

Julen Lopetegui appointed Qatar head coach, with World Cup qualification his first task

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatar yesterday announced the appointment of Spaniard Julen Lopetegui as their new head coach, tasking the experienced tactician with the immediate challenge of securing a berth at the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

The 58-year-old former Spain and Real Madrid boss has signed a contract running until 2027, the Qatar Football Association (QFA) confirmed.

"The contract was signed by Mansoor Al-Ansari, the General Secretary of the Qatar Football Association, at the association's headquarters in Al Bidda Tower, in the presence of Jassim bin Rashid Al-Buainain, President of the Qatar Football Association," the QFA said in a statement.

Lopetegui takes over from Luis Garcia, who had a brief stint in charge after replacing Marquez Lopez, who was dismissed in December. Garcia, previously Lopez's assistant, led the national side during the Arabian Gulf Cup in Kuwait, where Qatar failed to reach the semi-finals.

He also oversaw two World Cup Qualifiers – guiding Al Annabi to a 5-1 victory over North Korea before a 3-1 loss to Kyrgyzstan.

"The QFA extends its deepest appreciation to Mr. Garcia for his professionalism and dedication throughout his time with the team," the association added.

The QFA is now counting on Lopetegui's extensive coaching experience to guide Qatar to their first-ever World Cup qualification via the qualifiers. Qatar made their World Cup debut as hosts in 2022 but have never qualified through the traditional route.

A former goalkeeper who earned one cap for Spain and played for clubs including Real Madrid and Barcelona, Lopetegui last managed Premier League side West Ham United. His coaching resume includes spells with Spain (2016–2018), where he remained unbeaten in 20 matches, and top clubs such as Real Madrid, Sevilla and Wolverhampton Wanderers.

His tenure with the Spanish national team ended abruptly just before the 2018 World Cup after it was revealed he had agreed to take over at Real Madrid.

Lopetegui's first assignment with Qatar will be a crucial home match against Iran on June 5, followed by an away qualifier against Uzbekistan on June 10 – marking the final two fixtures of the third round of Asian World Cup qualifiers.

Qatar have struggled in this stage, missing out on the two automatic qualification spots. Currently fourth in their group, Al Annabi must aim to retain their position to progress to the fourth round. Fifth-placed Kyrgyzstan trail them by four points.

The fourth round will include the third- and fourth-placed teams from each of the three third-round groups, with only the group winners advancing to the 2026 World Cup.

In a video filmed at QFA headquarters and shared on the association's social media, a relaxed-looking Lopetegui smiled and said, "I am ready."

He is expected to attend next week's Amir Cup Round of 16 matches, where several national team players will be in action with their respective clubs.



Newly appointed Qatar head coach Julen Lopetegui receives his jersey from QFA President Jassim bin Rashid Al-Buainain.

Mexico City to host F1 races until 2028

MEXICO CITY: Mexico City will host high-altitude Formula One races for at least three more years after a contract extension was signed Wednesday.

"We are very excited to announce that the Mexico City Grand Prix will continue to be part of our calendar until 2028," F1 chief executive Stefano Domenicali said.

"Formula 1 is energy, passion and emotion, and every year the unique atmosphere created by our fans in Mexico City is one of the most incredible and energetic experiences of our championship," he added.

The Mexican capital "is the home of Formula 1," its mayor Clara Brugada said.

Mexico City is more than 2,200 meters (7,200 feet) above sea level and the rarefied atmosphere has an effect on turbos, cooling systems and brakes as well as delivering less drag. Formula One returned to Mexico City's Autodromo Hermanos Rodriguez racetrack in 2015 after a 23-year absence, to the delight of fans in the Latin American nation. This year's Mexico City Grand Prix will be held October 24-26. — *AFP*

AVC Beach Tour: Younousse, Tijan cruise into Doha Open quarters

CHINTHANA WASALA
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatar's Olympic bronze winners Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan kept their hopes for another home title alive when they stormed to the AVC Men's Beach Tour Doha Open quarter-finals yesterday.

After opening the tournament at Al Gharafa Beach Complex on Wednesday with a commanding 21-7, 21-10 win over Uzbekistan's Mukhammadali Otabekov and Nodirjon Alekseev, the world No. 9 duo secured a dominant 2-0 victory in the Round of 16 yesterday.

In the Last 16 clash, the Qatari duo outclassed Bahrain's Ali Marhoon and Hasan Abdulla Nasser with scores of 21-15, 21-11 in just 24 minutes to enter the next round.

The victory also extended the top seeds' unbeaten streak in Asia following their recent gold-winning performance at the Samila Open in Thailand.

Younousse and Tijan will now face Thailand's No. 6 seeds Dunwinit Kaewsai and Banlue Nakprakhong, the semi-finalists at last month's Pattaya Asian leg.

