Pressure on Norris as F1 enters new era in Melbourne

MELBOURNE: A new era in Formula One revs up this week with Lando Norris starting his world title defence and Cadillac making their debut at a wide-open Australian Grand Prix that will test the impact of sweeping rule changes.

McLaren ace Norris began his drive to a maiden Formula One crown last year with victory at Melbourne's full-throttle Albert Park from pole, edging Red Bull's Max Verstappen.

It was an incident-packed race in the rain with the safety car repeatedly forced into action after a slew of crashes on the wet circuit.

Better weather is forecast this time but there will be as many, if not more, variables to deal with after a dramatic overhaul to both engine and chassis regulations.

With hybrid power units now roughly 50 percent thermal and 50 percent electric, there is more focus on battery management, prompting Max Verstappen to say driving felt like "Formula E on steroids".

The uncertainty of what to expect makes Melbourne one of the most anticipated races in years as drivers grapple with finding maximum performance in what are vastly different cars.

It also sees the grid expand from 20 cars to 22 with the debut of an 11th team in Cadillac, whose hopes rest on experienced pair Valtteri Bottas and Sergio Perez.



A crew member walks past images of drivers at the Albert Park Circuit in Melbourne.

Battery tests drivers

Britain's Norris, who narrowly clinched the championship at the season finale in Abu Dhabi in December from Australian teammate Oscar Piastri, has reservations about the new cars "A lot of the driving is focused on just trying to get the battery to work properly and less focused on how can you as a driver get everything out of the car," he said.

But he added: "I still have fun and it's still the job that I love to do."

Pre-season testing at Barcelona and Bahrain suggested that the big four -- McLaren, Ferrari, Red Bull and Mercedes -- would again dominate.

But teams were still hiding their full capabilities as they collected data on the power units and how the cars responded.

Along with defending the drivers' title, McLaren also hold the constructors' crown and team chief Zak Brown said they may not be at the very front of the pack.

Mercedes caught the eye in Bahrain with a heavy lap load and fast times, with consensus in the paddock that they could be the team to beat in Melbourne.

Feeling fast

George Russell, who is again partnered by Kimi Antonelli, admitted his car was "feeling good".

"The new power units are feeling fast and we're making improvements every single day. However, we need to keep on improving the reliability," he said.

And while four-time world champion Verstappen initially blasted the new cars as "anti-racing", the 2023 Melbourne winner also told reporters: "Overall I'm very happy with the car -- in general we don't have too many problems, so that's been OK."

Red Bull have dispensed with Honda engines and are competing this season for the first time with their own factory-built power units.

This year Verstappen is joined by French driver Isack Hadjar, promoted to the number two seat after a successful rookie season with Racing Bulls.

Last year was a nightmare for Ferrari and its star drivers Lewis Hamilton and Charles Leclerc, but the Scuderia are showing signs of turning the corner with a positive vibe in the team. Seven-time world champion Hamilton said he felt more in sync with the SF-26 as he bids to put a miserable first season at Ferrari behind him.

"I generally feel, personally, in the best place that I've been in a long, long time," said the Briton, a two-time Melbourne winner.

"It's an exciting time with this new generation of car." — *AFP*


Lando Norris

2026 F1 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP TEAMS AND DRIVERS

BWT Alpine F1 Team
Pierre Gasly, Franco Colapinto

Aston Martin Aramco F1 Team
Fernando Alonso, Lance Stroll

Atlassian Williams F1 Team
Alexander Albon, Carlos Sainz Jr.

Audi Revolut F1 Team
Gabriel Bortoleto, Nico Hülkenberg

Cadillac Formula 1 Team
Sergio Pérez, Valtteri Bottas

Scuderia Ferrari HP
Charles Leclerc, Lewis Hamilton

Visa Cash App Racing Bulls F1 Team
Liam Lawson, Arvid Lindblad

McLaren Mastercard F1 Team
Lando Norris, Oscar Piastri

Mercedes-AMG Petronas F1 Team
Kimi Antonelli, George Russell

Oracle Red Bull Racing
Max Verstappen, Isack Hadjar

TGR Haas F1 Team
Esteban Ocon, Oliver Bearman

Alcaraz unbeaten run under threat from Sinner, Djokovic at Indian Wells

INDIAN WELLS: Former champion Carlos Alcaraz aims to extend his perfect start to 2026 at Indian Wells while Jannik Sinner returns to the California desert seeking to fill a gap in his resume with his first title of the year.

The world's top two players headline a stellar men's field for the ATP and WTA Masters 1000 tournament, where Serbian superstar Novak Djokovic is chasing a record sixth title, which would see him break out of a tie with Swiss great Roger Federer for the most in tournament history.

