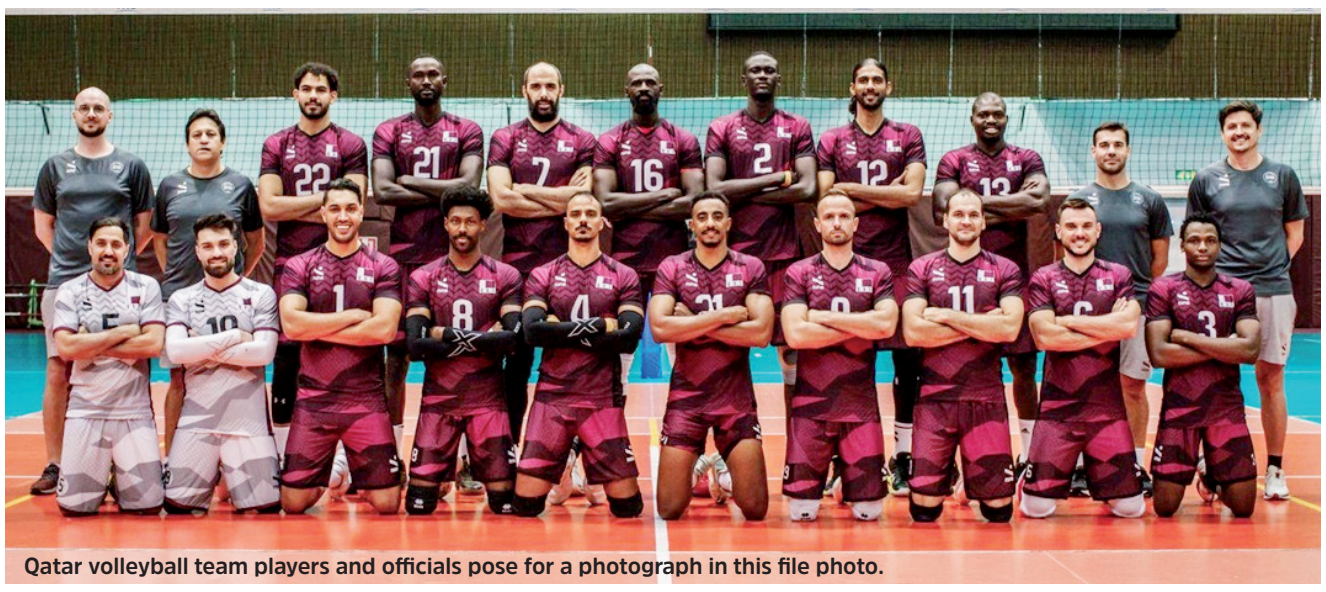


Eyeing strong comeback, Qatar put final touches on FIVB Volleyball World Championship build-up

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA


Qatar volleyball team players and officials pose for a photograph in this file photo.

DOHA: Qatar are set to return to the FIVB Volleyball Men's World Championship, and this time the national team is expected to make a strong appearance.

Qatar's debut in 2022 wasn't successful, with the team losing all their group matches, but the side under coach Camilo Andres Soto has shown significant progress, raising hopes of a strong performance in their second straight appearance at the global event to be hosted by the Philippines this month.

As many as 32 teams, divided into eight groups, will vie for top honours in the World Championship, scheduled to take place in two venues in Manila – the Smart Araneta Coliseum and the SM Mall of Asia Arena – from September 12 to 28.

Qatar are placed in tough Group B, which also includes the Netherlands, top-ranked Poland and Romania. Al Annabi will open their campaign against the Netherlands on September 13 and will face Poland two days later before their final group game against Romania on September 17. The Pool B matches will be played at Smart Araneta Coliseum.

Before securing their World Championship spot, Qatar earned outstanding results in major events in recent years.

They claimed a bronze medal at the Asian Championship in 2023 – their best result yet – and also reached the final of the 2023 FIVB Challenger Cup. Qatar also won a bronze earlier this year at the AVC Men's Volleyball Nations Cup.

Ukraine friendlies in final tune-up

Qatar will wrap up their preparations with a three-match friendly series against Ukraine that got underway in Doha yesterday.

The games are part of their intensive home training camp, which also included matches against Egypt and Iran.

The double-header against Egypt, played on August 25 and 26, ended in two-set draws. In the subsequent matches against Iran, the visitors claimed a 3–1 win in the third game, while the fourth ended in a four-set draw.

Qatar will play their second match against Ukraine tomorrow and the third on Sunday before departing for the Philippines. Ukraine are in Pool F alongside Italy, Belgium and Algeria.

Four-time champions Italy will defend their title, which they won after defeating hosts Poland in the final of the last edition. Brazil secured third place, defeating Slovenia in the play-off.

World Championship Groups

Pool A: Philippines, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia
Pool B: Poland, Netherlands, Qatar, Romania
Pool C: France, Argentina, Finland, Korea
Pool D: USA, Cuba, Portugal, Colombia
Pool E: Slovenia, Germany, Bulgaria, Chile
Pool F: Italy, Ukraine, Belgium, Algeria
Pool G: Japan, Canada, Turkiye, Libya
Pool H: Brazil, Serbia, Czechia, China

QFA announces free entry for Qatar-Russia friendly

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: In a gesture to energise local support ahead of next month's crucial FIFA World Cup 2026 Asian play-offs, the Qatar Football Association (QFA) yesterday announced free entry for the international friendly match between Qatar and Russia, scheduled to take place at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium on Sunday.

