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## 50th-ranked Linette stuns Swiatek in Miami

**MIAMI:** Iga Swiatek crashed out of the Miami Open second round as 50th-ranked fellow Pole Magda Linette fought back for a 1-6, 7-5, 6-3 victory over the six-time Grand Slam champion.

Reigning Wimbledon champion Swiatek, who won the Miami Open in 2022, suffered her first opening loss at a tournament since the 2021 WTA Finals on Thursday.

It's just the latest disappointment for Swiatek, who was eliminated in the quarter-finals at the Australian Open and in the WTA 1000 events in Doha and Indian Wells.

Although she was seeded second in the elite combined ATP and WTA hard-court tournament in Miami, Swiatek dropped this week to third in the world as Indian Wells finalist Elena Rybakina moved up behind top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka.

Swiatek's compatriot Linette had to dig deep after Swiatek -- who won their last encounter 6-1, 6-1 -- raced through the opening set in 33 minutes.

But she stuck to her guns and Swiatek double-faulted to give Linette two break points in the 12th game of the second set, Linette forcing a third set with a return winner.

"I just had to go for a little bit more," Linette told Tennis Channel. "I had to start hitting a little bit faster, too, to push her a little bit more back, not give her space."

"But I think it all started with serving a bit better," she added.

Swiatek didn't go meekly, saving a pair of match points on her own serve in the eighth game of the third and two more

as Linette served for the match, before Linette sealed the win as Swiatek sent a backhand wide.

"She actually gets really good on those break points down, match points down," Linette said. "She starts swinging. I just knew I had to stay strong on my serve." Linette advanced to a third-round matchup against 20-year-old Alexandra Eala of the Philippines, a 6-7 (6/8), 6-3, 6-3 winner over Germany's Laura Siegemund.

"It really was close," said Eala, a surprise semi-finalist last year who needed three hours and 20 minutes to close out the victory.

"It was demanding, physically and mentally. But that

was one of my goals last year after the tournament, to improve physically, and here I am fresh as a flower." It was the longest WTA career match for 29th-ranked Eala, who beat Swiatek in last year's Miami Open quarter-finals for the biggest win of her career before losing to American

Jessica Pegula in the semi-finals. Former world number one Venus Williams, 45, lost her first-round match to Britain's Francesca Jones 7-5, 7-5 after one hour and 51 minutes.

Jones advanced to a second-round match against fifth seed Pegula, last year's Miami runner-up to Sabalenka.

On the men's side 19-year-old Brazilian Joao Fonseca outlasted Hungary's Fabian Marozsan 6-4, 3-6, 6-2, to book a second-round match with world number one Carlos Alcaraz.

Fonseca, ranked 39th, was strongly backed by Brazilian fans as he booked a first-ever meeting with Alcaraz and his second marquee contest in as many tournaments after falling to Jannik Sinner at Indian Wells last week.

French 17-year-old Moise Kouame beat qualifier Zachary Svajda 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 to become the youngest player to claim an ATP Masters 1000 victory since Rafael Nadal in Hamburg in 2003.

Kouame, who received a wild card invitation, next faces 21st seed Jiri Lehecka of Czech Republic.

Kouame, who battled through cramping late in the match, was thrilled to receive a message of congratulations from his idol Novak Djokovic.

"He texted me something really, really nice," Kouame said. "I don't know how I'm going to answer. Hopefully I can meet him... it will be my dream." — **AFP**



Iga Swiatek returns a shot against Magda Linette.



## Injured Ronaldo misses Portugal World Cup friendlies

**LISBON:** Cristiano Ronaldo, who is currently nursing a hamstring injury, was yesterday left out of the Portugal squad to play pre-World Cup friendlies against tournament co-hosts Mexico and the United States later this month.

The 41-year-old has not played for his Saudi club Al-Nassr since the end of February but Portugal coach Roberto Martinez insisted that Ronaldo's participation at what would be a record sixth World Cup was "not at risk".

"It's a minor injury," Martinez said at a press conference, adding that the five-time Ballon d'Or winner could be back "within one or two weeks".

"Everything Cristiano has done physically during this season shows that he's going through an excellent spell and that there are no physical problems.