Spain's Alcaraz, 22, made history last month when he lifted the Australian Open title to become the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam.

He won the Qatar Open to arrive Stateside riding a 12-match winning streak to start the year.

The top seed could face a tricky second-round opener against either former world number three Grigor Dimitrov or in-form left-hander Terence Atmane, with third-seeded Djokovic also looming in his half of the draw.

Sinner will play either Australian James Duckworth or Czech qualifier Dalibor Svrcina, who faced off Wednesday as first-round action got underway.

The Italian missed Indian Wells last year serving a suspension for a positive test for banned anabolic steroid clostebol. He returned from that ban to win Wimbledon and the ATP Finals but fell to Djokovic in the Australian Open semi-finals and lost to Jakob Mensik in the quarters at Doha last month.


Carlos Alcaraz of Spain during a practice session, watched closely by his coach Samuel Lopez at Indian Wells Tennis Garden.

Although he professed himself satisfied with his season so far, Sinner said Tuesday he was trying to maximize his potential.

"It has been a very hard practice week here for me," he said. "We spent many, many hours of practice.

"(I'm) very happy with how I'm feeling on the court ... In the same time, we also try to improve a couple of things.

"I'm trying to be slightly more aggressive at times on the baseline, and then we see how it goes," added the Italian, who has won all of the other five Masters 1000 hard court tournaments, starting with Toronto in 2023 and adding Miami, Cincinnati and Shanghai in 2024 and Paris last year.

Women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka is also chasing a first Indian Wells title, having fallen in last year's final to Russian teen Mirra Andreeva and in 2023 to Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina -- who beat Sabalenka in the Australian Open final to claim a second Grand Slam crown.

Sabalenka, back in action for the first time since that Australian Open disappointment, will open her campaign against either Japanese qualifier Himeno Sakatsume or US wild card Alycia Parks, with Japanese star Naomi Osaka and hard-hitting American Amanda Anisimova in her quarter. Third-seeded Rybakina is in the same half of the draw as Iga Swiatek, the Indian Wells winner in 2022 and 2024.

Swiatek says the conditions suit her game, but she has a tough draw that includes a potential quarter-final clash with Andreeva, who upset her in the semi-finals here last year. — *AFP*

Norway's Warholm to open title bid in Shanghai/Keqiao

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Norway's Karsten Warholm will headline the men's 300m hurdles at the second Diamond League meeting of the season in Shanghai/Keqiao in May.

Reigning Diamond League champion Karsten Warholm will be eyeing a second successive win in Shanghai/Keqiao when he opens his series title defence in the 300m/400m hurdles on May 16.

Three-time world champion Warholm will headline the 300m hurdles in Keqiao a year after he raced to a world-leading 47.28 in the 400m hurdles at the same meeting in 2025.

"I am so excited to return to Keqiao again this year!" said Warholm.

The Norwegian star is chasing a fourth Diamond League title in 2026, having won athletics' premier one-day series for the first time in four years last season.

Warholm dominated his discipline in 2025, claiming world bests in the 300m hurdles in Xiamen and Oslo as well as a Diamond League record in the 400m hurdles in Silesia.

At the Diamond League Final in Zurich, he set a new meeting record of 46.70 to claim the Diamond Trophy for the third time in his career.

Warholm joins a growing list of global superstars in Shanghai/Keqiao, including 110m hurdles world champion Cordell Tinch and 100m hurdles Olympic champion Masai Russell.

Pole vault world record holder Mondo Duplantis and reigning world and Diamond League shot put champion Jessica Schilder are also confirmed for the Chinese meeting.

Sabalenka backs 'best-of-five' Slam proposal, Swiatek against

INDIAN WELLS: World number one Aryna Sabalenka has voiced her support for a proposal to make women's matches best-of-five sets during the later stages of Grand Slam tournaments.

Speaking ahead of this week's ATP-WTA tournament in Indian Wells, the hard-hitting Sabalenka said she believed switching to five sets would benefit her game.

"Yeah, let's do that," the four-time Grand Slam singles champion said when asked about the idea, which was floated by incoming US Tennis Association chief Craig Tiley at the Australian Open earlier this year.

"I feel like I would have probably more Grand Slams," Sabalenka added. "Physically I'm really strong, and I'm pretty confident that my body can handle that. So let's do it."

Tiley, the former head of the Australian Open who last week was named as the new USTA chief, told the *New York Times* in an interview last month that switching to five sets from the quarter-finals onwards at Grand Slams should be discussed.

"All the research shows interest grows as the match goes on," Tiley said. "As a sport, we need to evolve." But while Sabalenka backed the move, other women players were more circumspect.