"Welcome, to Jassim bin Hamad Stadium. Entry is free, #AlAnnabi waiting for you," QFA posted on social media, encouraging fans to show up in full support of the national team.

The fixture marks the final tune-up for Julen Lopetegui's side as they continue preparations for the upcoming qualifiers. The friendly against Russia follows Wednesday's behind-closed-doors match against Bahrain, which ended in a 2-2 draw at Al Thumama Stadium. Qatar will soon shift focus to the 2026 World Cup Asian play-offs, where they are drawn in Group A alongside Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

Al Rayyan sign Serbian Aleksandar Mitrovic from Saudi giants Al Hilal

THE PENINSULA



DOHA: Al Rayyan Sports Club yesterday officially announced the signing of Serbian international striker Aleksandar Mitrovic **(pictured)** from Saudi Arabian giants Al Hilal. The high-profile move comes as part of Al Rayyan's efforts to strengthen their squad ahead of the new football season.

In a statement, Al Rayyan expressed their appreciation to Al Hilal and its board of directors, headed by H E Prince Nawaf bin Saad Al Saud, for their cooperation in completing the transfer.

The club described the deal as a significant step in building a competitive team capable of challenging for top honours.

Mitrovic, 29, is considered one of the most prominent goal scorers of his generation. Known for his physical presence, aerial ability, and clinical finishing, the Serbian forward brings with him a wealth of experience from top leagues across Europe and Asia, as well as the international stage.

The striker began his professional career at Partizan Belgrade, where he won the Serbian league title. He later moved to Anderlecht in Belgium, shining as the league's top scorer and helping the club win the Pro League title.

Mitrovic then made the switch to England, playing for Newcastle United in the Premier League, before enjoying his most prolific spell at Fulham, where he became the club's top scorer and played a key role in securing promotion to the top tier.

Before joining Al Rayyan, Mitrovic spent a successful stint with Al Hilal in Saudi Arabia, where he won a domestic treble — the Saudi Pro League, the King's Cup, and the Saudi Super Cup.

His individual numbers have been equally impressive across all clubs he has represented.

At Al Hilal, Mitrovic scored 68 goals and provided 15 assists in 79 appearances. During his time at Fulham, he netted 97 goals in 173 matches, and he scored 44 goals in 90 games for Anderlecht. On the international stage, he is the all-time leading scorer for the Serbian national team, with 62 goals in 100 appearances.

Upbeat Qatar U-23 set sights on India clash

CHINTHANA WASALA
THE PENINSULA


Mohamed Siraj (right) celebrates with a teammate after scoring Qatar's fourth goal.

DOHA: Group H hosts Qatar will shift their focus from celebrations to serious business ahead of their crucial clash against India tomorrow as they target a direct spot in next year's AFC U-23 Asian Cup finals.

Qatar's U-23 side delivered a ruthless display of attacking football on Wednesday, handing the South East Asian nation a crushing 13-0 in their opening clash at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium in Doha.

Forward Moustafa Asar was the star of the show, netting four goals in a dominant performance, while braces from Noureldan Tamer and Marawan Brimil, ensured Qatar dominated the proceedings.

Jassem Al Sharshani, Mubarak Shanan Hamza, Mohamed Siraj, Hashmi Al Hussain, and Abdulaziz Mohamad Hassan also found the back of the net as Brunei succumbed to a massive defeat.

Siraj, who scored Qatar's fourth goal of the night, expressed his delight after the emphatic victory.

"We entered the first match with the goal of winning and scoring as many goals as possible, given the importance of goal difference in securing qualification from the last two matches and to avoid being under pressure," Siraj said.

"The big win is important and will be a great motivation for us ahead of the final two matches against India and Bahrain. We are working to give our best in both games and perform at the highest level," Siraj added.

Looking ahead, Siraj noted that Qatar had already shifted focus to their next challenge.

"We will turn the page on this match and begin preparing for the next match against India, which will not be easy," Siraj said.

Following Qatar's ruthless demolition of Brunei, Al Annabi sit comfortably on top with three points and a huge +13 goal difference. India also secured three points with a 2-0 victory over Bahrain, placing them second in the table, while Bahrain, yet to open their goal account, are third with no points. Brunei are fourth.

In tomorrow's other Group H clash, Brunei will face Bahrain at the Suheim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Qatar will conclude the group stage on September 9 with a clash against Bahrain.

All group winners and the four best runners-up overall, along with hosts Saudi Arabia will complete the final line-up at the 2026 U-23 Asian Cup which will take place from January 7-25.

Sinner powers into US Open semis, Anisimova gains Swiatek revenge


Jannik Sinner returns a shot against Lorenzo Musetti.

NEW YORK: Reigning champion Jannik Sinner marched into the US Open quarter-finals as Amanda Anisimova avenged her Wimbledon thrashing by Iga Swiatek to set up a last-four clash with Naomi Osaka.

