Qatar shooters fire three more golds at GCC Games

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatari shooters excelled at the Lusail International Shooting Range, bagging three gold and four silver medals as the hosts added nine more medals at the GCC Games Doha 2026 yesterday.

The hosts' medals tally rose to 119, including 43 gold, 44 silver and 32 bronze medals. Saudi Arabia are second with 26 gold, 20 silver and 19 bronze medals, while Bahrain are third with 61 medals, including 24 gold, 22 silver and 15 bronze.

The trio of Mohammed Al Rumaihi, Angelo Scalzoni and Saeed Abu Shareb combined to win the gold medal in the men's trap team event, aggregating a total of 354 targets. Kuwait (344) claimed silver while the UAE (341) settled for bronze.

Qatar's Dua Habib emerged victorious in the women's 10m air pistol event, scoring 231.2 to strike gold. She overcame a challenge from UAE's Ghalia Al Shuhail, who claimed silver with 229.6 points, while Bahrain's Aisha Al Braiki took bronze with a score of 209.2.

Dua was also part of the national women's 10m air pistol team that clinched another gold of the day. The team, also comprising Aisha Al Abdullah and Salma Al Maas, won the event with a total of 1,669 points, finishing ahead of Bahrain (1,646) and the UAE (1,634).

Elsewhere, Qatar also clinched a silver medal in the women's trap team event with Maytha Al Buainain, Khulood Al Khalaf and Ray Bassil returning with an aggregate of 310 targets. Kuwait topped the event with 320 targets while Bahrain (298) finished third. Al Rumaihi also won silver in the men's individual trap event. The Qatari shooter was tied with Kuwait's Abdulrahman Al Faihan on 120 targets before being edged out in the shoot-off. Al Faihan scored 26+23 while Al Rumaihi settled for silver with 26+22. UAE's Yahya Al Muhairi finished third.

The women's individual trap event saw Qatar's Maytha Al Buainain take silver, with Kuwait's Shahad Al Hawal winning gold and Marwa Bouarki securing bronze.

In the men's 10m air pistol team event, Qatar bagged silver through Khalid Al Shaiba, Nasser Al Sunaij and Mohammed Al Yafei. Saudi Arabia won gold while Oman finished third.


Qatar's Angelo Scalzoni, Mohammed Al Rumaihi and Saeed Abu Shareb celebrate with their gold medals.


Qatar's Dua Habib, Aisha Al Abdullah and Salma Al Maas won the women's 10m air pistol team gold.


Qatar's Khalid Saadoun (left) and Issa Shanan celebrate their win over the Bahraini counterparts.


Qatar's Mohammed Al Rumaihi in action.

The Qatar shooting team has so far captured a total of 18 medals, including eight gold, five silver and as many bronze medals.

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"We are extremely happy with the performance of the shooting team," said the Secretary General of the Qatar Shooting and Archery Association.

"The competitions were highly competitive due to the participation of some of the GCC's top shooters with continental achievements, but Team Qatar imposed their complete dominance."

Today's shooting schedule includes the finals of the mixed trap team event and the mixed 10m air pistol team event.

Qatar lose to Bahrain in volleyball final

At Aspire Women's Sports Hall, Qatar fell to Bahrain in the men's volleyball final, taking the silver medal.

Bahrain clinched a 25-21, 27-25, 25-23 victory to win gold, while Oman defeated the UAE 3-1 in the third-place match to take bronze.

Meanwhile, Qatar were also confined to a silver medal in the 15-red team snooker after losing to the UAE in the final at the Main Hall of the Qatar Billiards & Snooker Federation.

The Qatar team, comprising Ali Al-Obaidli, Ahmed Saif and Bashar Hussein, lost to UAE's Mohammed Shehab, Khalid Al Kamali and Abdulrahman Al Shamsi 3-0.

Qatar's hat-trick of wins in padel

Qatar's padel team blanked Bahrain 3-0 to register their third straight victory at Aspire Dome.

The duo of Mishari Nawaf and Rashid Nawaf gave Qatar the lead, defeating Youssef Qaed and Omar Qaed 6-0, 6-1.

Khalid Saadoun and Issa Shanan then teamed up to beat Ahmed Khalid and Hussein Diwani 6-0, 1-6, 6-3. Mohammed Saadoun and Hassan Wali sealed the win after Ali Diwani and Rashid Al-Obaidli retired, with Al-Obaidli forced out due to injury in the second set. Qatar had taken the opening set 6-0.