"I mean, it probably would favor me, because I'm physically up there with the best, but I mean, I probably wouldn't want to see that happen," reigning French Open champion Coco Gauff told reporters.

"And if it were to happen, I would prefer it to be the whole tournament, not just the quarters. I think changing the format in the middle of the tournament defeats the purpose of the playing field." Six-time Grand Slam champion and former world number one Iga Swiatek was firmly against the idea, and questioned the suggestion it would boost audiences.

"I think honestly it's a weird approach in the world where everything is becoming faster, you know," Swiatek said. "So I don't know if the audience honestly would like that.

"Also, I don't know if we would be able to keep the quality for five sets. Well, that's a fact, like, men are more physically strong and they can handle it for sure better."

Swiatek said the physical demands would also force players to adjust their schedules, potentially leading to them playing fewer tournaments.

"We have never practiced in a way to prepare for that, so we would need to change, I think, our whole calendar, because the Grand Slams would be so tough that I don't think we would have honestly time to prepare for any other tournaments," she said.

"I think it would change a lot. I don't think it would change anything for good." — *AFP*


Aryna Sabalenka


A file photo of Dave Rennie (right).

New Zealand's All Blacks name Dave Rennie as coach

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's All Blacks named Dave Rennie yesterday as head coach, replacing Scott Robertson who was sacked midway through a four-year contract.

Rennie, a 62-year-old former Wallabies coach, takes over a team rocked by a scathing 2025 performance review and a rumoured player revolt against his predecessor.

"He is a world-class coach who has consistently shown he can build strong performance environments and win," said New Zealand Rugby chair David Kirk.

"Dave understands what it means to coach the All Blacks and play a style of rugby that reflects who we are as New Zealanders."

Rennie led the Waikato Chiefs to Super Rugby titles in 2012 and 2013, his first two years in charge.

After leaving the Chiefs in 2017, he headed overseas, first to Glasgow Warriors and then Australia, taking over the Wallabies.

He was sacked before reaching the 2023 World Cup, replaced by Eddie Jones, and was most recently working in Japan club rugby.

"Coaching the All Blacks is an incredible honour. I'm extremely proud to have been entrusted with this role and understand the expectations that come with it," Rennie said.

"I'm really clear on the way I want the All Blacks to play and I look forward to working with the players, management team, and the rugby community," he said in a statement.

Former All Blacks coach Robertson was fired in January after leading the team to 20 wins in 27 matches -- below powerhouse New Zealand's expectations.

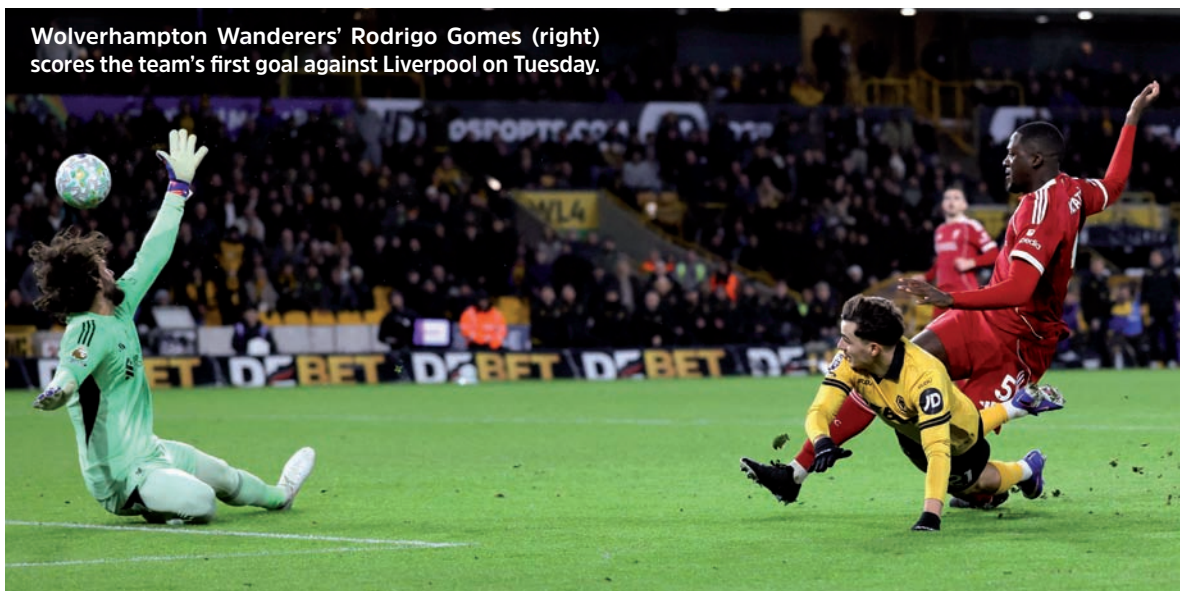
New Zealand Rugby said Rennie -- who is of Cook Islands descent through his mother -- would be the first All Blacks head coach with Pacific Islander heritage.