World number one Sinner swept aside 10th seed Musetti 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 in the first all-Italian men's quarter-final in Grand Slam history.

"It was a great performance, very solid. I started the match very well," said Sinner, who faces Canadian 25th seed Felix Auger-Aliassime in the semi-finals today.

Auger-Aliassime has won two of three previous meetings but Sinner thrashed him for the loss of just two games in Cincinnati last month.

"Every player who is in the semis of a Grand Slam can say they're playing their best tennis," added Sinner.

The 24-year-old Sinner also tied Nicola Pietrangeli for the most Grand Slams win by an Italian man with his 86th victory.

Auger-Aliassime overcame Alex de Minaur in a four-set battle lasting over four hours to reach his second US Open semi-final.

The 25-year-old Auger-Aliassime is back in the last four of a Grand Slam for the first time since the 2021 US Open after beating eighth seed De Minaur 4-6, 7-6 (9/7), 7-5, 7-6 (7/4).

"Some days you won't feel your best but I was willing to dig really deep and do everything I can," said Auger-Aliassime.

"It feels amazing. Four years ago, it feels like more. It was a tough couple of years but it feels even better now to be in the semi-finals." Australia's De Minaur, 26, has now lost all six of his Grand Slam quarter-finals.

"Right now I'm looking at this like a wasted opportunity," De Minaur said.

Anisimova rebounded from her disastrous double-bagel defeat at the hands of Swiatek at Wimbledon two months ago, beating the second-ranked Pole 6-4, 6-3 in New York.

"I've been having the run of my life here," said Anisimova, the American eighth seed.

"The first day I got here I was like 'OK, let's try and get through one round... This has been such a dream. To come back from Wimbledon like that is really special to me."


Amanda Anisimova of the United States reacts after defeating Iga Swiatek of Poland.

Six-time major winner Swiatek entered the US Open as the bookmakers' favourite, after she followed up her maiden Wimbledon title with victory at the Cincinnati Open WTA 1000 event.

Swiatek broke in the first game of the match but Anisimova hit back immediately and snatched the opening set when her rival ballooned a forehand long.

Anisimova again had to rally after falling behind early in the second set. She broke back for 2-2 and then moved a game from victory as Swiatek coughed up a costly double fault.

Swiatek saved two match points but a net cord in Anisimova's favour sealed the win and a sense of redemption for the 24-year-old. "Today is definitely the most meaningful victory I've had in my life," said Anisimova.

Osaka beat Czech 11th seed Karolina Muchova 6-4, 7-6 (7/3) to extend her deepest run at a Grand Slam since returning to tennis after the birth of her daughter in 2023. The Japanese star hit 30 winners in a smooth performance reminiscent of the player who lifted the trophy here in 2018 and 2020.

"It's been a while since I've been in this position," said Osaka, who has gone on to win the tournament every time she has reached the last four of a major.

"You play the best players in the world towards the end of a Slam. We're all hoping to achieve the same thing. It's kind of like boxing, but with a tennis ball," said Osaka, the 23rd seed. However, she has lost both previous matches with Anisimova -- at the Australian Open and Roland Garros in 2022. — *AFP*

Car-crash season with Ferrari weighing on Hamilton ahead of Monza homecoming

MONZA: Lewis Hamilton is in the midst of a crisis of confidence and results that the Formula One icon has never known in his storied career as Ferrari's fans hope for a sharp turnaround at the Italian Grand Prix.

Seven-time F1 champion Hamilton's arrival at Maranello made Ferrari's vociferous support dream of an end to an 18-year wait for a world title to be won by a driver in red.

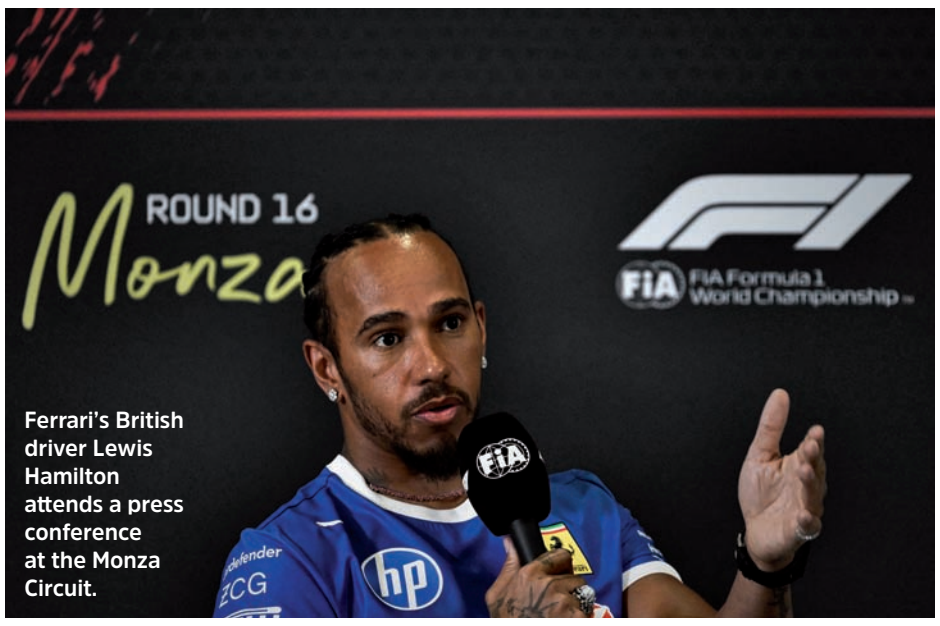
Instead the 40-year-old trails championship leader Oscar Piastri by a whopping 200 points after a disastrous campaign with Ferrari which not only hasn't brought him any GP wins, but not even a single podium finish.