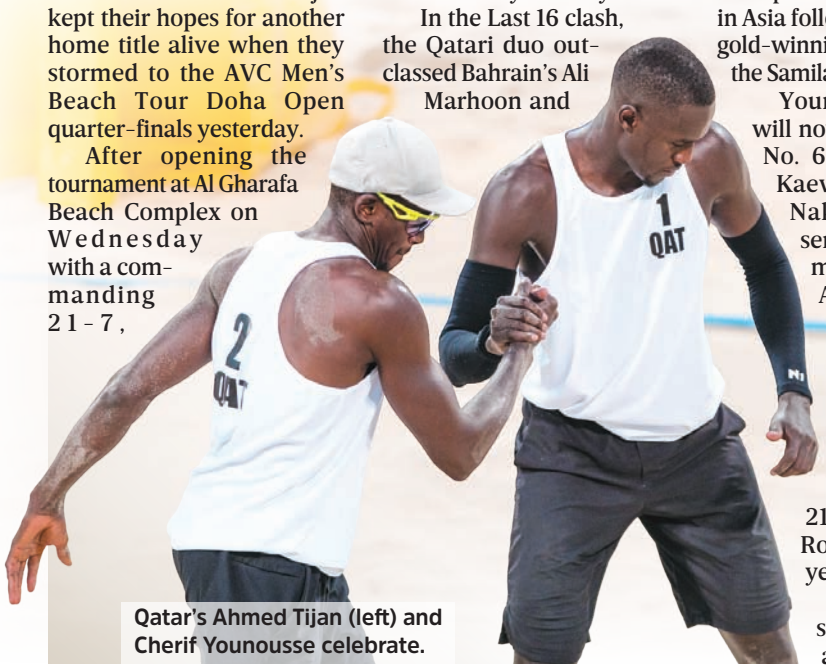
The Thai duo cruised past Uzbekistan's Dilshodbek Tolibaev and Azamat Dauilbaev (21-14. 21-13) in another Round of 16 clash yesterday.

Australia's third seeds Paul Burnett and Luke Ryan will meet Japan's No. 11 seeds Takumi Takahashi and Jumpei Ikeda in another quarter-final clash today, while Ben Hood and Oliver Merritt, also from Down Under, square off against Iran's seventh-seeded Alireza Aghajanighasab and Abbas Pourasgari.

Tenth-seeded Japanese duo Nassim Malki and Kosuke Fukushima will battle Thailand's fourth seeds Netitorn Muneekul and Wachirawit Muadpha in the final last-eight encounter today.

The four-day Doha Open, which has drawn 21 elite pairs from 10 Asian nations, offers valuable cash awards apart from ranking points as well as qualification credits for upcoming international events.

The semi-finals will also take place tomorrow, followed by the final and the third-place play-off tomorrow.



Qatar's Ahmed Tijan (left) and Cherif Younousse celebrate.



Team Qatar athletes shine in Algeria

Team Qatar athletes secured two podium finishes in the field events on Day 1 of the 24th Arab Athletics Championships, currently underway at the Miloud Hadefi Stadium in Oran, Algeria. High-jump sensation Hamdi Ali sailed over 2.14 metres to clinch Team Qatar's first gold medal at the five-day Championships. Earlier Ahmad Jibrine registered a distance of 17.88 metres to seize the silver medal in the shot put final which was won by Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Tolo (19.70m).

Phenomenons like Yamal born every 50 years: Inter's Inzaghi

BARCELONA: Inter Milan coach Simone Inzaghi lavished praise on Barcelona's teenage winger Lamine Yamal **(pictured)** after a thrilling 3-3 Champions League semi-final first leg draw on Wednesday.

Yamal, 17, scored a superb solo goal on his 100th Barcelona game as the Catalans came back from two goals down and terrified Inter's defence throughout.

"Yamal is clearly a talent of the type born every 50 years, talents like this I've never really seen before," said Inzaghi.

"I saw him tonight for the first time and he created problems for us, we doubled up him... and then we lacked players elsewhere on the pitch...

"(Our performance) is a reason for great pride, and Yamal is a phenomenon of the kind born every 50 years." Inter kept Yamal quiet for some parts of the second half, which Inzaghi said was the objective after the teenager's first-half display.

"We adjusted something, we had to be better on Yamal, which is not very simple," continued the coach.

Inzaghi also said he had "some doubts" whether captain Lautaro Martinez, who went off injured at half-time, would be ready for the second leg.

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick also hailed winger Yamal, who rejected comparisons to all-time great Lionel Messi on the eve of the game, but scored a goal the Argentine would have been proud of.



"I'm really happy that this talent that comes every 50 years plays for Barca," said Flick, when Inzaghi's words were put to him.

The German coach said Yamal sparked his team's comeback.

"Lamine in the first half was so important for us, he created so many positive things and got the first goal," the German coach told reporters. — *AFP*

United seize control of Europa League semi-final

BILBAO: Bruno Fernandes struck twice as Manchester United put one foot in the Europa League final with a clinical away performance to beat 10-man Athletic Bilbao 3-0 yesterday.