Kirk said the search for a new coach had been the most thorough in the All Blacks' history.

As All Blacks Head Coach, Rennie is set to honour his commitments with the Kobelco Kobe Steelers in Japan until the conclusion of the Japan Rugby League One competition, New Zealand Rugby said.

He will return to New Zealand to prepare the All Blacks for their July home series against France, Italy and Ireland. — ***AFP***

Slot frustrated after Liverpool suffer late heartbreak again in Wolves stunner


Wolverhampton Wanderers' Rodrigo Gomes (right) scores the team's first goal against Liverpool on Tuesday.

WOLVERHAMPTON: Arne Slot admitted Liverpool must solve their habit of conceding late goals to save their troubled season after Tuesday's embarrassing 2-1 defeat at bottom of the table Wolves.

Slot's side fell behind to Rodrigo Gomes' strike with 12 minutes left at Molineux before Mohamed Salah's equaliser looked to have rescued a point for the Reds.

Liverpool's Achilles heel of surrendering goals in the final seconds came back to haunt them once again as Andre's shot deflected over wrong-footed keeper Alisson Becker.

Liverpool have lost five games thanks to 90th minute goals in the Premier League this season, the most of any side in a single campaign in the competition's history.

Slot urged his players to solve their late-game meltdowns in time to salvage one of the most disappointing campaigns in Liverpool's illustrious history.

"We hardly conceded a chance, created not so much but more than they did, but the result is again a 2-1 loss," said Slot, who spent around £450m ($601m) on new signings before this season.

"We are losing far too many football games and dropping points. Was it again in extra (added) time that we conceded?

"The three times we lost in the last 22 games were all in extra time."

Liverpool were beaten for the first time in five games in all competitions, opening the door for sixth-placed Chelsea to move above them with a win against Aston Villa.

Out of sync for much of a difficult season, Slot bemoaned Liverpool's careless defending and poor finishing in a game that exposed their flaws at both ends of the pitch.

"Bad result, far from good first half, better second half. Second half, there was a bit more urgency, getting closer to scoring a goal, then conceding with the first moment they arrived around our box," Slot said.

"We immediately struck back, first off the post, then with Mo, then we were twice close to making a winner.

"In the end, we conceded a deflected shot, which was not even a chance."

Liverpool are the first reigning champions to lose to the Premier League's bottom club since Chelsea were beaten by Crystal Palace in 2017.

It is the latest chastening loss in a turbulent season for Liverpool, who sit in fifth place after a dismal defence of the title they won last term.

The Anfield outfit are far from certain to qualify for next season's Champions League and questions are mounting about Slot's future.

The Dutchman, the toast of Anfield less than a year ago, has presided over a long run of lacklustre performances with little of the flair and excitement the club's fans expect.

Liverpool have a chance for immediate revenge over Wolves when they return to the west midlands for an FA Cup fifth round tie on Friday.

"Yeah, which is a good thing and a nice thing because we have something to prove on Friday," Slot said.

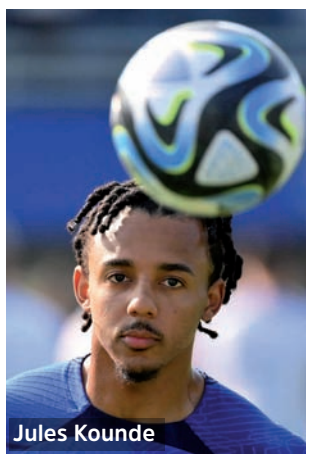
One of many Reds stars well below their best, Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk conceded his team had only themselves to blame.

Van Dijk was caught out during the build-up to Wolves' opener and missed a golden opportunity to put Liverpool 2-1 up before Andre's winner.

"I think it's down to ourselves. It was slow, we were predictable, sloppy in possession and wrong decision-making," he said.

"We didn't concede chances but if you perform like that then a result like this can be a result of that and that's a fact. It was disappointing." — ***AFP***

Kounde, Balde out for Barca ahead of Champions League tie


Jules Kounde

BARCELONA: Barcelona will be without defenders Jules Kounde and Alejandro Balde for their Champions League last 16 tie against Newcastle after they were diagnosed with hamstring injuries yesterday.

Both players were taken off hurt during Barca's 3-0 Copa del Rey semi-final win over Atletico Madrid on Tuesday, with the Catalans ousted 4-3 on aggregate.

"The time of the recovery process (for Balde) will be four weeks," said Barcelona in a statement, without specifying how long Kounde will miss.