Last weekend's Dutch GP was the lowest point of the year for the Scuderia, with both Hamilton and Charles Leclerc crashing out of a race which had been preceded by the Briton twice spinning his car in practice.

Nonetheless Hamilton still appears to be happy to be with the sport's most famous team, telling Sky in Italy on Wednesday that it was "really special to remember that I'm a Ferrari driver" every time he comes to Italy.

Hamilton and Leclerc, who delighted fans by winning at Monza last year, were greeted enthusiastically by hordes of supporters at an event held in the shadow of Milan's famous Gothic cathedral.

"Yesterday was such a unique experience. Yesterday morning, I got to Maranello, and when you walk in and you see the Ferrari logo, I mean I still have to pinch myself," Hamilton told reporters on Thursday.



Ferrari's British driver Lewis Hamilton attends a press conference at the Monza Circuit.

"There's clearly just so much love for this brand and for what it means to people. And to be in Milan, in the heart of it all yesterday and seeing the fans and just how passionate they were about it, it was intense, but very, very positive."

Hamilton has taken badly his failure to perform after switching to Ferrari following 12 years at Mercedes, referring to himself as "completely useless" at the Hungarian GP in an outburst which led to talk of him quitting the sport come the end of the year.

"It's been an emotional rollercoaster. What can I say? Did I expect it to be as volatile in terms of the feeling? No. But that's life," he said.

"The sun may be coming out on the brighter end of the tunnel."

And his chances of making the Monza masses happy were further hit after the Dutch GP when he was handed a five-place grid penalty for this weekend after failing to slow down in a yellow flag zone on his way to the grid.

"There's not point whinging about it," added Hamilton.

"It's going to be a challenge this weekend in qualifying as it's already so close between us all. Just getting to Q3 is tough, getting in the top five is very, very tough."

Hamilton and Leclerc are in truth little more than a photogenic sideshow as McLaren duo Piastri and Lando Norris battle for a drivers' crown which would be the first for the British team since 2008, when Ferrari won their last constructors' title.

Piastri has 309 points from 15 GPs and leads his teammate by 34 after Norris failed to finish the race in Zandvoort after suffering a mechanical failure in the closing laps.

Between them Piastri and Norris have won all but three races this season at the wheel of McLaren cars which have blown away the competition.

Not even reigning champion Max Verstappen has had enough to challenge McLaren and a 104-point gap separating him from Piastri suggests that his run of F1 titles is set to end at four in a row.

Dutchman Verstappen managed to finish second in front of his home fans last weekend, pouncing on Norris' misfortune, but he is realistic about his chances of putting pressure on Piastri over the final nine races of the season.

The famously blunt 27-year-old has already said that his goal for the rest of the campaign is to "just try to make the best of it", starting at a circuit where he has won twice. — *AFP*

FORMULA ONE: WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP STANDINGS

DRIVERS

1. Oscar Piastri (AUS) 309 pts, 2. Lando Norris (GBR) 275, 3. Max Verstappen (NED) 205, 4. George Russell (GBR) 184, 5. Charles Leclerc (MON) 151, 6. Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 109, Kimi Antonelli (ITA) 64, 8. Alex Albon (THA) 64, 9. Nico Hulkenberg (GER) 37, 10. Isack Hadjar (FRA) 37, 11. Lance Stroll (CAN) 32, 12. Fernando Alonso (ESP) 30, 13. Esteban Ocon (FRA) 28, 14. Pierre Gasly (FRA) 20, 15. Liam Lawson (NZL) 20, 16. Oliver Bearman (GBR) 16, 17. Carlos Sainz (ESP) 16, 18. Gabriel Bortoleto (BRA) 14, 19. Yuki Tsunoda (JPN) 12, 20. Franco Colapinto (ARG) 0, 21. Jack Doohan (AUS) 0

CONSTRUCTORS

1. McLaren 584 pts, 2. Ferrari 260, 3. Mercedes 248, 4. Red Bull 214, 5. Williams 80, 6. Aston Martin 62, 7. Racing Bulls 60, 8. Sauber 51, 9. Haas 44, 10. Alpine 20


Wales players celebrate Kieffer Moore's goal. PIC: FAW

Wales edge Kazakhstan to boost World Cup hopes

PARIS: Kieffer Moore's goal gave Wales a 1-0 win away in Kazakhstan in World Cup qualifying yesterday to hand Craig Bellamy's side a major boost in their attempt to make next year's tournament in North America.

The veteran Wrexham striker netted from close range midway through the first half in Astana and the visitors held on as a late Serikzhan Muzhikov free-kick for Kazakhstan clipped the crossbar.