Defending champions Qatar, who also defeated Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, have secured a place on the podium and will face the UAE in today's final match.

Meanwhile, Bahrain ended Qatar's winning streak in handball, beating the hosts 24-19 at Duhail Handball Hall. Bahrain will meet the UAE in their next match while Qatar face Saudi Arabia on Friday.

دورة الألعاب الخليجية الرابعة 4TH GCC GAMES | DOHA 2026

MEDAL TALLY

1	Qatar	43	44	32	119
2	Saudi Arabia	26	20	19	65
3	Bahrain	24	22	15	61
4	Kuwait	11	16	24	51
5	Oman	10	4	15	29
6	UAE	8	13	25	46



QAF chief praises Qatar's athletics success at Games

DOHA: President of the Qatar Athletics Federation (QAF) Mohammed Issa Al-Fadala has said that Qatar's strong showing at the 4th GCC Games Doha 2026, where the athletics team topped the standings with 34 medals, including 12 gold, 13 silver and nine bronze, was the result of coordinated work, strong commitment, professionalism and detailed planning in the lead-up to the competition hosted in Qatar.

Al-Fadala said the federation's objective was clearly defined from the outset — to win the maximum possible number of medals while ensuring the safety of athletes and maintaining their physical and mental readiness throughout the Games. He added that this target was achieved successfully, with no Qatari athlete suffering muscle injuries during the competition.

He noted that the focus was not solely on medal colour, but on overall medal accumulation, given its importance in regional multi-sport events.

Al-Fadala also highlighted the intense level of competition among participating nations, particularly between Qatar and Bahrain in the battle for gold medals.

Both nations finished with 12 gold medals each, but Qatar edged ahead thanks to a higher silver medal count, giving them the overall advantage. He added that all participating teams managed to secure medals, reflecting the high competitive standard across track and field events.

The QAF President praised the organisational efforts behind the Games, pointing to the meticulous planning and early preparations that ensured smooth execution. He said the high organisational standards positively influenced athlete performance and drew wide appreciation.

He described Qatar's overall top finish as clear evidence of effective planning and hard work, while also commending the contribution of all sports federations involved in the event.

Al-Fadala further praised the role of clubs in preparing athletes, describing the collaboration between the federation and clubs as highly productive. — ***QNA***

Qatar to meet UAE, Bahrain and Yemen in Gulf Cup group

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatar will face the UAE, Bahrain and Yemen in Group B of the 27th Arabian Gulf Cup, as the draw ceremony held in Jeddah yesterday revealed.

Hosts Saudi Arabia headline Group A alongside Iraq, Oman and Kuwait in the regional tournament, which will be staged in Jeddah from September 23 to October 6, 2027.

The draw ceremony was attended by Minister of Sports and Youth and President of the Arabian Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF) H E Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed Al-Thani, representatives of the eight participating teams and a host of former Gulf football stars.

Saudi Arabia will organise the Gulf Cup for the fifth time, having previously hosted the competition in 1972, 1988, 2002 and 2014. The upcoming edition will also be the fifth tournament held under the AGCFF umbrella.

Ahead of the draw, teams were seeded according to the latest FIFA rankings released on April 1. As hosts, Saudi Arabia were automatically placed at the top of Group A, while the UAE occupied the top spot in Group B as the highest-ranked side.



The remaining nations were divided into pots based on rankings, with Qatar and Iraq placed in Pot 1, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Pot 2, Bahrain and Oman in Pot 3, and Kuwait and Yemen in Pot 4.

Under the competition format, teams in each group will play a single round-robin phase, with the top two sides advancing to the semi-finals. The winners of Group A will meet the runners-up of Group B, while the Group B leaders will face the second-placed team from Group A.

Bahrain enter the tournament as defending champions after defeating Oman 2-1 in the final of the previous edition held in Kuwait.

Kuwait remain the most decorated side in Gulf Cup history, having lifted the title a record 10 times, with their most recent triumph coming in Yemen in 2010. Iraq are second on the honours list with four titles, most recently claiming the crown on home soil in Basra in 2023.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have each won the tournament three times, while the UAE, Oman and Bahrain have secured two titles apiece. Yemen are still chasing their maiden Gulf Cup title after 10 appearances.

First staged in Bahrain in 1970, the Arabian Gulf Cup has grown into one of the region's most cherished football events, combining fierce on-pitch competition with the strong cultural and social ties shared among Gulf nations.