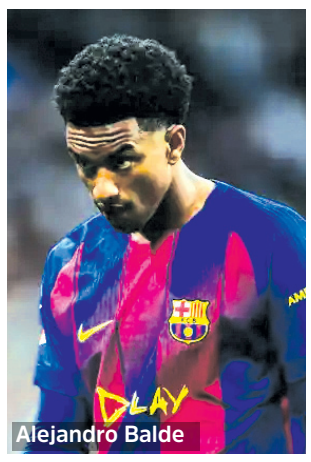
Spanish media reported France international Kounde, 27, is likely to be sidelined for a similar length of time.

As well as the Champions League matches, the duo will also miss La Liga games against Athletic Bilbao, Sevilla and Rayo Vallecano.

Barcelona are currently also without midfielder Frenkie de Jong, who also has a hamstring injury.

The injury makes Kounde a doubt for France's friendlies against Brazil and Colombia in the United States at the end of March, in the build up to this summer's World Cup.

Balde is a Spain international but has been behind Marc Cucurella and Alex Grimaldo in coach Luis de la Fuente's pecking order. — ***AFP***


Alejandro Balde

Misfiring Japan overcome Taiwan in Women's Asian Cup

PERTH: Bayern Munich midfielder Momoko Tanikawa finally cracked a dogged Taiwan yesterday as powerhouse Japan kicked off their Women's Asian Cup with a 2-0 victory in Perth.

Brimming with a talented squad featuring 16 England-based players, Japan dominated a one-sided match played in fierce heat.

But they were left frustrated by an inability to hit the target other than Tanikawa's strike in the 61st minute and a header from substitute Kiko Seike in the 92nd minute.

In the later Group C match, Vietnam edged India 2-1 after forward Ngan Thi Van Su bagged a brace, including the winner in the 94th minute.

Japan are the highest-ranked team in the competition and are desperate for a third title to add to their back-to-back triumphs in 2014 and 2018.

But they will need to clean up their finishing after attempting 30 shots and enjoying almost 90 percent of possession.

"We need to be a little more sharp but this was the first game and we open with three points, so you cannot be unhappy with that," Japan coach Nils Nielsen said.


Action during the match between Japan and Taiwan. PIC: AFC

Taiwan, who reached the final eight in the last tournament in 2022, did not have a shot on goal but fought gamely with goalkeeper Wang Yu-ting producing a superb performance.

Under Nielsen, a Greenlander and Japan's first foreign-born women's coach, the team have vowed to play in a fast and brash manner.

Heeding Nielsen's words, Japan were aggressive from the outset and peppered the goal but without success.

Taiwan were clinging on against the odds with Wang pulling off a spectacular save to deny a bullet from Mina Tanaka.

Tanikawa then hit the post as Japan racked up an astonishing 13 shots within the opening 15 minutes.

Taiwan's woes deepened when forward Pu Hsin-hui limped off the field with an apparent knee injury.

They continued to bravely defend, leaving Japan flustered as the teams took a drinks break in the 32nd minute with the temperature hitting 36C.

Japan came perilously close to breaking the deadlock just before half-time only for Wang to prove a thorn.

Taiwan's embattled defence had 35 clearances in the first half, with each one cheered enthusiastically by their vocal supporters, who livened up the sparse terraces.

Wang was again put to work after the interval as she smothered Tanaka's attempt from short range.

But Wang was helpless when Tanikawa finally slotted home after getting on the receiving end of a superb pass from Hana Takahashi.

Japan's celebrations were put on ice until VAR determined the ball had not deflected off Tanikawa's hand on the way down.

It looked like it would be Japan's only goal until Seike stepped up late to put the match beyond doubt. — ***AFP***

Strasbourg spot on against Reims

STRASBOURG: In the end there were enough penalty kicks to go around as Strasbourg converted twice from the spot in the last seven minutes to scratch out a 2-1 French Cup quarter-final win over Reims on Tuesday.

First-division Strasbourg repeatedly came close against their second-tier visitors but the game was still scoreless on 83 minutes when the hosts were awarded a penalty after the ball struck Spanish-Irish midfielder John Patrick on the arm.

Argentine striker Joaquin Panichelli and Paraguayan winger Julio Enciso both stepped up to take the kick.

As time ran out, Patrick Zabi pulled a goal back for the visitors four minutes into added time. — ***AFP***


Strasbourg's Julio Enciso (left) celebrates scoring his team's second goal.

Tudor tells Spurs that relegation battle isn't real pressure



LONDON: Tottenham interim boss Igor Tudor **(pictured)** insists fighting to avoid relegation is not real pressure as he urged his struggling team to show the "courage" required to win their survival battle.