Wales were beaten 4-3 away in Belgium in their last qualifier in June, but this victory leaves them provisionally top of Group J with 10 points from five games.

However, North Macedonia are only two points behind in second with a game in hand, while group favourites Belgium have four points from only two outings.

Belgium will be expected to get all three points later when they face minnows Liechtenstein away.

Elsewhere yesterday, European champions Spain began their qualifying campaign away in Bulgaria, while Germany also played their first match away to Slovakia.

The Netherlands entertain Poland in Rotterdam. — *AFP*

French team barred from boxing worlds over late gender test results

PARIS: The French women's team have been barred from the boxing world championships because the results of their gender tests were not delivered on time, the French Federation (FFBoxe) said yesterday.

World Boxing said last month women wanting to compete in the event in Liverpool that starts on Thursday would have to undergo mandatory genetic gender testing under its new policy.

Such tests have been banned in France since a law was passed in 1994, save under strict conditions, so the French federation had to wait till they reached England in order to proceed with them.

The five-member team underwent testing in a World Boxing-accredited laboratory with the understanding, FFBoxe said, that the results would be available before the deadline.

"We are sorry some boxers did not meet the deadline for results of testing but the rules and deadlines were published," a World Boxing official told AFP.

Nevertheless FFBoxe was seething over the decision.

"It is with stupefaction and indignation that the French team learned on Wednesday evening the French women's boxing team would not be able to compete in the first world championships organised by World Boxing," it said in a statement.

"Despite guarantees given to us by World Boxing, the laboratory which they recommended to us was not up to the task of delivering the results on time.

"As a result our athletes as well as those from other countries have been caught in this trap and excluded."

Under World Boxing's policy, fighters over 18 who want to participate in their competitions need to take a PCR, or polymerase chain reaction, genetic test. — *AFP*

Spence on brink of history as first Muslim England player

LONDON: Tottenham's Djed Spence said the opportunity to make history as the first male player who publically identifies as a Muslim to represent England was a "blessing" as he prepares for a potential debut.

The 25-year-old defender was one of two new faces included in Thomas Tuchel's squad for World Cup qualifiers against Andorra and Serbia.

It is understood Spence could become the first Muslim man to play for England's senior team.


England's defender Djed Spence takes part in a training session.

"I've seen that," the versatile full-back said at England's training base. "It's a blessing, it's amazing. I did see something like that. I was surprised, really, first ever. It's just amazing. I don't have the words really."

But the former England Under-21s international said he did not feel under extra pressure, adding: "I just play football with a smile on my face."

Spence's faith is a major part of his identity and is something he frequently acknowledges on social media.

"First things first, God is the greatest," he said. "I pray a lot. I give gratitude to God.

"In the toughest moments of my life, the darkest moments, I've always believed that God has always been by my side.

"When I'm winning, when I'm in a good moment, I promote God as well because he's always been by my side. It's a big thing for me, my faith." Spence's rise has been a slow one.

After impressing in the Championship for Middlesbrough and Nottingham Forest, he moved to Premier League Tottenham in 2022.

But he initially struggled to make an impression under former Tottenham boss Antonio Conte, and spent time on loan at Rennes, Leeds and Genoa.

The defender only made his full Spurs debut in December, two-and-a-half years after he joined the club in what proved a breakthrough campaign that culminated in Europa League glory.

He came on as a substitute in the Bilbao final having initially been omitted from Ange Postecoglou's group-stage squad earlier in the season.

"Without (a strong) mentality, you won't make it to the top," said Spence.

"I definitely think I have got a strong mentality, especially to fight through challenges." "I do have a mental note of people who doubted me, for sure, and it does feel good to prove them wrong," he added.

Now the full-back hopes to inspire others. "If I can do it, you can do it," he said. "Not just Muslim kids, any child of any faith. Put your mind to something and you can do it."

England face Andorra at Villa Park on Saturday before travelling to play Serbia in Belgrade on Tuesday.

Tuchel's men are top of Group K with three wins from three matches so far. — *AFP*

After change of club and Italy coach, fresh beginnings for Donnarumma

ROME: Gianluigi Donnarumma is entering a new phase of his career as the Italy goalkeeper prepares for 2026 World Cup qualifiers under new coach Gennaro Gattuso before taking his place at Manchester City.

The giant goalkeeper will move to England after Italy's Group I clashes with Estonia and Israel after he was abruptly frozen out at Paris Saint-Germain by coach Luis Henrique.

"I really felt at home during my four years in Paris, I'll never forget them," Donnarumma told journalists.

Donnarumma insists he holds no ill will about the way he was dumped down the pecking order at PSG in favour of French youngster Lucas Chevalier so soon after his performances helped win the capital club's first Champions League.

"I've always had an excellent relationship with the coach. I appreciated his directness with me, right from the first day of training," he said.

"I don't know what the reason was (for being replaced), I don't even want to know. I always try to do what my coach asks me to do, to help my team.

"You can always improve, but I've accomplished great things since I made my Serie A debut at 16 years old." Just as he did when he moved to PSG, Donnarumma signed his City contract at Italy's Coverciano training camp during an international break.