"At the World Cup, the centre-forward position will be for Cristiano Ronaldo and Goncalo Ramos. We are looking for a third striker with a different profile." Portugal will face Mexico on Saturday, March 28, in Mexico City, and the United States three days later in Atlanta.

"This is the last chance to experiment, because it's the final training camp before the World Cup squad is named," said Martinez.

At the World Cup, co-hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada from June 11 to July 19, Portugal have been drawn in Group K with Colombia and Uzbekistan.

The other team in this group will come from a play-off that could see New Caledonia, Jamaica, or the Democratic Republic of Congo qualify.

**SQUAD:** Goalkeepers: Diogo Costa, Jose Sa, Rui Silva

Defenders: Matheus Nunes, Diogo Dalot, Joao Cancelo, Nuno Mendes, Goncalo Inacio, Renato Veiga, Antonio Silva, Tomas Araujo  
Midfielders: Ruben Fernandes, Samu Costa, Mateus Fernandes, Joao Neves, Vitinha, Bruno Fernandes, Rodrigo Mora

Forwards: Ricardo Horta, Pedro Goncalves, Joao Felix, Francisco Trincao, Francisco Conceicao, Rafael Leao, Pedro Neto, Goncalo Guedes, Goncalo Ramos. — **AFP**

## Football chiefs halt Asian Cup bids after FIFA request

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Asian football bosses said yesterday they were stopping the bidding process to host the 2031 and 2035 Asian Cups after a FIFA request to move the continental showpiece to even-numbered years.

Several countries including Australia, Japan and South Korea had thrown their hats into the ring to stage the 2031 and 2035 tournaments.

The announcement comes after the Asian Football Confederation recently met FIFA "concerning a potential revision to the international match calendar", the AFC said.

"As part of this process, it has been deemed appropriate to halt the current bidding cycles to provide greater clarity and ensure a more structured approach to future host selections," the Kuala Lumpur-based AFC said.

Six bids were put in to host the 2031 showpiece: Australia, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Kuwait, as well as a joint effort by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Australia, Kuwait, Japan and South Korea had also said they were interested in, or were bidding for 2035.

"Given the far-reaching implications such a change would have on the scheduling and strategic planning of its premier national team competition, the AFC has initiated a broader review of its competitions calendar," the body said in a statement.

South Korea's football association said it received a letter from the AFC on Thursday announcing the bidding suspension.

"Although unexpected variables have occurred, the association's will to host the Asian Cup remains unchanged," the KFA said yesterday.

The next Asian Cup is in 2027 in Saudi Arabia. — **AFP**

## Al Arabi extend coach Contra's contract until 2028



THE PENINSULA

**DOHA:** Al Arabi SC have officially renewed the contract of head coach Cosmin Contra (pictured) for two more seasons, keeping him at the club until 2028, the management announced yesterday.

The decision confirms the club's confidence in the Romanian coach, who took charge on 15 October 2025 as part of the ongoing project aimed at returning the Dream Team to winning titles and competing for top positions in domestic competitions.

Contra replaced Spaniard Pablo Amo

after a poor start to the season, and has since improved the team's results in the Qatar Stars League. Under his leadership, Al Arabi have played 12 league matches, winning seven, drawing three and losing two, in addition to winning both matches in the Qatar Cup.

Al Arabi are currently sixth in the Qatar Stars League points table.

The 50-year-old coach enjoyed a successful playing career with AC Milan and Atletico Madrid before moving into coaching. His managerial career also includes spells with Al Ittihad and Dinamo Bucharest.

## FIG announces cancellation of Artistic Gymnastics Apparatus World Cup 2026

THE PENINSULA

**DOHA:** The gymnastics World Cup event scheduled to take place in Doha in April has been cancelled, the sport's governing body announced yesterday.

"World Gymnastics reports that, following an urgent online vote and in light of the current situation in the Middle East, its executive committee has decided to cancel the 2026 edition of the Artistic Gymnastics Apparatus World Cup in Doha, Qatar, scheduled to take place from April 15 to 18," World Gymnastics said in a statement. "The event will not be rescheduled," it added.

Qatar Gymnastics Federation President and First Vice President of the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) Ali Al Hitmi (pictured) said that the Qatari federation had submitted a formal request to postpone the championships to ensure they would be staged to the highest standards and in line with international best practices.