Tudor's side are just four points above the Premier League relegation zone after the Croatian lost his first two matches since replacing the sacked Thomas Frank.

Another defeat at home to Crystal Palace today would plunge Tottenham deeper into trouble.

The north London club haven't played in the second tier since 1977-78, but their 10-match winless run in the league has made that grim prospect increasingly realistic.

Tudor has no intention of taking it easy on his players, instead opting to point out to them the jobs in everyday life that carry genuine pressure.

"Everyone understands the situation, but we are working hard to change this, otherwise there is something wrong if you don't understand. Of course my job is to put the pressure away, but their job is also to accept this pressure as part of the job," he told reporters yesterday.

"Working in jobs like doctors who do operations, they are dealing and decide about life and death. That is the real pressure.

"This is sport. The club, Tottenham, has always been a club with big pressure so you need to be ready to accept this and stand up, not stay behind.

"Take responsibility and have courage to confront these things. This is the best way to do things and the only way to do things."

Tudor slammed his players after Sunday's 2-1 loss at Fulham, berating them for weaknesses in all three phases of the game.

Only two matches into his tenure, Tudor's remarks sparked debate over whether he would see out this season.

"Of course after the game, there are emotions, there are disappointments because you work, you want (to win) and the players also work hard and want (to win), but the result didn't come, so of course it was a little bit disappointing," Tudor said. "It's how it should be after the games. You need to be angry and disappointed. You don't need to be the guy who comes there and says everything is perfect, smile and nothing happens.

"Also, to send a message to everyone, me personally, and everyone to not accept this situation, but we go on. We move on, we have a good, short period to prepare this game, but I saw the guys reacting well."

Tottenham remain without 10 players for the Palace clash, which Tudor refused to label as a game his team cannot afford to finish without three points. "No, there is no must-win game, all the games need to be won," he said. — ***AFP***

Allen's record ton powers New Zealand into final

KOLKATA: New Zealand's Finn Allen blasted the fastest century in T20 World Cup history in Kolkata yesterday as his side hammered South Africa by nine wickets to reach the final.

Chasing 170 to win the first semi-final, Allen hit an unbeaten 100 off just 33 balls, to obliterate the previous mark of 47 balls by Chris Gayle, as New Zealand raced home with 7.1 overs to spare.

Allen went on a rampage as he finished with two fours, two sixes and a four off successive balls to hit the winning runs and reach his hundred with a roar of delight at Eden Gardens.

Tim Seifert hit 58 in a 117-run opening stand with Allen off just 9.1 overs to set up the victory romp.

Seifert hit two sixes and seven fours while Allen bludgeoned eight sixes and 10 fours in a brutal display of controlled power hitting.

"Obviously, we wanted to start looking straight and obviously try and put them on the back foot early," said Allen.

"I think it's easy for me when Timmy's (Seifert) going like that, I can kind of just watch and then hit it when it's in my area and just try and give him the strike."



New Zealand's Finn Allen plays a shot during the semi-final against South Africa.

***Brief Scores:** New Zealand 173 for 1 (Allen 100*, Seifert 58, Ravindra 13*, Rabada 1-28) beat South Africa 169 for 8 (Jansen 55*, Brevis 34, McConchie 2-9, Ravindra 2-29) by nine wickets*

New Zealand, who edged into the semi-finals on net run rate but are seeking a first World Cup title, will play either India or England in Sunday's final in Ahmedabad. Spinners Rachin Ravindra and Cole McConchie took two wickets each to restrict South Africa to 169-8 after New Zealand elected to field first.

The 2024 runners-up South Africa, led by Aiden Markram, had been unbeaten in seven matches but slumped to 77-5 before Marco Jansen hit an unbeaten 55 to give the total some respect.

"We knew obviously how good South Africa are, and they've shown that throughout the tournament," said New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner.

"So, to put on a performance like that in a crunch game is obviously pretty pleasing."

Seifert reached his fifty off fast bowler Lungi Ngidi. Allen raised his half-century off 19 balls.

Kagiso Rababa bowled Seifert in the 10th over but it wasS South Africa's only success.

Spinners Rachin Ravindra and Cole McConchie earlier took two wickets each before Tristan Stubbs (29) and Jansen put on 73 for South Africa.

Jansen hit two fours and five sixes in his 30-ball knock. McConchie struck first in the second over with his off-spin to send back Quinton De Kock for 10 and Ryan Rickelton next ball, but Dewald Brevis avoided the hat-trick. Left-arm spinner Ravindra had Markram caught in the deep by Daryl Mitchell for 18.

David Miller fell for six to Ravindra five balls later, with Mitchell again taking the catch at long-on.