"It brought me some luck," said Donnarumma, who was also key to Italy being crowned European champions in 2021, just before he signed for PSG. But before joining Guardiola in Manchester Donnarumma has a big task on his hands with Italy, who are at risk of missing out on a third straight World Cup.


Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma (left) and Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Bradley Barcola arrive for a training session, in this file photo.

Donnarumma has maintained the captain's armband under Gattuso, who replaced Luciano Spalletti in June after a troubled start to Italy's qualifying campaign which included a 3-0 thumping at the hands of group leaders Norway.

The 26-year-old played under Gattuso, who won the World Cup as a player with Italy in 2006, at AC Milan when still a teenager.

Donnarumma said that he wants to "take Italy back to where we belong" which is not small feat given where they find themselves after two qualifying matches.

Italy are nine points behind Norway, albeit having played two games fewer, and have a slim chance of taking the spot which offers the only direct place in next year's finals in the USA, Canada and Mexico.

As well as the significant points gap Italy have a goal difference which is 12 worse than Norway, meaning that the play-offs, from which they failed to reach the last two tournaments, are the more realistic route for qualification. — *AFP*

Kyrgios predicts easy win over Sabalenka

SYDNEY: Mercurial Australian Nick Kyrgios **(pictured)** claims he will easily beat women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka in a "Battle of the Sexes" showdown that could be played next year.

Australian and British media said the rare man-versus-woman contest was pencilled in, but not yet confirmed, for Hong Kong in January in the lead-up to the Australian Open.

Kyrgios said he was "super-excited" about the prospect, adding: "She's not going to beat me, do you really think I have to try 100 percent? "Getting to know her, she's definitely a character," the 2022 Wimbledon finalist added in a YouTube interview with fellow ATP Tour player Alexander Bublik.

"I think she's the type of player who genuinely thinks she's going to win."

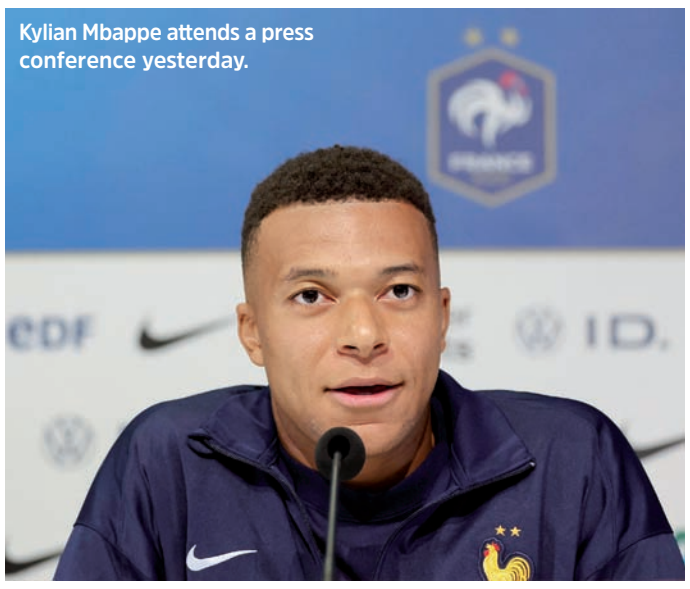
The 30-year-old Kyrgios, ranked 651 in the world after a series of injuries, has not played since losing in the second round at the Miami Open in March.

In contrast, Belarusian Sabalenka is a three-time Grand Slam champion and the world's top-ranked woman.



Asked by Bublik how he would beat her, Kyrgios said: "Our serves, women can't return them and then we can just chip and drop shot." Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in a "Battle of the Sexes" exhibition in 1973, a key moment as the push for women's rights gained ground. — *AFP*

France star Mbappe calls for players to get more time off


Kylian Mbappe attends a press conference yesterday.

WROCLAW: France captain Kylian Mbappe said yesterday that top footballers do not necessarily play too many matches but do need more time off in a crowded schedule which offers little time for a break.

"It is not only a matter of the number of games, but more about recovery. We just need a bit more rest, time off for our bodies to regenerate and recover from the number of matches we have to play," Mbappe told reporters in Poland, where France begin their 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign against Ukraine today.

Mbappe played 59 matches last season in his first campaign with Real Madrid, from making his debut in the UEFA Super Cup on August 14 last year to the Club World Cup semi-final defeat by Paris Saint-Germain on July 9.

He also made six appearances for France in that time, and was back in action for Real in La Liga as this season started on August 19.

If France qualify for the World Cup, it could be mid-July next year before he gets any significant time off again.

"Do we play too much? No, my thinking has evolved," Mbappe insisted.

"I did think that, but I don't anymore, because I can understand that the people watching on their sofa think we earn a lot of money and so we should play."

Mbappe, who scored 44 goals for the Spanish giants last season, admitted that the introduction of the Club World Cup had hugely increased the demands on players.

"We were only just getting to the quarter-finals while teams were already starting to play friendly matches. They had started the 2025/26 season while it was still 2024/25 for us," he said.