He explained that the relevant committees within the FIG - particularly the

Competitions Committee and the Technical Committees - held extensive meetings to assess the situation. It was concluded that postponing the championships would negatively affect the international competition calendar, including the continental championships in Africa, Europe and Asia, as well as the Artistic Gymnastics World Championships scheduled to be held in the Netherlands later this year.

He added that the decision to cancel the event was taken to ensure the smooth running of the FIG calendar and to guarantee equal opportunities for all participating national federations.

He also expressed his appreciation for the understanding shown by all parties in light of the current circumstances.

Several major sporting events have been postponed or cancelled due to the prevailing situation in the region, including the Formula One grands prix in Bahrain and Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia.

In football, the Finalissima, which was to pit European champions Spain against



Copa America winners Argentina on March 27 in Qatar, has also been cancelled.

The Qatar motorcycling Grand Prix, initially scheduled for the weekend of April 12, has been postponed to November 8.

## Liverpool showdown brings back 'beautiful memories' for PSG coach Enrique



**POISSY:** Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique (pictured) said yesterday that the prospect of a Champions League quarter-final against Liverpool brought back "beautiful memories" of last year's encounter between the sides which his team won on penalties.

"When Liverpool were the best team in Europe at the time, I remember Arne Slot speaking very well about PSG, at a time when nobody else was," Luis Enrique said.

"It was very positive for us, a beautiful memory of a classic tie." PSG won the last-16 tie a year ago 4-1 in a shoot-out after a 1-0 victory at Anfield which cancelled out Liverpool's win by the same scoreline in Paris.

Luis Enrique's team went on to win the Champions League title for the first time in the club's history.

Liverpool, meanwhile, went on to

win the Premier League title last season and had been considered the favourites going into that tie. This time, however, Slot's team do not appear the same fearsome prospect and lie fifth in the Premier League table.

"Are we the favourites now? I always try to weigh things up and control what is being said around the team," added Luis Enrique, speaking ahead of his team's trip to Nice in Ligue 1 today.

"I have players who are very intelligent and know that there is no favourite and that both sides know how to handle a game like this."

PSG are a point clear of Lens at the top of the French table with a game in hand after their home meeting with Nantes last weekend was postponed.

That call-off was with the intention of allowing the Qatar-backed club extra time to rest in between the two legs of their

Champions League last-16 tie against Chelsea, which they won 8-2 on aggregate.

That raises the question of whether PSG might request another postponement for their scheduled trip to domestic title rivals Lens -- that game is set for April 11, in between the two legs of the Liverpool tie.

"I would like to wait for more news," said Luis Enrique.

"Every team wants to find the best conditions to play the competition but we can also understand the interests of other teams."

Meanwhile, the Spaniard added that he was "very happy" to see Lucas Chevalier named in the latest France squad despite the goalkeeper having lost his place in the PSG team to Matvey Safonov.

PSG will be without Joao Neves, Fabian Ruiz and Bradley Barcola due to various fitness issues for the game in Nice. — **AFP**

# England stars have 'last chance' to earn World Cup spots: Tuchel

LONDON: England boss Thomas Tuchel said this month's friendlies are the "last opportunity for players to compete for their ticket" to the World Cup but insisted "no one is on the plane" yet.

Tuchel yesterday announced an extended 35-man squad for matches against Uruguay and Japan at Wembley, on March 27 and 31.

Manchester United pair Harry Maguire and Kobbie Mainoo are back in the international fold, while Leeds forward Dominic Calvert-Lewin also returns.

Real Madrid midfielder Jude Bellingham is included, even though he has not played since early February due to a hamstring injury, but there is no place for his team-mate Trent Alexander-Arnold, Luke Shaw or Ollie Watkins.

Tuchel has handed a first senior call-up to Everton's "underrated" midfielder James Garner.

The players will report to camp in two stages across the international window.

Among the 11 players who will skip the Uruguay match, "to give them a break mentally and physically", are Declan Rice, Harry Kane and Bukayo Saka.

Others will then be released to slim the squad down to around 22 outfield players.



England manager Thomas Tuchel and players during a training session yesterday.

"The reality of a March camp is that our players are in a crucial moment in the club football season," the England manager told a press conference.

"They fight for titles, they fight a relegation battle, they are involved in knockout matches, in cup matches, so it is a crucial moment of the season, a very stressful moment of the season for them.