Qatar's Mutaz Barshim in action at the 1st Asian Jumping Championships in Chongqing, China, yesterday. (Xinhua)

Barshim wins gold in China

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatar's Mutaz Barshim once again proved his class on the international stage after winning the men's high jump title at the inaugural Asian Jumps Championships in Chongqing, China, yesterday. The Asian record holder cleared 2.23m to secure the gold medal, marking his highest clearance since claiming bronze at the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. The competition attracted 552 athletes from 23 countries and regions, including Kazakhstan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Qatar and Singapore.

The 34-year-old four-time Olympic medallist opened his campaign confidently by clearing 2.10m on his first attempt before producing another flawless jump at 2.19m. Barshim then sailed over 2.23m at the first time of asking to take firm control of the contest and underline his strong form ahead of the upcoming international season.

Barshim later attempted 2.26m in search of a higher winning mark but was unable to clear the bar.

The latest triumph follows another memorable appearance by Barshim at the 4th GCC Games Doha 2026 earlier this month. Competing in front of home fans in Doha, the Qatari star cleared 2.16m to claim a shared gold medal alongside Oman's Fatak Bait Jaboob in an emotional tribute to his famous shared Olympic title moment with Italy's Gianmarco Tamberi at the Tokyo Games.

The three-time world champion still holds the Asian record with his outstanding leap of 2.43m achieved in Brussels in 2014, which remains the second-highest jump in history.

Ronaldo, 41, leads Portugal into his sixth World Cup

LISBON: Veteran Portugal striker Cristiano Ronaldo **(pictured)** will lead his country into the 2026 World Cup this summer after coach Roberto Martinez named the 41-year-old in his squad yesterday.

The former Real Madrid and Manchester United star, now at Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr, is set to appear at a record sixth World Cup.

Portugal and Ronaldo, the all-time leading men's international goalscorer with 143 goals, have never won the competition.

Ronaldo could face former Barcelona rival Lionel Messi, who is also set to play at a sixth World Cup after leading Argentina to glory four years ago in Qatar.

The Portuguese forward avoided a three-match ban despite being sent off against the Republic of Ireland in their last qualifying match for an elbow.

Spanish coach Martinez selected a 26-man squad with no major surprises, including Ronaldo's Al Nassr team-mate Joao Felix, and also named goalkeeper Ricardo Velho as an extra player in the group.

Paris Saint-Germain stars Vitinha, Joao Neves, Nuno Mendes and Goncalo Ramos are also included in a strong squad, along with Manchester United playmaker Bruno Fernandes and a contingent from Manchester City, including Bernardo Silva.

Martinez said he would not need to manage five-time Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo in a special way because of his age.

"In my experience, at a World Cup, a player doesn't follow the pattern of club form, age-related performance or anything like that," Martinez told reporters.

"The focus is our group. All of them are focussed, they're prepared for the demands of a World Cup and we just need to manage day by day."

Ronaldo said last year that this World Cup would be his last.

He was left in tears last weekend after defeat by Gamba Osaka in the AFC Champions League Two final, but Martinez said an emotionally draining season would not affect him this summer.

"I think that coming into the national team set-up brings new energy and allows you to completely switch off from what happened during the season," said the coach. Martinez confirmed Velho was the fourth goalkeeper and he would only be involved if another stopper was injured and could be replaced in the squad.



The coach also said late striker Diogo Jota, who died in a car crash in July 2025, was with the squad in spirit.

"The spirit, strength and example of Diogo Jota is our plus one," Martinez added.

In the run-up to the tournament Portugal will face Chile and Nigeria in friendlies, before their World Cup campaign begins against DR Congo on June 17. Portugal will also face Uzbekistan and Colombia in Group K on June 23 and 27, respectively. — ***AFP***

PORTUGAL 27-MAN SQUAD LIST

Goalkeepers: Diogo Costa (Porto), Jose Sa (Wolves/ENG), Rui Silva (Sporting Lisbon), Ricardo Velho (Genclerbirligi/TUR)

Defenders: Diogo Dalot (Manchester United/ENG), Matheus Nunes, Ruben Dias (both Manchester City/ENG), Nelson Semedo (Fenerbahce/TUR), Joao Cancelo (Barcelona/ESP), Nuno Mendes (Pari Saint-Germain/FRA), Goncalo Inacio (Sporting Lisbon), Renato Veiga (Villarreal/ESP), Tomas Araujo (Benfica)