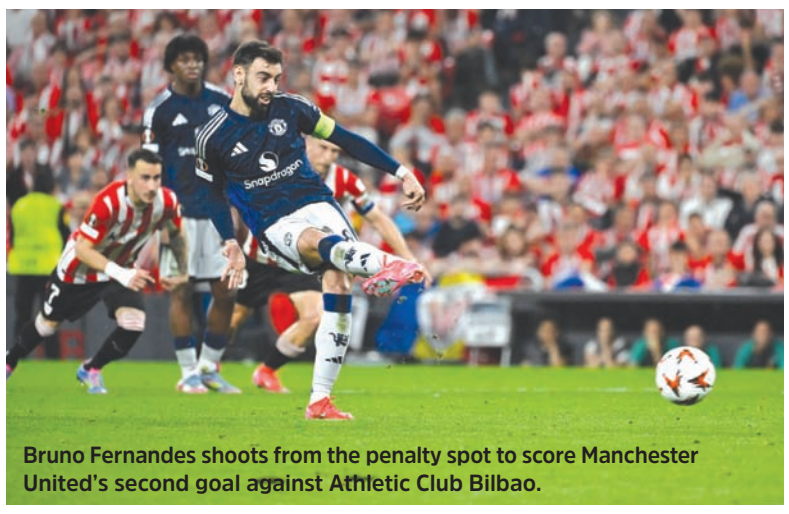
The fervent home fans were enraged when Athletic defender Daniel Vivian was sent off for pulling back Rasmus Hojlund and Fernandes slotted home the resulting penalty, after Casemiro had opened the scoring against the run of play in the semi-final first leg.

Fernandes rolled in a third before half-time as Ruben Amorim's side moved a step closer to the final, to be held at Athletic's San Mames stadium.

The hosts have been dreaming of winning a first European trophy on their own soil but their hopes were demolished by United's professional display in the north of Spain -- and Athletic's supporters argued, the refereeing.

Languishing in 14th in the Premier League, Champions League qualification for United is only possible with a Europa League triumph, as is access to the £100m($133m) honeypot it entails.

Despite regularly crumbling under pressure this season, the Red Devils -- who produced a stunning comeback against Lyon in the quarter-finals -- first survived and then thrived in a hostile environment.



Bruno Fernandes shoots from the penalty spot to score Manchester United's second goal against Athletic Club Bilbao.

With May 1 a bank holiday in Spain the streets of Bilbao were filled with red-and-white striped shirts from the morning onwards, with thousands of fans turning up at their team's hotel to see the Athletic bus set off for the stadium.

The second leg takes place next Thursday at Old Trafford, ahead of the final on May 21 against Tottenham or Bodo/Glimt.

Meanwhile, Tottenham closed in on a place in the Europa League final after Brennan Johnson struck just 38 seconds into their 3-1 win against Norwegian side Bodo/Glimt.

Johnson's quick-fire opener was followed by James Maddison's strike before the interval in the semi-final first leg at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium. Dominic Solanke's second-half penalty should have been the end of the tie.

But a late goal from Ulrik Saltnes ensured the second leg on May 8 will be a nervous occasion for beleaguered Tottenham boss Ange Postecoglou. — *AFP*

Mutamarrid storms to Al Hamla Cup win

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Mutamarrid wasted no time getting back to winning ways, showing grit and determination to land the Al Hamla Cup – a 1200m Class 2 Local Thoroughbred Conditions race – at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday.

The experienced eight-year-old, representing Injaaz Stud and trained by Jihad El Ahmad, settled comfortably near the pace before launching his challenge in the home stretch.

With Alberto Sanna aboard, Mutamarrid, winner of the Ras Al Noof Cup in March, dug deep in the final strides to fend off a determined late charge from Maysara, clinching victory by a head.

Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) Racing Manager Abdulla Rashid Al Kubaisi presented trophies to the winning connections.

Earlier on the card, Saqr, trained by Ahmed Kobeissi and ridden by Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik, claimed a narrow half-length win in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (80–100).





The connections of Mutamarrid celebrate their victory. LEFT: Alberto Sanna rides Mutamarrid during the feature. PICS: Juhaim/QREC

In the Thoroughbred Handicap (0–75), Gulf Legend delivered a dominant performance, surging to a commanding six-and-three-quarter length win under Maxim Bozzio.

Meanwhile, Abdulla Rashid Al-Hajri guided Jazz De Nacre to success in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (55–75), while Billythekid Pompadour, partnered by Pierre Charles Boudot, triumphed in the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate, the opening race of the five-event meeting.