"But it is also our last camp, the last opportunity to impress, the last opportunity for players to compete for their ticket."

Tuchel has selected United players for the first time since taking the helm at the start of last year.

"They have had an outstanding run since Michael Carrick took charge and

Harry and Kobbie are a big part of that," said the German.

"It's the last camp before the US, it's the last chance also for me to get to know new players, to learn about new players."

Maguire, 33, and Mainoo, 20, last played for England in September 2024 but have been rewarded for United's

recent good form, which has lifted them to third in the Premier League.

Shaw, 30, was another United player pushing to be involved but has once again been overlooked, with Tuchel instead calling up Newcastle's Lewis Hall for the first time since he took charge.

Tuchel said the omission of former Liverpool defender Alexander-Arnold, even in the absence of injured Chelsea right-back Reece James, was a "sporting decision" but stressed his World Cup hopes were not over.

"I know that it's a tough decision for Trent, as it is for I guess Ollie Watkins at the moment and for Luke Shaw," he said.

"These tough decisions come with the job."

Tuchel was also asked about Arsenal teenager Max Dowman, who became the youngest scorer in Premier League history last week.

The England boss described the 16-year-old as a "fantastic talent" but said there was "no need to call him up now and increase the pressure and increase all the noise that comes with it".

The World Cup, taking place in Canada, Mexico and the United States, starts on June 11, with England among the favourites. — AFP

## Liverpool suffer Salah blow in chase for Champions League

LONDON: Mohamed Salah will miss Liverpool's trip to Brighton today with a muscle injury -- a major blow for manager Arne Slot as he hunts a Champions League place next season.

The Egypt forward was forced off at Anfield on Wednesday after scoring in Liverpool's 4-0 victory against Galatasaray, which sealed their place in the quarter-finals of this year's Champions League.

In-form Salah, 33, has scored in three of his past four starts after an uncharacteristic lean spell.

"It's unusual," Slot said at his pre-match press conference on Friday. "As a result of that I think you can expect the outcome. So, (he's) not available for tomorrow." Slot gave no timeframe for Salah's recovery.

"The good thing for Liverpool and for us is that we go to an international break," he said. "The bad thing for Egypt is that he can't go there.



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah (centre) is greeted by coach Arne Slot (left) during the UEFA Champions League, round of 16 second leg match against Galatasaray on Wednesday.

"We are hoping also with what Mo has shown in the past that he can recover faster than other players might in similar situations because he takes such good care of his body. History has shown that he can be earlier back than some others.

"But it's only two weeks until we go again so let's hope in that period

of time he can be back." Salah, who is rarely absent through injury, is firmly back in the fold at Anfield after a dramatic fallout with Slot earlier in the season, when he was dropped for several games.

Despite his recent good form, the Egypt forward has scored just five Premier League goals this

season, compared with 29 in Liverpool's title-winning campaign in 2024/25.

Slot, whose team dropped valuable points in a 1-1 draw against Tottenham last week, admitted his side were not sharp enough in attack.

"We're struggling to score goals," said the Dutchman. "Not that we don't score them, but with all the chances we create, it's unbelievable that we don't score, especially looking at the quality we have up front and throughout the whole team."

Liverpool are fifth in the Premier League, two points behind fourth-placed Aston Villa, with the top five teams almost certain to qualify for next season's Champions League.

Slot's men face Manchester City in the FA Cup quarter-finals on April 4 and will meet defending champions Paris Saint-Germain in the last eight of the Champions League. — AFP

## Spain include Joan Garcia as one of four new call-ups

MADRID: Spain coach Luis de la Fuente named in-form Barcelona goalkeeper Joan Garcia in his 27-man squad yesterday as one of four maiden call-ups for friendlies later this month.

The European champions continue their World Cup preparations with matches against Serbia on March 27 in Villarreal and Egypt four days later.

The game against Serbia replaced the Finalissima versus Argentina, cancelled due to the Middle East war.

The friendly with Egypt has been moved to Barcelona from Qatar for the same reason.

Garcia has made 35 appearances in all competitions this season since joining Barcelona from city rivals Espanyol.