Midfielders: Ruben Neves (Al Hilal/KSA), Samu Costa (Mallorca/ESP), Joao Neves, Vitinha (both Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United/ENG), Bernardo Silva (Manchester City/ENG)

Attackers: Cristiano Ronaldo, Joao Felix (both Al Nassr/KSA), Francisco Trincao (Sporting Lisbon), Francisco Conceicao (Juventus/ITA), Pedro Neto (Chelsea/ENG), Rafael Leao (AC Milan/ITA), Goncalo Guedes (Real Sociedad/ESP), Goncalo Ramos (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA)

Arsenal win Premier League after Man City held

BOURNEMOUTH: Arsenal ended their 22-year wait to be crowned Premier League champions yesterday after Manchester City were held 1-1 by Bournemouth.

City had to win to take the title fight to the final day, but the Cherries extended their unbeaten streak to 17 league games, a run which has secured European football for the first time in the club's history.

After finishing second for the past three seasons, Mikel Arteta's Gunners have finally made it over the line to end a six-year trophy drought.

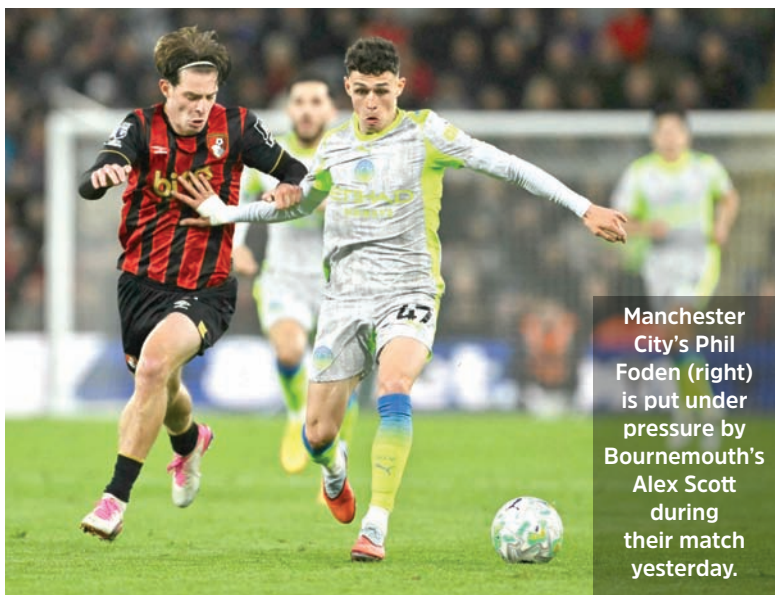
Arsenal edged to the brink of the title with an unconvincing 1-0 win over already relegated Burnley on Monday, which took them five points clear of City.

The Gunners, who have set the pace for most of the season, have bounced back impressively since losing to City last month, winning four straight league matches without conceding a goal.

On Monday, just 48 hours after completing a domestic cup double with victory over Chelsea in the FA Cup final, City were rocked by widespread reports that manager Pep Guardiola will depart after a decade in charge at the end of the season.

Victory at Wembley on Saturday secured a 20th trophy of Guardiola's glorious reign.

But he cannot add to his six Premier League titles when Aston Villa visit the Etihad on Sunday for what is expected to be his final match in charge.



Manchester City's Phil Foden (right) is put under pressure by Bournemouth's Alex Scott during their match yesterday.

Guardiola had warned that fatigue could cost City against a highly motivated Bournemouth, who still have Champions League qualification in their sights for next season.

As it stands, Bournemouth will be in the Europa League after ensuring they will finish no lower than seventh.

Sixth could be good enough for a place in the Champions League if Aston Villa finish fifth and win Wednesday's Europa League final.

City fans forlornly chanted "One more year, Guardiola" in the early stages at the Vitality Stadium in a bid to convince their decorated coach to see out the final season of his contract.

But if the travelling fans hoped City's players would be inspired to give Guardiola a glorious goodbye, they were left sorely disappointed.

Antoine Semenyo had the ball in the net on his return to Bournemouth but was flagged offside in City's best moment of a flat first half.

The home side suddenly sprang to life to open the scoring in the 39th minute. Eli Junior Kroupi curled a brilliant strike into the top corner to set a new record of 13 goals in a debut Premier League season for a teenager.

Nico O'Reilly wasted City's best chance of a lifeline when he was denied by Djordje Petrovic just seconds into the second half.

Guardiola watched on pensively as his side's title challenge fizzled out with a whimper.