South Africa had lost half their side in 10.2 overs when Jimmy Neesham cut short Brevis's knock on 34.

Ferguson bowled Stubbs but Jansen hit him for six to reach his fifty.

Pace bowler Matt Henry, who arrived back only on Tuesday night after going home for the birth of his child, took 2-34.

"I think you look at conditions early and they bowled really well up front," said Markram.

"Ball didn't quite feel like coming on, some were just stopping on the wicket and some were hitting quite low on the bat and they made scoring really tough." — ***AFP***

India eye special performance to conquer 'street-smart' England

MUMBAI: India will need a "special performance" to beat a "street-smart" England in their T20 World Cup semi-final in Mumbai, bowling coach Morne Morkel warned yesterday.

Sanju Samson's sparkling 97 not out enabled India to chase down 196 against the West Indies in a winner-takes-all clash on Sunday in Kolkata.

Morne said India would again need someone "to put their hand up" against Harry Brook's side on Thursday night to keep the nation's dream of a home World Cup win alive.

Morkel agreed India had not put together a flawless display in the tournament yet, but said that did not matter.

"We haven't really spoken about the perfect game," Morne told reporters at Mumbai's Wankhede stadium after India's final training session before today's big clash.

"It's not about how you get to the semi-finals. It's about the next two games, how we're going to play there.

"I think the quality of this team has been shown that on the day somebody will put their hand up.

"Then hopefully, especially tomorrow night, we can put that special performance in."

It is the third T20 World Cup in a row that India will play England in the semi-finals.

Both previous times the winners went on to lift the trophy. In 2022, England crushed India by 10 wickets in Adelaide and beat Pakistan in the Melbourne final.

Two years ago India won in Guyana by a similarly dominant 68 runs before downing South Africa in Barbados.



India's Tilak Varma attends a training session ahead of the semi-final.

This time, though, India will have the backing of 35,000 fiercely partisan fans in Mumbai.

"It's a big occasion tomorrow night here, a semi-final, a great stadium to play a great game of cricket," said Morkel.

"So hopefully the boys can rock up tomorrow and just be calm and execute those skills."

India are leaving nothing to chance in their preparations.

Training on Tuesday night was delayed by an hour so it did not coincide with a lunar eclipse, which is considered unlucky in India.

"I was told about the lunar eclipse and the session was pushed backwards," admitted Morkel.

"I think the most important thing to focus on was the quality the guys put in at training, which was great to see."

India hosted the T20 World Cup in 2016 and lost in a Mumbai semi-final to eventual champions the West Indies.

India are wary of the threat posed by England, who were shaky in the group phase but powered through the Super Eights with wins over Sri Lanka, Pakistan and New Zealand.

"They're a team that's street smart. Obviously there's a lot of quality in their side," said Morkel.

"Their batting is deep, which makes them a very dangerous side. With the ball, they've got a lot of attacking options.

"The way they approach a T20 game, fearless, trying to take the game on, will give you opportunities.

"Tomorrow is going to be a good shoot-out between two aggressive teams." — ***AFP***



England captain Harry Brook (left) interacts with team head coach Brendon McCullum during the training session yesterday.

India are rightly favourites, but anything can happen in T20: England captain Brook

MUMBAI: Harry Brook conceded yesterday that India were favourites to win the T20 World Cup on home soil, but warned them that England's "perfect performance" was "just around the corner".

The previous two winners of the T20 World Cup -- India won in 2024, England in 2022 -- will go head-to-head in a blockbuster semi-final at Mumbai's famed Wankhede stadium today.

The match will be played in a cauldron-like atmosphere -- temperatures are forecast to be in the mid-30s Celsius with a capacity crowd of 35,000 India fans raising the roof.

Hundreds of millions more will follow on TV and streaming sites across the cricket-obsessed nation.

Asked if it gets any better than that, Brook said: "It's up there for sure.

"It's a dream come true for most of us to play in a World Cup semi-final against the home nation on a very iconic ground," the England captain told reporters at the Wankhede stadium, minutes before his side's final training session ahead of the semi-final.

"We're obviously going into the game very confident. We're playing some good cricket.

"We haven't quite played that perfect performance, but I feel like it's just around the corner.

"Hopefully it's tomorrow night and we go out there and we just play with freedom, play brave and look to take it to them as much as we can."

It is the third T20 World Cup in a row that England will have played India in the semi-finals and each time the winners went on to lift the trophy.

In 2022, England crushed India by 10 wickets in Adelaide and went on to beat Pakistan in the Melbourne final.

Two years ago India won in Guyana by a similarly dominant 68 runs before downing South Africa in Barbados.

"I do believe that India were favorites from the start of the competition, as they should be on their home soil, with home crowds and knowing the venues better than anyone else," said Brook.