"It was the right time to have these four goalkeepers. As of today, they are the four most likely to be called up (for the World Cup)," De la Fuente said of including Garcia alongside fellow keepers Unai Simon, David Raya and Alex Remiro.

Arsenal defender Cristhian Mosquera, Real Sociedad forward Ander Barrenetxea and Osasuna's Victor Munoz are all also named in a national-team squad for the first time.

Winger Nico Williams is still absent through injury, while Gavi misses out having only made one brief substitute appearance for Barcelona since returning from a serious knee injury.

Spain are among the favourites for this year's World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada, where they will face Uruguay, Cape Verde and Saudi Arabia in Group H. — AFP



Ukraine's Yaroslava Mahuchikh competes in the women's high jump final.

## Ukraine's Mahuchikh soars to world indoor high jump gold

TORUN: Ukraine's world record holder Yaroslava Mahuchikh dominated the women's high jump to win the first gold on offer at the world indoor championships in Torun, Poland, yesterday.

Mahuchikh, the Olympic champion who won a first world indoor title in Belgrade in 2022, cleared a best of 2.01 metres.

Australia's reigning world indoor and outdoor champion Nicola Olyslagers shared silver with Serbia's Angelica Topic and Ukrainian Yuliya Levchenko.

The four medallists were the sole jumpers left in competition at the 1.96m mark. The bar was raised to 1.99m and first up was Mahuchikh. She sailed over, but so did the three others.

Mahuchikh kept up the pressure with a first time clearance of 2.01m.

All three of her rivals struggled with that height, registering three failures apiece to hand victory to the Ukrainian, who had three failed attempts at 2.06m.

One of the stars of the three-day competition in Poland is Britain's Keely Hodgkinson, who smashed the indoor 800m world record last month.

Untimely injuries have prevented the 24-year-old from taking part in the past three editions of the world indoors.

But the Briton, who earned

Tokyo Olympic silver and Paris Olympic gold and who has two world outdoor silver medals and a bronze, looks to be in perfect shape and coasted through her heat in 2:00.32.

"I am glad to take the win today, it is a job well done," said Hodgkinson.

"It is all about controlling your pace. I am happy to run again tomorrow.

"I have gone to the championships before and then not run due to injury so I am really happy now to get to the start line and go to the next round. I hope I will end with the gold medal."

The semi-finals of the women's 800m are scheduled for 1122 GMT today, with the final set for 1853 GMT tomorrow.

Defending champion Jeremiah Azu safely negotiated the first round of the men's 60m, with the semi-finals set for 1916 GMT and the final at 2022 GMT later yesterday.

Azu, who clocked a heat-winning 6.55sec, finds himself in the middle of a US-Jamaica sandwich.

The strong trio of Jamaicans led by Kishane Thompson, the world and Olympic 100m silver medallist, all won their heats as they seek to end the Caribbean island's gold drought in the event. — AFP

## League Cup final a 'big moment' for Manchester City: Guardiola

MANCHESTER: Pep Guardiola (pictured) believes tomorrow's League Cup final against Arsenal is the acid test of his side's "level" as Manchester City aim to get their season back on track.

City were knocked out of the Champions League by Real Madrid for the third consecutive year in midweek and have fallen nine points behind leaders Arsenal in the Premier League title race.

The Gunners are going for their first trophy in six years at Wembley as Mikel Arteta's men remain



"We have got to Wembley 22 times in 10 years, it's an honour and a big challenge. They (Arsenal) are an exceptional team, it's a big challenge for us to see our level."

**Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola**

on course for an unprecedented quadruple of the League Cup, FA Cup, Premier League and Champions League.

City, however, suffered their first trophyless campaign for eight seasons last term.

"We have got to Wembley 22 times in 10 years, it's an honour and a big challenge," said City manager Guardiola at his pre-match press conference yesterday. "For the team it's a big moment."

"They (Arsenal) are an exceptional team, it's a big challenge for us to see our level." City have a game in hand on Arsenal in the Premier League and home advantage when the sides meet again next month.

But Guardiola is unsure whether lifting the first silverware of the season will have an effect on the title race.

"I don't know," he said. "Of course winning helps, just for the fact that winning helps. We can win the competition tomorrow and after in the league it is going the opposite (way)."