After winning what was billed a title decider against Arsenal last month, City put the destiny of the title back in their rivals' hands by drawing 3-3 at Everton.

Guardiola looks set to depart having failed to win the league for two consecutive seasons for the first time in his coaching career.

Rayan and David Brooks hit the post as Bournemouth should have secured victory in Andoni Iraola's final home game in charge.

Erling Haaland's equaliser deep into stoppage time came too little, too late to save City's title challenge.

But it was a big goal for Liverpool, who now have a three-point cushion over Bournemouth and a goal difference advantage of six heading into the final day battle to secure a top-five finish and Champions League football. . — ***AFP***



Alcaraz withdraws from Wimbledon with wrist injury

MADRID: Carlos Alcaraz's hopes of regaining his Wimbledon title have been dashed with the two-time champion announcing yesterday he is withdrawing as he recovers from a wrist injury.

"My recovery is going well and I'm feeling much better, but unfortunately I'm still not ready to play, I am obliged to withdraw from both Queen's and Wimbledon," said Spaniard Alcaraz, who lost to world number one Jannik Sinner in last year's final.

"These are two really special tournaments for me and I'll miss them a lot. We'll keep working to come back as soon as possible." Alcaraz sustained the injury during the first round of the Barcelona Open and subsequently pulled out of tournaments in Madrid and Rome and then Roland Garros.

The world number two became the youngest man to complete the career Grand Slam in January with his triumph at the Australian Open. The 23-year-old holds a 22-3 record this season and also won a title in Doha. — ***AFP***



Fans celebrate after the announcement of Neymar Jr.'s inclusion during an event to announce Brazil's squad for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Superstar Neymar back in Brazil squad for fourth World Cup

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil superstar Neymar was handed a dramatic recall to the country's World Cup squad on Monday, returning to the national team after a near three-year absence.

The inclusion of Neymar, Brazil's all-time leading goalscorer with 79 goals in 128 appearances, was the biggest surprise in the 26-man squad named by coach Carlo Ancelotti.

Ancelotti announced Neymar's selection at a gala ceremony in Rio de Janeiro, with loud cheers ringing out as the veteran attacker's call-up was confirmed.

Speculation has raged for months over whether the 34-year-old former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain attacker would force his way back into the national team set-up.

The forward, a veteran of the 2014, 2018 and 2022 World Cups, had not played for Brazil since suffering knee injury during a World Cup qualifying game against Uruguay in 2023.

A mixture of injuries and poor form had left him outside the national team set-up, with Ancelotti citing concerns over his fitness after leaving him out of Brazil's squad for March friendlies against France and Croatia.

However Neymar, who rejoined boyhood club Santos in January after an injury-ravaged stint in Saudi Arabia, has now earned Ancelotti's stamp of approval for the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"We monitored Neymar throughout the year and observed that, in recent times, he has been playing consistently and his physical condition has improved," Ancelotti said.

"We believe he is an important player." Injuries have restricted Neymar to just 15 appearances in 31 matches since his return to Santos in 2026.

Brazil, who are chasing a record sixth World Cup crown, open their World Cup campaign against Morocco on June 13 before playing Haiti and Scotland in Group C.

Neymar joins a potent line-up of attackers that includes Barcelona striker Raphinha and Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior.

Ancelotti meanwhile said he believed the World Cup would be won by the most "resilient" team.

"The World Cup won't be won by a perfect team - because a perfect team doesn't exist," he said. "It will be won by the most resilient team." — ***AFP***

BRAZIL SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Alisson (Liverpool/ENG), Ederson (Fenerbahce/TUR), Weverton (Gremio/BRA)

Defenders: Alex Sandro (Flamengo/BRA), Danilo (Flamengo/BRA), Leo Pereira (Flamengo/BRA), Bremer (Juventus/ITA), Douglas Santos (Zenit St Petersburg/RUS), Gabriel Magalhães (Arsenal/ENG), Ibanez (Al-Ahli/KSA), Marquinhos (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Wesley (Roma/ITA) Midfielders Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle/ENG), Casemiro (Manchester United/ENG), Danilo (Botafogo), Fabinho (Al-Ittihad/KSA), Lucas Paqueta (Flamengo/BRA).