45th Al Rayyan Race Meeting - Al Hamla Cup
WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)
Al Hamla Cup, Local Thoroughbred Conditions
Mutamarrid, Jihad El Ahmad, Alberto Sanna
Purebred Arabian Handicap (80-100)
Saqr, Ahmed Kobeissi, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik
Thoroughbred Handicap (0-75)
Gulf Legend, Jassim Ghazali, Maxim Bozzio
Purebred Arabian Handicap (55-75)
Jazz De Nacre, Owaida Salem Al Hajri, Abdulla Rashid Al-Hajri
Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Billythekid Pompadour, Mohd Ahmed Mohd Hasan Al-Sulaiti, Pierre Charles Boudot

Guardiola glad of Rodri return but uncertain if he'll play in FA Cup final

LONDON: Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola is glad to have Spain midfielder Rodri back in training but has no idea yet if he'll feature at all in this month's FA Cup final, saying "I'm not a doctor".

Rodri was expected to miss the rest of the season after suffering a serious knee injury rupturing an anterior cruciate ligament in City's 2-2 draw with Arsenal in September.

The 28-year-old Ballon d'or winner's absence has been a key factor in a City slump that ended their unprecedented run of four successive English top-flight titles, with Liverpool already crowned champions for the 2024/25 Premier League season.

City, however, have recovered to fourth in the table and are on course to qualify for the Champions League with a top-five finish.

Guardiola's men will also play Crystal Palace in their third straight FA Cup final at Wembley on May 17 after defeating fellow Premier League side Nottingham Forest 2-0 in last weekend's semi-finals.

"We are really pleased that Rodri is back in the training sessions," Guardiola told reporters on Thursday during a pre-match press conference ahead of Friday's league game at home to Wolves.

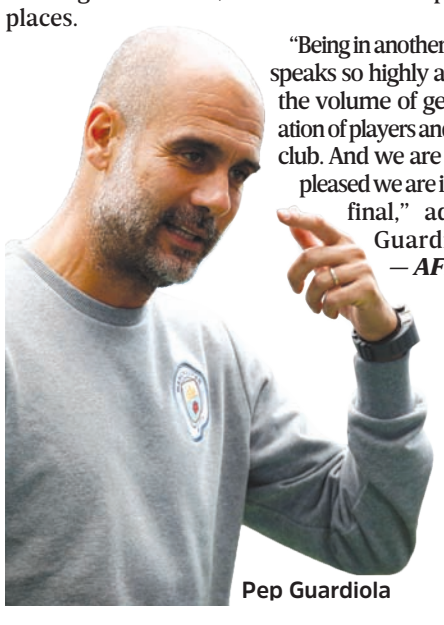
"The moment the physio and doctor says, 'Rodri can start to play minutes', and after that he will start to play minutes. But the doctors have to tell me." The Spaniard added: "It was a difficult injury, seven to 11 months the doctors.

"He feels really good every day making sessions and sessions, but we have to avoid making a step backwards or getting injured again. That's why you have to be careful.

"The important (thing) is one training session, another one, and every time he feels better and better. And when the doctor says 'Rodri is stable and he can start to play', after that he is going to come back." Guardiola, pressed on whether Rodri would play any part in the FA Cup final against south London side Palace, insisted: "I am not a doctor." Following the semi-final win over Forest, it was suggested to Guardiola that a combination of FA Cup glory and Champions League qualification would constitute a "successful" campaign.

But he replied: "No, and I have said that many times.

"This season has not been good. We are a thousand million points behind Liverpool, so come on, this season has not been good." City are 21 points behind Liverpool in the league and one point clear of Chelsea and Forest, who also have a game in hand, in the race for the top five places.



Pep Guardiola

"Being in another final speaks so highly about the volume of generation of players and this club. And we are very pleased we are in the final," added Guardiola. — ***AFP***

QHA hosts draws for Qatar Cup, Amir Cup

DOHA: The Qatar Handball Association (QHA) conducted yesterday the draw for the Qatar Handball Cup and the Amir Handball Cup for the current sports season 2024-2025.

The draw for the Qatar Cup, in which the first four places teams in the general league participate, resulted in two matches between Al Duhail (second in league) and Al Rayyan (third in league), while Al Ahli will face Al Arabi in the semi-finals on Saturday, May 17. The final between the two winners will be held on May 19.

The draw for the Amir Cup also placed Al Khor with Qatar SC and Al Wakrah with Al Shamal in the play-offs.

In the Quarter Final, Al Sadd will play against Al Duhail and Al Gharafa will face the winner of the Al Khor-Qatar SC match, while Al Ahli will face Al Arabi, and Al Rayyan will face the winner of the Al Wakrah vs. Al Shamal match.

The Amir's Cup semi-finals will be held on May 25, while the tournament will conclude with the final on May 27.

The draw ceremony was supervised by Hamad Misfer Al Nuaimi, member of the board of directors of the Qatar Handball Association, in the presence of club representatives.

Last season, Al Arabi won the Qatar Cup title and Al Duhail won the Amir Cup title. — ***QNA***



QHA officials and club representatives pose for a group photo.

Qatari referees to officiate in ACL Elite final

JEDDAH: The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has selected Qatari refereeing team to officiate the AFC Champions League Elite final, slated for tomorrow in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

The Qatari refereeing team features Abdulrahman Al Jassim (referee), Taleb Salem (first assistant referee), and Ramzan Al Nuaimi (second assistant referee). Khamis Al Marri has also been selected as the video assistant referee.

Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia advanced for the final after defeating their compatriot Al Hilal 3-1 in the semi-final, while Kawasaki Frontale of Japan qualified after defeating Al Nassr of Saudi Arabia 3-2 in the second match of the same round.

Meanwhile, Kawasaki Frontale coach Shigetoshi Hasebe hailed his young players after they "stepped up" to reach the final by stunning Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr.

Despite having only 25 percent possession on Wednesday night Frontale went 3-1 up in the 76th minute and were holding on comfortably until Ayman Yahya pulled one back three minutes from time. Al Nassr, who also had former Premier League strikers Sadio Mane and Jhon Duran in their ranks, and ex-Inter Milan midfielder Marcelo Brozovic, threw everything at the tiring Kawasaki players in search of an equaliser.

"We want to deliver another surprise in the final," said Hasebe. "I'm proud we upset the expectations tonight." — ***AGENCIES***



Lusail 3x3 Challenger International Tournament set to kick off today

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: As part of Qatar's preparations to host the 2027 FIBA Basketball World Cup, the Qatar Basketball Federation (QBF) has announced the launch of the Lusail 3x3 Challenger International Tournament today.

The two-day tournament is being held under the supervision of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) and in cooperation with the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027 Organising Committee and Qatari Diar.

The tournament, which is part of the Challenger series supervised by FIBA and considered a major global sporting event, will be held at Al Saad Square in Lusail Park, one of Qatar's most prominent modern cultural landmarks. The tournament includes 16 teams from around the world, with the competition system divided into two stages:

Preliminary stage (qualifiers)

Six teams will participate, divided into two groups, with the top team from each group advancing to the group stage.

Main stage (group stage)

Twelve teams, including 10 direct qualifiers and the two teams that qualified from the qualifiers, will be divided into four groups.

Qualifier details

The qualifiers will be held today, and the teams will be divided as follows:

Group A: Al-Gharafa of Qatar, Kaunas of Lithuania, and Nishinomiya of Japan.

Group B: Al-Doha of Qatar, Al-Khor of Qatar, and Kigali of Rwanda.

The top team from each group will advance to the group stage. The team that qualifies from Group A will join Group C, while the team that qualifies from Group B will join Group D.

The 12 teams were divided into four groups as follows:

Group A: Al-Wakrah of Qatar, Marbella of Spain, and Toulouse of France.

Group B: Al-Rayyan of Qatar, Partizan of Serbia, and Kandava of Latvia.

Group C: Partizan of Serbia, Lugano of Switzerland, and the team that qualified from Group A in the playoffs.

Group D: New York Harlem of the United States, Carolina of Puerto Rico, and the team that qualified from Group B in the play-offs.

Knockout Stage Qualification System

After the group stage, eight teams will advance to the quarter-finals, which will be held tomorrow evening. The winners will then meet in the semif-inals.

The top team from Group C will meet the runner-up from Group A, and the top team from Group B will meet the runner-up from Group D. The two winners will then meet in the semifinals. The final will be between the two semifinal winners.

The Lusail 3x3 Challenger International is one of a number of tournaments and events organized by Qatar leading up to the 2027 FIBA Basketball World Cup.

The tournament is also a qualifying event for the Masters tournaments on the 3x3 World Tour, adding significant sporting value and attracting international teams seeking to qualify and participate in major tournaments within this series.

PSG minds on Arsenal return as French clubs scrap for Champions League places

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain must go to Strasbourg this weekend, in between the two legs of their Champions League semi-final against Arsenal, for a clash with one of a host of sides scrapping to qualify from Ligue 1 for Europe's elite club competition next season.

PSG are in a strong position to make it through to the second Champions League final in their history after Ousmane Dembele's early goal gave them a 1-0 win away to Arsenal in the first leg of their last-four tie on Tuesday.

The return leg will take place in Paris next Wednesday, and Luis Enrique's side risk having to do without their leading marksman Dembele after he came off in the second half in London.

"It is a minor thing but there is a doubt for the return match," Luis Enrique said following the first leg.

In the meantime the former Barcelona winger seems certain to play no part for PSG in Strasbourg, who will be hoping to capitalise and pick up precious points as they scrap for a place in the Champions League themselves. PSG's hopes of becoming the first team ever to complete a French top-flight season without losing were ended after 30 games as they lost 3-1 at home to Nice last weekend.



PSG players celebrate after the match against Arsenal. PIC: PSG

However, they can still extend their run -- a record in Europe's major leagues -- without being beaten away from home to 40 games if they avoid defeat in Alsace.

Strasbourg come into the final three games of the campaign in seventh place, which will at best bring with it a spot in next season's UEFA Conference League.

Their fans would probably be delighted with that, but the club belonging to the American consortium BlueCo which also owns Chelsea is dreaming even bigger.