"I learned that when there are many competitions and many games in a short time of recovery -- Champions League, FA Cups, Carabao (League) Cups, Premier League -- you have to have the ability to forget and move forward in the good and the bad moments." Guardiola confirmed James Trafford will start in goal in place of Gianluigi Donnarumma as he has for all City's domestic cup games so far this season. — AFP



## Coach Valverde to leave Bilbao at end of season

MADRID: Athletic Bilbao coach Ernesto Valverde is to step down at the end of the season after a hugely successful third spell in charge, he announced yesterday.

The 62-year-old, who ended Bilbao's 40-year trophy drought when his side won the Copa del Rey in 2024, said he had been considering the move for some time.

"It is a decision I have thought about for a long time, and it was discussed and agreed upon with the club's management," Valverde said in a video posted on the club's website.

He added that with Bilbao currently 10th in La Liga and six points off the European places, he would remain focused on the job until the end of the season.

"We still have 10 games ahead of us, and there is a lot to gain," he said.

His announcement will bring down the curtain on a long association with the Basque club.

He spent six seasons with Bilbao as a player in the 1990s and has had three tenures as coach, with this current spell which started in 2022 the most successful. The season after their Copa del Rey triumph, Bilbao reached the Europa League semi-finals before losing to Manchester United.

Bilbao then returned to the Champions League for the first time since 2014/15 this term but won just two of their eight league-phase games and failed to make the knock-out stage.

Tomorrow's match against Real Betis will be his 495th in charge, more than any other Bilbao coach. He also led Barcelona to the domestic double in 2017-18, winning La Liga with them again the following year. — AFP

# New Zealand dominate South Africa for 2-1 T20 series lead

**AUCKLAND:** A miserly bowling display helped give New Zealand a 2-1 lead in their T20 series against South Africa with an eight-wicket win yesterday in Auckland.

Speedster Lockie Ferguson conceded just nine runs from his four overs in the first innings as South Africa were restricted to 136-9 from their allotted overs at a postage stamp Eden Park ground renowned for 200-plus scores.

Tom Latham guided the hosts to victory with 22 balls remaining, making 63.

New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner won the toss and elected to field, putting South Africa in on a wicket sporting more grass than usual.

The decision was vindicated during a fruitful powerplay for the hosts as they snared three wickets for just 41 runs at a ground that usually sees teams scoring at more than 10 an over.

Ferguson bowled with pace and accuracy to get Wiaan Mulder for a duck, before Santner removed Connor Esterhuizen and Ben Sears had Tony de Zorzi.

Two more wickets fell in the three overs after the powerplay as South Africa added just nine further runs, Jason Smith and Ruben Hermann departing tamely.

Teenage fast bowler Nqobani Mokoena was the pick of the visiting batters with 26 from 20 balls,



New Zealand's Kyle Jamieson (centre) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of South Africa's George Linde.

hitting three massive sixes in the closing overs including dispatching Kyle Jamieson to the longest boundary from the first ball he faced.

Sears, Santner and Jamieson took two wickets each, while Ferguson had one wicket from his stingy spell.

New Zealand started slowly in

response, with Devon Conway and Latham playing with caution as South Africa's openers found swing and seam with the new ball.

Both batters cut loose in the fourth over, hitting Lutho Sipamla for 21 runs in the over as the batting pair both hit sixes.

The pair combined for a 96-run opening stand before Conway fell

for a 26-ball 39 at the end of the 11th over.

The fourth T20 is in Wellington tomorrow.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
New Zealand 137 for 2 (Latham 63\*, Conway 39) beat South Africa 136 for 9 (Santner 2-21, Sears 2-27, Jamieson 2-42) by eight wickets.  
— AFP

# Australia must be 'smart' to beat Japan in Asian Cup final: coach

**SYDNEY:** Coach Joe Montemurro told his Australia team yesterday they must be adaptable and "smart" to win the Women's Asian Cup for the first time since 2010 and avenge two gut-wrenching losses against Japan in the continental final.

The sides face off for the title today at Sydney's Olympic Stadium in a repeat of the 2014 and 2018 deciders, where Japan edged home 1-0 on both occasions.

Nils Nielsen's world number six side go into the clash in seemingly invincible form after cruising through the tournament with five convincing wins and 28 goals scored to just one conceded.