Forwards: Endrick (Lyon/FRA), Gabriel Martinelli (Arsenal/ENG), Igor Thiago (Brentford/ENG), Luiz Henrique (Zenit/RUS), Matheus Cunha (Manchester United/ENG), Neymar (Santos/BRA), Raphinha (Barcelona/ESP), Rayan (Bournemouth/ENG), Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid/ESP)

Stuttering Sabalenka seeks to set down marker at Roland Garros

PARIS: Aryna Sabalenka looked unbeatable when the clay-court season got underway last month, but now as the world number one arrives in Paris for her latest tilt at winning Roland Garros, her dominance of the women's game has started to show cracks.

The four-time Grand Slam champion still holds more than 1,000 ranking points on her closest challengers but foremost on her mind over the next fortnight will be going one better than her runner-up finish last year in the French capital, when she lost in three sets to Coco Gauff. If her aims ahead of the tournament, mirror that of her men's counterpart, Jannik Sinner who is also hunting a first title on the red dirt in Paris, Sabalenka's stranglehold over her competitors is suddenly a lot less dominant than the Italian's.

When Sabalenka swept to the Sunshine Double at the WTA 1000 hardcourt events in Indian Wells and Miami in March, she had then won three of the four tournaments she had played in this season -- the only blight on that record being a three-set defeat to Elena Rybakina in the Australian Open final.

And as she jetted into Madrid for the start of the European clay swing on a 15-match winning streak, it had seemed little would stand in her way to claiming a fourth career title at the Caja Magica as she began preparations for the French Open. But a quarter-final exit at the hands of 30th seed Hailey Baptiste put paid to the Belarusian's ambitions in Spain, before she followed that up by crashing out of the Italian Open against a resurgent Sorana Cirstea in the third round, after which she said she felt like "my body was limiting me from performing on the highest level".

"I guess we never lose; we only learn, so it's OK," Sabalenka mused after exiting a 1000 tournament at the round-of-32 stage for the first time since February 2025.

With the 28-year-old top seed now looking uncertain on the clay, the draw again appears to be wide open.

Rybakina, who beat Sabalenka in last season's WTA Finals decider and then in Melbourne in January to claim her second major title, will be one of the main contenders despite having never progressed beyond the last eight at Roland Garros. Iga Swiatek, the erstwhile 'queen of clay', has of late shown glimpses of the form that took her to world number one and four Roland Garros titles in the early 2020s.

Defending champion Gauff will certainly not cede her title lightly and the world number four enters the fray on the back of a strong run in Rome, which ultimately ended in defeat at the final hurdle to the in-form Elina Svitolina.

The 31-year-old Ukrainian has won two titles already this year, including a first 1000-level crown in eight years at the Italian Open. Alongside Svitolina, Madrid Open winner Marta Kostyuk, rising starlets Mirra Andreeva, Iva Jovic and Victoria Mboko, as well as Amanda Anisimova will be dark horses for a maiden Grand Slam title. — ***AFP***



Head coach Lopetegui dreams of a competitive Qatar at World Cup



THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Julen Lopetegui is not making lofty promises as he prepares Qatar for their historic participation in the FIFA World Cup 2026. Instead, the head coach says he "dreams" of seeing Al Annabi become competitive against some of the world's strongest teams in football's biggest stage.

The two-time Asian champions will head to North America for the June 11-July 19 showpiece, marking the first time Qatar have qualified for a World Cup through the qualifying process. Their debut appearance in 2022 came as hosts, but this time they earned their place after navigating a demanding Asian campaign, sealing qualification with a dramatic 2-1 win over the United Arab Emirates.

Having taken charge amid changes in the national team set-up during qualifying, Lopetegui now faces arguably the biggest challenge of his tenure. Qatar have been drawn in Group B alongside Switzerland, co-hosts Canada and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the opponents the Spaniard openly admits are stronger on paper.

Yet, speaking in an interview with *QNA*, the former Spain and Real Madrid coach made it clear that Qatar will not head into the tournament merely to make up the numbers.

"We have the ambition and the dream to be competitive in the World Cup because we won our right to be there," Lopetegui said.

"No one gave us this opportunity. We earned it and now we have to be ready to do our best, being humble and understanding the level of our opponents."

Lopetegui is realistic about the challenge awaiting Qatar. Switzerland, whom Al Annabi face in their opening match on June 13, are among Europe's most consistent teams and have been a regular force in major tournaments.

"Switzerland are maybe one of the most balanced teams in Europe in the last eight years," he said. "They have the same coach, very good players and footballers competing in the Champions League, Premier League, Serie A and La Liga."



Qatar players during a training session.