Coach Liam Rosenior, who has just extended his contract to 2028, has overseen a run of 11 matches without losing and Strasbourg come into the weekend only two points behind Lille in third.

Lille are two points behind second-placed Marseille, and those sides meet each other on Sunday in a huge game, the winner of which will take an enormous step towards guaranteeing a top-four finish and a Champions League berth.

Monaco, who are a point behind Lille in fourth, visit relegation-threatened Saint-Etienne on Saturday and have won only one of their last 10 away outings.

Paulo Fonseca's Lyon are another point back in fifth, level with both sixth-placed Nice and Strasbourg. They will be expected to get the better of a Lens side who appear to be in freefall.

Meanwhile Nice host struggling Reims as they look to build on last week's win away to PSG.

With just four points separating the six teams immediately behind PSG, nothing will be decided this weekend but all the European contenders know how damaging a slip-up could be. — ***AFP***


LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers dunks the ball against the Minnesota Timberwolves.

James will mull NBA future after Lakers playoff exit

LOS ANGELES: NBA superstar LeBron James says he'll take time to decide whether to return for a 23rd season after his Los Angeles Lakers were dumped out of the first round of the playoffs by the Minnesota Timberwolves on Wednesday.

"I don't know," James said when asked how many more years he would play. "I don't have the answer to that. (It's) something I sit down with my family, my wife and my support group and kind of just talk through it and see what happens and just have a conversation with myself on how long I want to continue to play."

James, who turned 40 on December 30, averaged 24.4 points, 7.8 rebounds and 8.2 assists per game in a season that featured a new set of milestones, but not a fifth title go with the two he won with Miami in 2012 and 2013, the one he won with hometown team Cleveland in 2016 and his 2020 crown with the Lakers.

Already the league's all-time leader scorer, in March James became the first player to amass 50,000 career points.

He joined NBA icon Michael Jordan as the only players to score 40 points at the age of 40 wen he poured in 42 in a Lakers win over Golden State in February.

Later that month he and the Lakers were energized by the addition of Luka Doncic, the Slovenian star who led the Dallas Mavericks to the finals last season.

But James said the most important first achieved this season was playing alongside son Bronny as the first father-son duo to play together in a regular season NBA game.

It was a moment James had long anticipated, and became possible when the Lakers drafted Bronny James last year.

"Number one, for sure," he said of playing with his son. "That's not even close. To be able to play the game that I love and to be able to be alongside my son, this whole year has been one of the most gratifying, satisfying journeys I've ever been on."

Bronny James played much of the season in the developmental G League, but James said watching him grow from Summer League, through the pre-season and G League competition and in his brief stints with the Lakers made him "super proud".

James also praised the development of first-year coach JJ Redick, noting that rookie coaches in the NBA face a tough road but that it was "a hell of a lot harder being a rookie head coach coaching the Lakers."I thought he handled it extremely well," James said. — ***AFP***

Madrid Open holder Swiatek thrashed by Gauff in semis

MADRID: Reigning Madrid Open champion Iga Swiatek suffered a crushing semi-final defeat by Coco Gauff yesterday, with the American triumphing 6-1, 6-1.

The Polish world number two and five-time Grand Slam winner could not force a single break point and dropped serve five times as she fell in 64 minutes.

Swiatek, usually excellent on clay, has struggled during her Madrid title defence.

She dropped sets against Alexandra Eala and Diana Shnaider, and then was dealt a bagel by Madison Keys in just 24 minutes on Wednesday.

However, the 23-year-old Pole bounced back strongly to defeat the American, but came undone against Keys' compatriot Gauff, who beat Swiatek for the first time on the red dirt.

With this latest loss, Swiatek has only the upcoming Italian Open to help her get back to winning ways before she defends her French Open title later in May -- her 2024 triumph at Roland Garros was the last trophy the former world number one lifted.

Gauff, 21, broke in the third, fifth and seventh games to blow Swiatek away in the first set, converting her second set point.

The world number four secured two more breaks in the second set and wrapped up victory at the first time of asking, on serve to love.

Gauff produced seven aces to Swiatek's one in a dominant display.

"I felt great out here on the court today, much different to my first match here in the first round," said Gauff, who had edged past Dayana Yastremska in three sets at the Manolo Santana stadium.


USA's Coco Gauff returns the ball to Poland's Iga Swiatek during their semi-final.

> *I felt great out here on the court today, much different to my first match here in the first round.*
> ***Coco Gauff***

Gauff won her next three matches in straight sets at the Arantxa Sanchez stadium, before returning to centre court.

"I think the previous times we played on clay I don't think I had a win against her yet...

"Obviously on clay she's a different player, but clay is one of my better surfaces too, and I thought if I can beat her on hard I can beat her on clay."

Gauff beat Swiatek at the 2025 United Cup and in the WTA Finals last year, both on hardcourt.

Last year's runner-up Aryna Sabalenka faces in-form Elina Svitolina in the second semi-final.