> *I watch a lot of matches but I can't remember seeing a player - even the greatest of all time - play 60 matches in a season and always be at their best.*
> ***Kylian Mbappe***

"I watch a lot of matches but I can't remember seeing a player -- even the greatest of all time -- play 60 matches in a season and always be at their best."

He added: "It is a matter which needs to be looked into, because everyone will come out as a winner. People will see games of a higher quality."

After playing Ukraine, France entertain Iceland in Paris next Tuesday.

They will also face Azerbaijan in qualifying Group D, the winners of which will qualify directly for the World Cup. — ***AFP***

Levy makes shock decision to quit as Spurs chairman



LONDON: Daniel Levy **(pictured)** stepped down as Tottenham executive chairman in a shock move yesterday after a controversial reign lasting nearly 25 years.

Levy was the driving force behind Tottenham's £1.2bn ($1.6 billion) stadium and state of the art training centre.

But the 63-year-old was a polarising figure among Tottenham fans, with numerous protests against him during difficult spell for the Premier League team.

Levy, who was the longest-serving chairman in the Premier League, had come under fire more than ever over the last few seasons.

A series of failed managerial appointments and the club's transfer policy infuriated supporters and turned up the heat on Levy, who was accused of caring more about the club's financial profits than success on the pitch.

Levy hired Thomas Frank from Brentford to replace Postecoglou in the last significant decision of his reign.

"I am incredibly proud of the work I have done together with the executive team and all our employees. We have built this club into a global heavyweight competing at the highest level," Levy said in a statement.

"More than that, we have built a community. I was lucky enough to work with some of the greatest people in this sport, from the team at Lilywhite House and Hotspur Way to all the players and managers over the years.

"I wish to thank all the fans that have supported me over the years. It hasn't always been an easy journey but significant progress has been made. I will continue to support this club passionately." — ***AFP***


Fakhar Zaman plays a shot: PIC: Emirates Cricket Board

Zaman, Abrar star as Pakistan beat UAE to reach final

SHARJAH: Fakhar Zaman cracked a robust 77 and spinner Abrar Ahmed registered career-best figures as Pakistan reached the T20I tri-series final with a 31-run win over United Arab Emirates yesterday.

Zaman hit an aggressive 44-ball 77 not out for his 12th T20I half century while Mohammad Nawaz smashed an undefeated 27-ball 37 to revive Pakistan from 80-5 Pakistan to 171-5 in their 20 overs.

Abrar then grabbed 4-9 in four economical overs to restrict UAE to 140-7 with opener Alishan Sharafu fighting a lone hand, scoring a steady 51-ball 68.

Sharafu hit four sixes and as many fours.

The win, Pakistan's third in four games, not only took Pakistan to Sunday's final but also ensured Afghanistan who face the hosts in the last group on Friday, would advance. UAE's power-hitters Muhammad Waseem fell for 19 and Asif Khan for seven as UAE suffered their third defeat in as many games.

Abrar's previous best of 3-19 came against Bangladesh in Lahore earlier this year.

Earlier, Pakistan lost five wickets for just 80 runs in 11.3 overs after they won the toss and batted.

Openers Saim Ayub scored 11 and Sahibzada Farhan made 16. Skipper Salman Agha hit seven, Mohammad Haris 14 and Hasan Nawaz four.

Zaman and Nawaz added 91 off 51 balls for the sixth wicket to put the innings back on track.

It was Zaman's first half century in 14 innings since a match against Ireland at Dublin in May last year.

Zaman's knock contained two sixes and ten fours. Nawaz hit two sixes and three fours.

The pair launched vicious late attack, with 74 coming off the last five overs and 42 off the last two.

Nawaz smashed three fours and a six in Junaid Siddique's penultimate over while Zaman cracked five consecutive boundaries off Muhammad Jawadullah's last over. Spinner Haider Ali was the most successful home bowler with 2-17. — ***AFP***

Spain thrash Bulgaria in qualifier as Germany suffer shock defeat



SOFIA: Spain kicked off their World Cup 2026 qualification campaign with an emphatic 3-0 win in Bulgaria yesterday.

The Euro 2024 champions eased to a comfortable victory at the Vasil Levski Stadium in Sofia with first-half goals from Mikel Oyarzabal, Marc Cucurella and Mikel Merino **(pictured)**.

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente was able to bring on Rodri Hernandez and Dani Carvajal for their first international appearances in several months after both recovered from severe knee injuries.

Spain, who won the World Cup for the first and only time in 2010, are expected to top Group E which also contains Turkiye and Georgia, to reach the tournament in the United States, Canada and Mexico directly.

This was the first time Spain have faced Bulgaria in more than 20 years, with the last competitive meeting at the 1998 World Cup.

Arsenal midfielder Martin Zubimendi set up his former Real Sociedad team-mate Oyarzabal for the opener with a fine pass as Spain took the lead after five minutes.

Radoslav Kirilov hit the post for the hosts before Chelsea defender Cucurella thumped in to double Spain's lead after the ball dropped into his path.

The game was effectively over before the break when Barcelona winger Lamine Yamal whipped in a corner which Merino nodded home, reflecting Spain's domination.

Arsenal midfielder Merino hit the crossbar in the second half as Spain continued to dominate.