> *No one gave us this opportunity. We earned it and now we have to be ready to do our best, being humble and understanding the level of our opponents.*
> ***Julen Lopetegui***

Canada, Qatar's second opponents in Vancouver on June 19, also represent a stern test according to Lopetegui, who pointed to the quality of players competing at elite European clubs.

"You analyse Canada's line-up and most of their players compete in the Champions League," he said, adding that Bosnia and Herzegovina - Qatar's final opponents on June 24 - pose a similarly difficult challenge.

But despite repeatedly acknowledging the gulf in experience and pedigree, Lopetegui believes Qatar must embrace the challenge rather than fear it.

"We know they are better than us, but now they have to beat us," he said. "We cannot lie to ourselves about the reality, but we have the dream to compete and to be competitive."

Preparation, according to the 59-year-old, will be central to Qatar's hopes of making an impression.

Unlike domestic football schedules in Qatar, several World Cup matches in North America will take place earlier in the day, forcing players to adapt physically and mentally.

"Here you never play in the morning, usually you play at night," Lopetegui explained.

"We have to start working in the morning. We have to change many things in our bodies and minds to be ready."

The coach stressed that the coming weeks will revolve around intense work, commitment and careful planning to ensure the team peak at the right moment.

"There is no switch on and switch off," he said. "We have to work on effort, spirit and commitment to arrive stronger when June comes."

Lopetegui also revealed that avoiding injuries remains one of his biggest concerns ahead of Qatar's final preparations.

"The most important thing is to have as few injuries as possible," he said. "We are crossing our fingers because there is no time to recover if players suffer injuries at this stage."

With several senior players in the squad aged 35 or older, managing workloads has become crucial. Lopetegui said this was one of the reasons behind squad rotation during recent tournaments, including the Arab Cup, as Qatar attempt to strike a balance between experience and freshness.

"We have to take care of the players to arrive at the World Cup in the best possible condition," he said. "Sometimes you have to make different choices because we want them ready for the big challenge in June."

The Spaniard also addressed the cancellation of high-profile matches against Argentina and Serbia in March, a challenge he admitted would have been valuable tests for Qatar.

"It was not good for us because we lost the possibility to compete against very demanding teams," Lopetegui said.

Lopetegui defended the decision to hold an ongoing training camp, citing the physical risk to players who had already spent extended time away from their clubs.

"It was a bad period and many players had already been out of their teams for around 15 days," he said. "It was a big risk to force them to play these kinds of matches, so we adapted and focused on training."

> *We achieved one dream of qualifying for the World Cup. Now we have another dream, to be competitive and to make Qatari people proud of the team's behaviour, spirit and fight.*
> ***Julen Lopetegui***

Even so, the coach insisted strong opponents are essential for Qatar's development, pointing to last year's defeat to Russia as an example of how difficult fixtures can sharpen the team before decisive matches.

"Sometimes these tough matches teach you a lot," he said. "Against stronger teams you understand your real level and what you need to improve."

On the player front, Lopetegui admitted fitness and match rhythm will heavily influence his final squad selection, particularly in the case of striker Almoez Ali, who endured an injury-hit campaign.

"In Ali's case, unfortunately he only played around two matches this year because of injuries and surgery," Lopetegui said, referring to Almoez Ali.

"For this level of competition, rhythm is very important. We hope he improves step by step because all players need minutes to be physically ready."

Despite the challenges, Lopetegui urged Qatari fans to savour the moment, describing qualification itself as a historic achievement.

"Qatari people should be proud because we achieved something many countries could not," he said.

"We achieved one dream of qualifying for the World Cup. Now we have another dream, to be competitive and to make Qatari people proud of the team's behaviour, spirit and fight."

Qatar's ongoing training camp features a friendly against Sudan in Doha tomorrow, followed by a clash with Ireland in Dublin, before the squad travels to the United States for their final warm-up match against El Salvador in Los Angeles on June 6.

Sinner primed for career Grand Slam

PARIS: Jannik Sinner **(pictured)** will head into the French Open as the most overwhelming favourite to win the men's title since Rafael Nadal's hey-day and with the career Grand Slam firmly in his sights.

The Italian will not even have to face Carlos Alcaraz, who beat him in a dramatic Roland Garros final last year, after his great rival was ruled out through injury.

Sinner could become the ninth man to complete the set of all four major titles, following in the footsteps of Alcaraz who achieved the feat at the Australian Open earlier this season.

The world number one could not be in better form after romping to the Italian Open crown on Sunday.