In the men's draw Casper Ruud reached the semi-finals with a 6-3, 7-5 triumph over Daniil Medvedev.

The Norwegian ousted Taylor Fritz to reach the quarter-finals and secured his first win against the Russian in their fourth meeting.

Strong on clay, Ruud only converted two of his eight break points but it was enough to secure victory, with Medvedev, who dislikes the surface, not producing a single break. Ruud put heavy pressure on Medvedev's serve in the first set, breaking in the fourth game and serving it out.

The second set featured just a single break point, earned and converted by Ruud in the 11th game, enabling him to serve for the match.

Medvedev made 33 unforced errors and committed four double faults on a disappointing afternoon for the world number 10.

Ruud, ranked 15th, will face Francisco Cerundolo in the final four after he edged past Jakub Mensik 3-6, 7-6 (7/5), 6-2.

Fifth seed Jack Draper faces Matteo Arnaldi and Lorenzo Musetti takes on Gabriel Diallo in the other quarter-finals. — ***AFP***

Scorching 1,500m return for Olympic great Ledecky

FORT LAUDERDALE: Nine-time Olympic gold medallist Katie Ledecky **(pictured)** made a blistering return to the swimming pool on Wednesday, clocking the second fastest 1,500m freestyle in history in heats at the TYR Pro Series meeting in Florida.

The 28-year-old American star, who has not raced in an elite event since last year's Paris Olympics, touched the wall in Fort Lauderdale in a time of 15min 24.51sec.

That was just outside her own world record of 15:20.48 set in Indianapolis in 2018, and some 39.62sec faster than her next fastest rival, Jillian Cox. Ledecky now owns the 22 fastest times ever in the 1,500m freestyle, and has not been beaten in the event since she lost a race in Maryland way back in 2010 when she was just 13 years old.

Ledecky, who won her first Olympic title at the 2012 London Games, has already indicated she plans to extend her career to the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028.

Her time on Wednesday was around five seconds quicker than her winning time in the 1,500m final in Paris last August.

"I don't feel like I'm close to being finished in the sport yet," Ledecky said of her plans for the future after her win in Paris last year.



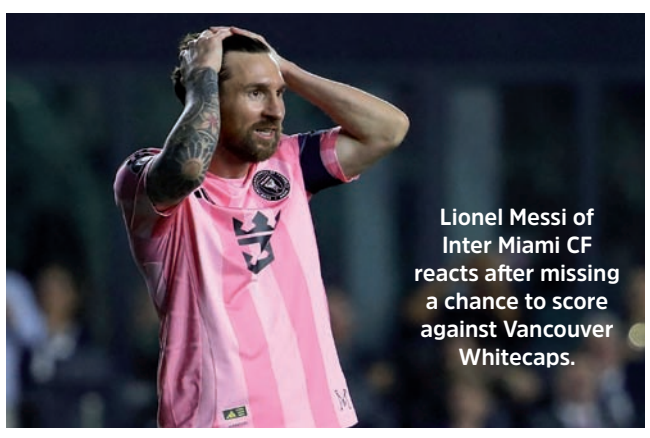
Messi, Inter Miami CONCACAF Cup dream over

FORT LAUDERDALE: Lionel Messi's dream of winning Inter Miami's first CONCACAF Champions Cup title ended on Wednesday with the Vancouver Whitecaps reaching the final with a 3-1 win in south Florida earning them a 5-1 aggregate victory.

The Whitecaps will meet the winners of other semi-final between Mexican clubs Cruz Azul and Tigres UANL which stands at 1-1 ahead of the second leg.

Whoever their Liga MX opponent will be in the single game final, the Whitecaps will go into the game full of confident after outclassing the most hyped-up and expensive Major League Soccer team in history.

In contrast to Miami's slow and ponderous play, Vancouver delivered crisp, positive attacking football allied with evident grit and determination with three second half goals earning them their first appearance in the regional final.


Lionel Messi of Inter Miami CF reacts after missing a chance to score against Vancouver Whitecaps.

Trailing 2-0 from the first leg, Miami made the perfect start to their comeback attempt when former Spain international Jordi Alba put them ahead on the night in just the ninth minute.

Messi, from midfield, threaded the ball through to Luis Suarez who found Alba on the left and his low drive got through Japanese keeper Yohei Takaoka at his near post.

Rather than retreat into a defence of their one-goal advantage, Vancouver went on the attack, knowing that an away goal could prove decisive.

After good work from American striker Brian White, Emmanuel Sabbi struck the outside of the post with a low drive. White and Pedro Vite both tested Miami keeper Oscar Ustari as Vancouver opened up the home defence with remarkable ease.

The Whitecaps were just too quick and too smart for Miami's slow back-line and labouring midfield.

A half-chance for Messi, which he fired high and wide, was the most the Argentine produced in the opening 45 minutes while his compatriot Tadeo Allende was unable to make the most of his openings.