Teenager Yamal was bright and dangerous without scoring.

Man City midfielder Rodri and Real Madrid's Carvajal made their long-awaited returns off the bench as De la Fuente shuffled his pack. They had missed seven and nine months each respectively.

The coach also handed Jesus Rodriguez his international debut in the final stages, with the Como winger replacing Yamal to round off a fine evening for La Roja.

Spain visit Turkiye, who beat Georgia 3-2 earlier on, in their next qualifier on Sunday.

Meanwhile, Germany crashed to a shock 2-0 defeat against Slovakia in their World Cup qualifying opener in Bratislava.

Ranked 52 in the world, Slovakia frequently carved up the four-time World Cup winners, taking the lead after 42 minutes through David Hancko with David Strelec adding a second 10 minutes after the break. It was Germany's first ever away loss in a qualifying match a World Cup tournament. — ***AFP***

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS RESULTS

Group A
Luxembourg 1-3 Northern Ireland
Slovakia 2-0 Germany
Group E
Georgia 2-3 Turkiye
Bulgaria 0-3 Spain
Group G
Lithuania 1-1 Malta
Netherlands 1-1 Poland
Group J
Kazakhstan 0-1 Wales
Liechtenstein 0-6 Belgium


Marnus Labuschagne

Labuschagne eyes Ashes return after missing West Indies tour

SYDNEY: Marnus Labuschagne has gone "back to the drawing board" in a bid to regain his Australia spot for the Ashes, boosted by knowing he was once the top batsman in the world.

The long-time number three in Australia's batting order was dropped from the Test tour of the West Indies in June-July after a sustained lean spell.

"There's an analogy -- you can try and bash yourself through the wall or you can just open the door and walk in," he told *cricket.com.au*. "(That means) train smarter.

"My technique over time hasn't been where I wanted it to be and probably there's been a little bit too much time and focus going into trying to get that right, rather than just playing with what I've got.

"But it's been a nice time to reset, be able to recalibrate and go, 'Okay I missed that West Indies series, how am I going to get myself ready to play the Ashes?'"

"The benefit is you know you've done it before, right?," he said.

"Two years ago I was one of the best batters in the world. You know that it's there and you know you've just got to go back to the (drawing) board and find that consistency, that mental clarity, to go out there and perform." — ***AFP***

South Africa beat England to win ODI series


South Africa's Lungi Ngidi (centre) celebrates taking the wicket of England's Jos Buttler during the second One Day International at Lords, yesterday.

LONDON: Matthew Breetzke became the first batsman in one-day international history to start his career with five consecutive scores of fifty or more as South Africa beat England by five runs for a series-clinching win at Lord's yesterday.

Victory gave the Proteas an unbeatable 2-0 lead in a three-match ODI campaign, with Breetzke's 85 the cornerstone of their imposing 330-8.

England, skittled out for just 131 in Tuesday's series opener in Leeds, kept hitting all the way down the order before, needing 16 to win off the last over, they were held to a total of 325-9. — ***AFP***

Ayuso sprints to Vuelta a Espana Stage 12 victory


Juan Ayuso celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the 12th stage yesterday.

LOS CORRALES DE BUELNA: Juan Ayuso sprinted to victory in the 12th stage of the Vuelta a Espana yesterday to seal his second win at this year's race.

After stage 11 on Wednesday was cut short because of a pro-Palestinian protest at the finish line in Bilbao, it was a far quieter afternoon on the winding 145-kilometre ride from Laredo to Los Corrales de Buelna in the north of Spain.

People held up Palestinian flags along the route but there were no disturbances to the race as UAE Team Emirates' Ayuso edged out Spanish compatriot Javier Romo, with Brieuc Rolland coming in third, 13 seconds behind.

UAE announced this week they would part ways with Ayuso at the end of the season, with the Spaniard saying he felt he had been afforded a lack of respect by his team.

Leader Jonas Vingegaard and the peloton came in well over six minutes behind, but the Dane stays in red, followed by Joao Almeida and Tom Pidcock.

Despite pressure from organisers on Israel-Premier Tech to pull out, given they were the target of the protests, they refused to and started the stage in Laredo.

After the first few kilometres a 40-strong break shook loose of the peloton, with more riders bridging the gap to create a 52-man break.

> *UAE Team Emirates' Ayuso edged out Spanish compatriot Javier Romo, with Brieuc Rolland coming in third, 13 seconds behind.*

The huge group put nearly five minutes between themselves and the peloton which included Vingegaard in the red jersey.

Eventually the break fractured and Ayuso pushed out in front with Romo hot on his tail.

Ayuso showed greater power to fly past Romo on the home straight, with the latter slapping his handlebars in frustration as the former celebrated.

"The sprint... I did quite well," said the triumphant 22-year-old, linked with a move to Lidl-Trek for next season.

"I know this road a lot because it's where the junior races finish as well, so I knew how to time my sprint," he added.

The general classification favourites had a quiet afternoon, saving their legs for the challenging stage to come today.

Riders will tackle one of the toughest climbs of the race in Angliru, where the stage ends after a 202.7 kilometre route from Cabezon de la Sal in Cantabria. — ***AFP***