointing ninth in the 10,000m at the Olympics in 2021.

The AIU has cancelled all the athlete's results between September 2, 2018 and May 11, 2023.

As a result, Ethiopia's Berihu Aregawi's will become the new world record holder over 10km after his 26min 33sec clocked last year. — ***AFP***

Rohit plays down injury scare after India rout Ireland in T20 World Cup

NEW YORK: India captain Rohit Sharma allayed fears about an arm injury after making 52 before retiring hurt as his side thrashed Ireland by eight wickets in the teams' T20 World Cup opener in New York yesterday.

India only required 97 to win after a dominant display by their bowling attack, with left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh striking twice in the third over to reduce Ireland to 9-2 after Rohit won the toss.

All-rounder Hardik Pandya took two wickets in two balls on his way to 3-27 and Jasprit Bumrah, the player of the match, 2-6.

"Just a little sore," said Rohit at the presentation ceremony.

"New ground, new venue, wanted to see what's it like to play on. I don't think the pitch settled down, there was enough there for the bowlers."

Ireland, all out for just 96, needed to hold every chance to have any hope of a shock upset.

But Rohit had made just two when, off the last ball of the first over of India's chase, he edged Mark Adair through the hands of Andrew Balbirnie at second slip.

Adair dismissed Virat Kohli for just one, when the star batsman sliced to deep third man, but the damage had been done as India launched their bid to win a first major title since their 2013 Champions Trophy triumph with a commanding Group A victory.

Rohit punished Ireland with a 37-ball innings, including four fours and three well-struck sixes as he shared a stand of 54 with Rishabh Pant.

The wicketkeeper, returning to international cricket after a horror car crash in December 2022, finished on 36 not out and ended the match with a typically flamboyant reverse-scooped six off Barry McCarthy as India won with nearly eight overs left.

Rohit was not there alongside him, however, having been previously struck on the arm by Josh Little, although he struck the next two balls from the paceman for resounding sixes.

Victory was all but secured for India, the inaugural 2007 T20 World Cup champions, when they dismissed Ireland cheaply as a drop-in pitch of variable bounce at a Long Island ground built specially for the tournament again proved tough to bat on.

India's joy, however, would have been tempered by the thought they too could be batting first on a similar surface when they return to the ground on Sunday to play arch-rivals Pakistan in the showpiece match of the group phase.

"I don't know what to expect against Pakistan, we will prepare like the conditions are going to be like that," said Rohit. — ***AFP***



India's captain Rohit Sharma bats during match against Ireland. AFP

I don't know what to expect against Pakistan, we will prepare like the conditions are going to be like that.
Rohit Sharma

Van Bronckhorst to coach Turkish club Besiktas

ANKARA: Former Rangers and Feyenoord coach Giovanni Van Bronckhorst was appointed manager of Turkish club Besiktas yesterday.

"Hello Black Eagles, I am Giovanni Van Bronckhorst and I am coming to Besiktas," the 49-year-old said in a video posted by Besiktas on X, the former Twitter.

Van Bronckhorst has signed for "2+1 years", added the Istanbul club which finished fifth in the Turkish Super Lig last season.

The Dutchman last coached Scottish club Rangers but was sacked in 2022 after just a year in charge at Ibrox.

The former Netherlands captain played with Rangers from 1998 to 2001, winning five trophies, including two league titles.

The midfielder then moved to Arsenal where he won the Premier League in 2002, followed by Barcelona where he won the Champions League in 2006 and two Liga titles. He also won 106 caps with the Netherlands, playing with the team that lost in the final of the 2010 World Cup.

Van Bronckhorst's arrival in the Turkish Super Lig follows that of Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho who will manage Istanbul rivals Fenerbahce next season. — ***AFP***

Modric set for international swan song at Euro 2024

ZAGREB: Luka Modric **(pictured)**, Croatia's star midfielder and the guiding force behind the country's recent football successes, will lead the squad at Euro 2024 in what will likely be his final act on the international stage.

Modric, who turns 39 in September, is continuing to negotiate a new contract with Real Madrid after winning a sixth Champions League on Saturday.

"Luka secured the status of the best Croatian football player in history a long time ago.

"With his sixth European Championship title, he entered football history as one of the greatest players of this football era", head of the Croatian Football Federation (HNS) Marijan Kustic said in a statement.

Modric led Croatia to the final of the 2018 World Cup in Russia and third place at the 2022 tournament in Qatar.

For Euro 2024, Modric will be returning to Germany, where he played in his first big tournament with the national team at the 2006 World Cup, just months after his Croatia debut.

He has played 174 matches for Croatia and scored 24 goals.

The midfielder grew up as a refugee in Zadar on the Dalmatian coast during the 1990s independence war.

Following the end of the fighting, Modric left Zadar and later played for Dinamo Zagreb in 2000 and then joined English Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur in 2008.

In 2012, Modric signed on with Real Madrid, where he has remained ever since.

'Can hardly wait'

Despite the 4-2 defeat by France in the World Cup final in Russia, more than 500,000 people gave Modric and his team a heroic welcome home on their return to Zagreb.

In 2018, Modric won the Ballon d'Or, football's most coveted award, for his role in Croatia's World Cup success and Real Madrid's third-straight Champions League trophy.

Experts have long praised Modric for his physical fitness along with the endless energy he brings to the pitch despite his age.

"He can hardly wait to play for Croatia and be our leader," coach Zlatko Dalic told reporters in late May.

"Modric plays for the national team because it still needs him, because he is irreplaceable in it and because he cares about it," Croatian daily Vecernji List wrote in an editorial.

The paper called Modric's upcoming appearance on the pitch during the Euro 2024 one of the "most anticipated football moments" of the year.

Croatia fans will "most likely ... witness the curtain fall on one of the most impressive careers of a football player in the national jersey", the paper added.

Croatia is set to square off against Spain in their opening Group B match on June 15, before playing Balkan rival Albania and current European champions Italy. Modric has yet to officially comment on his future with the national team, called the "Fiery Ones" (Vatreni in Croatian). — ***AFP***



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