Vancouver retained their positive approach after the break and they were rewarded just six minutes after the restart when, after a well-worked attack, Sebastian Berhalter pulled the ball back from the byline to White who placed into the bottom corner.

Two minutes later, the Whitecaps delivered the killer blow when, after a break down the left, the impressive Berhalter set up the arriving Vite whose shot took a slight deflection off Albi and flew into the top corner to make it 2-1 on the night and 4-1 on aggregate.

It got even worse for Miami when Berhalter, the son of former USA national team coach Gregg, pounced on a loose ball after a blocked White shot and his deflected effort flew past Ustari into the net.

Messi had a couple of late efforts but by then it was all over - his ageing team exposed by a side that will now look to be the first Canadian team to win the competition. — ***AFP***

Mumbai crush Rajasthan to end their playoff hopes


Mumbai Indians' Rohit Sharma plays a shot yesterday.

JAIPUR: Rohit Sharma shined with the bat and Karn Sharma spearheaded a fine collective bowling effort as Mumbai Indians cruised to a massive 100-run win over Rajasthan Royals yesterday, officially ending their opponents' chances of reaching the playoffs.

Rohit smacked 53 runs of 36 balls as Mumbai posted 217-2 after being invited to bat first at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur.

Indian pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah and spinner Karn then picked up a combined total of five wickets to help bowl out Rajasthan for 117 in 16.1 overs after teenage sensation Vaibhav Suryavanshi fell to a two-ball duck.

The match extends Mumbai Indians winning streak to six games and pushes them to the top of the points table.

Mumbai skipper Hardik Pandya said the team were going back to "simple" cricket with clinical batting and bowling performances.

"As a group, the way we batted was proper batsmanship...," said Hardik. "Everyone is really clear. We're going back to simple cricket, and it's working for that. We want to take game by game, and be humble and disciplined."

Mumbai openers Rohit and Ryan Rickelton kicked off the first innings on a dominant note, producing a 116-run partnership before Rickelton, who hit 61 runs off 38 balls, departed in the 12th over.

Rohit fell shortly after, leaving the team at 123-2.

But the rest of the batting burden was shouldered ably by aggressive knocks from Suryakumar Yadav and Hardik.

Both players smacked an unbeaten 48 runs each, giving no quarter to Rajasthan's bowlers, with Yadav hitting a six off the very last ball to set Rajasthan a chase of 218.

In reply, Rajasthan started the on a wobbly note. Suryavanshi (0) was dismissed cheaply in the first over while Yashasvi Jaiswal (13) fell soon after, leaving the team reeling at 20-2 at the end of the second over.

Unfortunately for the hosts, sharp spells from Mumbai's bowlers triggered a batting collapse.

Nitish Rana (9), skipper Riyan Parag (16), Shimron Hetmyer (0), Shubham Dubey (15) and Dhruv Jurel (11) fell like flies, leaving the team teetering at 76-7 at the end of the ninth over.

England's Jofra Archer offered a glimmer of hope, hitting 30 runs off 27 balls, but ultimately fell, leaving the Rajasthan Royals far short of their target.

Parag said that Mumbai Indians deserved credit "for the way they batted". — ***AFP***

Jordan U-16 national team boosted by Aspire Academy training camp

THE PENINSULA


Jordan U-16 training camp at Aspire lasted for a week.

DOHA: Khaled Saad, coach of Jordan's national under-16 team, has said that their training camp at Aspire Academy has been a boost for his players.

The squad's week-long stay at Aspire Academy included two friendly games against the Academy. The matches are part of an ongoing schedule of friendly games organised by the Academy for the various age groups.

At the same time as the games for the under-16s, Aspire Academy's 2014 generation feeder team played four matches against Turkish club Istanbul Basaksehir FK.

The international friendly encounters are a key part of Aspire Academy's commitment to athlete development by providing valuable opportunities for exposure, skill refinement, and cross-cultural football engagement.

Alongside the competitive matches, visiting teams benefit from Aspire Academy's world-class facilities and experience the renowned Qatari hospitality.

The friendly series with the Jordan under-16 national team saw Aspire Academy win the opening game, with the second ending in a draw. The games gave the young players the opportunity to take on strong regional opponents, providing real-time match experience in a competitive setting.

Coach Khaled Saad, a former Jordan international, explained why they chose to train at Aspire Academy.

"Aspire Academy was chosen for its world-class facilities and athlete-focused environment. We truly appreciated the hospitality and professionalism shown by the Aspire Academy team, which mirrors Qatar's strong sports culture and the close ties between our nations. Training at Aspire gave our players a valuable mental and physical boost," he said.

Aspire Academy also welcomed players from Istanbul Basaksehir FK's 2014 age group for a training camp and four friendly games.

This gave the Academy's feeder teams a chance to continue their development as they strive to be offered a place as a full-time student-athlete at Aspire Academy.

More international visitors are due in May for training camps and friendly games against Aspire Academy, including Syria's under-16 and under-18 national teams as well as teams from Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia and Ukraine.