In contrast, hosts Australia have had to knuckle down and fight hard. Montemurro said there were "no favourites in a final".

"It's the one who wants it more and the one who is smart enough to manage the moments," he said. "Adaptability is the word. I think this team is able to adapt accordingly. When we've had our backs against the wall we've changed things slightly and been able to find a way.

"When you're in these contests, you know that ability to be selfless and adapt is really, really important." Nielsen said after

Japan's 4-1 semi-final thumping of South Korea that Australia would be "massive favourites" given the expected partisan crowd.

But he changed his tune on the eve of the final.

"We are talking about a final in a major tournament. Both teams can win," he said.

"They know precisely our strength, they know their strength. They know weaknesses from us, they know their own weaknesses.

"It's completely 50-50 in the final and anyone that knows football knows that's true what I'm saying.

"So it's going to be, hopefully, a battle from another world between two great teams."

It will be the biggest game Australia have played since their run to the World Cup semi-finals on home soil in 2023.

While many of the current team were part of their two previous Asian Cup final defeats against Japan, captain Sam Kerr is the sole survivor from the 2010 title side.

Dubbed the golden generation by Australian media, finally winning a trophy together would be a dream come true for the likes of Arsenal defender Steph Catley and Chelsea's Ellie Carpenter.



Australia players during a training session. PIC: MATILDAS

"I've been playing with a lot of these girls since I was 13 years old and we've not won a major trophy," said Catley.

"We've put ourselves in a position a few times and had a few fourths. It would just be incredible to come away with a trophy for this group." Carpenter said winning at

home would be "the cherry on top". "Tomorrow's an amazing opportunity for us to hopefully do that," she said.

"We need to bring our aggressiveness, our physical game, our speed into this game tomorrow because we know Japan probably won't like that." — AFP

# India, Kazakhstan and China to host major World Athletics events

THE PENINSULA

**DOHA:** The World Athletics Council has selected Odisha in India and Astana in Kazakhstan to host the World Athletics Indoor Championships in 2028 and 2030, respectively.

The events were awarded during the 240th World Athletics Council Meeting held in Toruń, Poland, ahead of the World Athletics Indoor Championships Kujawy Pomorze 26.

The awarding of the 2028 World Athletics Race Walking Team Championships to Hefei in China was also among the decisions made during the two-day meeting on Wednesday and Thursday.

Welcoming the Council to the city of Toruń on the eve of the World Indoor Championships, World Athletics President Sebastian Coe said: "Poland is one of the heartlands of global athletics and one that has a long and distinguished athletics tradition, producing Olympic champions and world record-holders across multiple disciplines over the past century. Poland continues to produce world-class athletes, many of whom will be competing here in Toruń over the long weekend.

"In awarding the next two editions of this storied championships to Odisha and Astana, I am delighted that the World Indoors continues to go from strength to strength, captivating audiences around the world, and that our next two hosts reflect our strategy of taking our events to emerging markets.

"I would also like to congratulate Hefei on the awarding of the World Race Walking Team Championships in 2028. They will be the latest in a strong lineup of Chinese cities to host a World Athletics Series event from 2025 to 2028."

The 2028 World Indoor Championships will see India host a global track and field championships for the first time, from 3-5 March 2028.

The awarding of the 2030 edition to Kazakhstan's capital city, Astana, on 15-17 March 2030 will also see the sport reach new markets.  
— AFP