"But T20 is such a fickle game, anything can happen."

England experienced a hostile crowd at the Wankhede in their first match of the tournament when they beat Nepal in a final-ball thriller.

"We've won tight games, which in World Cups proved to be very important," said Brook. England were shaky in the group phase but came through the Super Eights with brilliantly executed wins over Sri Lanka, Pakistan and New Zealand when all three games could easily have been lost.

"We've won games which we probably shouldn't have won, and it just feels like we've never really been out of any game so far," said Brook.

"It holds you in good stead in these world competitions." — ***AFP***

Pakistan drop Azam for Bangladesh ODI series



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan dropped batting great Babar Azam **(pictured)** yesterday for next week's one-day international series in Bangladesh, bringing in six uncapped players with an eye on next year's World Cup.

Opener Saim Ayub, spin all-rounders Shadab Khan and Mohammad Nawaz, and pace bowler Naseem Shah were also dropped from the 15-man squad for the three-match series, to be played in Dhaka on March 11, 13 and 15. The shake-up follows Pakistan's failure to reach the semi-finals of the T20 World Cup currenlty being played in India and Sri Lanka.

Azam scored only 91 runs in the T20 World Cup, but has amassed 6,501 runs in 140 ODIs with 20 centuries.

Batsman Fakhar Zaman was ruled out with a hamstring injury suffered at the World Cup. Pace spearhead Shaheen Shah Afridi will captain the squad.

Abdul Samad, Maaz Sadaqat, Muhammad Ghazi Ghori, Saad Masood, Sahibzada Farhan and Shamyl Hussain are the six who have not played an ODI.

The 50-over World Cup will be hosted by South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia in October next year. — ***AFP***

Pakistan Squad

Shaheen Shah Afridi (captain), Abdul Samad, Abrar Ahmed, Faheem Ashraf, Faisal Akram, Haris Rauf, Hussain Talat, Maaz Sadaqat, Mohammad Rizwan, Mohammad Wasim, Muhammad Ghazi Ghori, Saad Masood, Sahibzada Farhan, Salman Ali Agha. Shamyl Hussain

Alaves appoint Flores after Coudet departure

VITORIA: La Liga side Deportivo Alaves appointed Quique Sanchez Flores until 2028 to replace Eduardo Coudet, who joined Argentine club River Plate earlier.

The 61-year-old most recently coached Sevilla in the 2023-24 season and has previously led Valencia, Benfica, Atletico Madrid and Watford among others.

"With a long and well-established career on the touchline, Quique Sanchez Flores has solid experience both in La Liga and in European competitions," said Alaves in a statement.

"Over the course of his career, he has managed historic clubs in Spanish and international football, establishing himself as a prestigious coach with a strong competitive character."

Alaves are 16th in the Spanish top flight, three points above the relegation zone. — ***AFP***

Donald to captain Europe again at 2027 Ryder Cup

LONDON: Luke Donald will captain Europe again at the 2027 Ryder Cup at Adare Manor in Ireland as he bids to become the first man to lead a side to three consecutive wins in the competition, officials announced yesterday.

The 48-year-old Englishman, a former world number one, previously led Europe to victory in the biennial tournament in Rome in 2023 and then at Bethpage Black in New York last year with a dramatic 15-13 win.

"The last two Ryder Cups have meant a lot to me and my family," said Donald in a European Tour statement.

"I didn't imagine this third time would come," he added ahead of what will be the centenary Ryder Cup.

"Celebrating on that Sunday night in New York after a pressure packed week in a tough environment, I thought maybe my job was done -- but maybe there is a little more story to tell...

"It's a real privilege and I am certainly looking forward to another home Ryder Cup."

Donald was a playing member of the victorious European team at the 2006 Ryder Cup, held at the K Club in County Kildare.

"The Irish golf fans are some of the best in the world," he said, with the 2027 event set to run from September 17-19.



Tiger Woods, whose tally of 15 major championships is second only to the 18 won by compatriot Jack Nicklaus, is reportedly in line to captain the United States team at Adare Manor. The Ryder Cup, named in honour of its founder Samuel Ryder, an English businessman and golf enthusiast, was first staged in 1927.

Since golfers from continental Europe were added to the previous British and Irish team in 1979, Europe have won 13 matches, while retaining the Ryder Cup once with a tie, and the United States nine editions.

Last year, Donald's men had to stave off a final-day surge by the United States in singles after dominating the opening two days' foursomes and four-ball matches to lead by 11.5 points to 4.5.

It was the first time either team had won away from home since Europe's 'Miracle at Medinah' triumph in 2012.

The Americans have not lifted the trophy on European soil since 1993. — ***AFP***