World Athletics President Sebastian Coe

# Australian McEvoy breaks 50m freestyle world record set 17 years ago

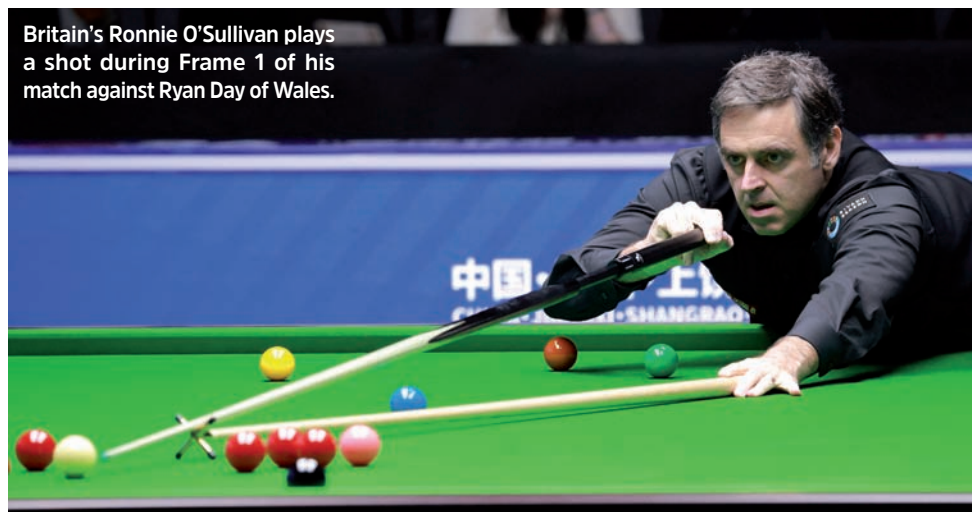
**PARIS:** Australian swimmer Cameron McEvoy broke the world record in the men's 50m freestyle, set by Cesar Cielo 17 years ago, at a competition in Shenzhen, China yesterday.

With a time of 20.88sec, McEvoy, the Olympic champion in the event at the 2024 Paris Games, shaved three-hundredths of a second off Cielo's mark achieved in the era of polyurethane bodysuits in December 2009.

"Congrats, Cam! Lightning fast swim! Incredible!" Brazilian Cielo said in a social media post.

McEvoy, also a two-time world champion over the distance, won the China Open race ahead of American Jack Alexy, in 21.57, while his fellow Australian Kyle Chalmers was third in 22.01.

McEvoy had entered the meet with a long-course best of 21.06 from the 2023 world championships, which had put him fifth on the all-time list. — AFP



# Snooker great O'Sullivan makes history with highest-ever break

**BEIJING:** Seven-time world champion Ronnie O'Sullivan made professional snooker history yesterday by crafting the highest break ever of 153 at the World Open in China.

The 50-year-old Englishman pulled off the feat against Ryan Day of Wales on his way to sealing his place in the semi-finals in Yushan with a dominant 5-0 victory.

O'Sullivan, regarded as the best player snooker has ever produced, was aided by a free ball and started his break with the green, followed by an opening black.

He then reeled off the 15 reds, complemented by 13 further blacks and two pinks, before nonchalantly clearing up the colours

to nail the eye-popping record. O'Sullivan celebrated with a broad smile and a thumbs-up to the arena, which clapped and cheered in return.

The previous highest break was 148 by Jamie Burnett in 2004.

"Just want to say a big shout-out to all the people that have been messaging me, congratulating me on the 153," O'Sullivan said in a video posted on X.

"It was a pretty cool moment, really happy to do it. Thank you to everyone out there that has supported me." The "Rocket" has achieved a perfect 147 break a record 17 times previously. — AFP

# China swim sensation Yu, 13, beats multiple Olympic medallist Smith

**BEIJING:** Chinese swimming sensation Yu Zidi added to her fast-growing reputation as the 13-year-old phenomenon beat multiple Olympic medallist Regan Smith in the women's 200m butterfly in a personal-best time in Shenzhen.

School girl Yu made global headlines last summer when at age 12 she became the youngest medallist in swimming world championships history.

At the China Open on Thursday, she powered to victory in the 200m fly in 2min 05.71sec, beating the American Smith into second in another statement performance.

Her time would have put Yu on the podium at the world championships.

Smith won silver in the event behind Canada's Summer McIntosh at the Paris 2024 Olympics in a time of 2:03.84.

The 24-year-old Smith has won a total of eight Olympic medals, two of them gold.

The China Open in the southern city of Shenzhen has attracted a strong field of Chinese and international stars.



China's Yu Zidi competes in the women's 200m butterfly final at the China Open Swimming Championships in Shenzhen.

Yu is entered to compete in five events, Chinese state media said.

The home team, including Yu, are gearing up for the Asian Games in September-October in Japan.

At last year's world championships in Singapore Yu took bronze as part of China's 4x200m freestyle relay team, making

history in the process. She also finished fourth in each of her three individual events.

In November Yu sent shock waves through the swimming world again with a blistering Asian record at China's National Games.

Yu, who turned 13 in October, swam 2:07.41 to claim gold in the 200m medley. — AFP