That final victory over Casper Ruud made the 24-year-old only the second player to win all nine Masters 1000 tournaments after Novak Djokovic, who is arguably his biggest rival for the French Open, which starts on Sunday.

Sinner has won six consecutive Masters titles and is on a record-breaking 34-match winning streak at the level just below the Slams.

It would be a surprise if he cannot translate that form to the red dirt in Paris.

Sinner cruised into the 2025 final without dropping a set before missing three championship points as Alcaraz staged a remarkable comeback from two sets down to snatch the trophy.

Norway's Ruud, who has never taken a set off Sinner in five meetings, is under no illusions as to the task facing the other contenders for the Coupe des Mousquetaires.

"I never played the big three in their prime... But I'm sure Roger (Federer), Novak, Rafa, 25, 26 years old was also the same feeling for the other players," said Ruud of Sinner after being swatted aside 6-4, 6-4 in Rome.

"I don't see him getting any worse, unfortunately. You just have to think that you have to be better and better because he's also going to get better and better." Sinner has only lost twice in 10 tournaments since retiring injured against Tallon Griekspoor in Shanghai last September.

Czech Jakub Mensik got the better of him in the quarter-finals of the ATP event in Doha in February, while Djokovic produced a vintage display in the Australian Open semi-finals.

Djokovic is still the most likely man to deny Sinner, despite having struggled for form and fitness since losing to Alcaraz in the Melbourne final.

The Serb, who will turn 39 shortly before the tournament, has beaten Sinner five times in 11 meetings.



Djokovic, still chasing a record-breaking 25th Grand Slam title, has made at least the semi-finals at each of the past five majors.

But he remains without one of the sport's biggest four trophies since equalling Margaret Court's all-time record tally at the 2023 US Open.

Djokovic, now ranked fourth, has only played two events since the Australian Open, losing to Jack Draper in the Indian Wells last 16 before a surprise defeat by Croatia's Dino Prizmic in his opening match in Rome.

Alexander Zverev will be the second seed in Alcaraz's absence and will have high hopes of finally ending his wait for a maiden Grand Slam title.

But there is little to suggest the German can start delivering when it matters.

The world number three has lost in three finals and nine semi-finals since last winning an ATP tournament in Munich 13 months ago.

Zverev has lost nine successive meetings with Sinner and the last six in straight sets.

Home hopes will be high for a deep run from Arthur Fils who has enjoyed an excellent return from injury this season.

There has not been a French men's quarter-finalist since Richard Gasquet in 2016.

Spanish teenager Rafael Jodar will be seeded at a Grand Slam for the first time after an impressive clay-court campaign, while Brazilian fans will turn out in numbers to support their rising star Joao Fonseca.

However, everything points to Sinner standing with the trophy on Court Philippe Chatrier on June 7, which would leave an Olympic gold medal as the only big achievement missing from his still young career. — ***AFP***

Taijul puts Bangladesh on brink of series win over Pakistan



Bangladesh's Taijul Islam celebrates the dismissal of Pakistan's Babar Azam.

SYLHET: Bangladesh are three wickets away from a famous Test series win at home after spinner Taijul Islam took 4-113 to rattle Pakistan despite a rearguard by the opposition batters yesterday.

Pakistan ended day four on 316-7, needing another 121 runs for victory in what would be a record chase of 437 on the fifth and final day in Sylhet.

Mohammad Rizwan, on 75, and Sajid Khan, on eight, were unbeaten at the close of play.

Left-arm spinner Taijul struck key blows, including Babar Azam for 47 and Salman Agha on 71, to keep Bangladesh in the hunt for their first-ever Test series win over Pakistan at home.

Bangladesh, who won the opener of the two-match series, also closed in on back-to-back Test series victories over Pakistan -- having whitewashed them 2-0 on Pakistani soil in 2024.

Pakistan slumped to 162-5 and were heading towards a tame defeat before Rizwan and Agha put on 134 runs to raise hopes of Test cricket's highest chase.

West Indies currently hold the record for the 418 they scored to beat Australia in Antigua in 2003, while Pakistan have never successfully chased more than 377.

Pakistan lost their overnight openers early before captain Shan Masood and Azam steadied the ship with a counter-attacking partnership that guided them to 101-2 at lunch.

But the afternoon session shifted the momentum back in the hosts' favour. Bangladesh removed Azam after wicket-keeper Litton Das took a stunning catch behind the stumps off Taijul.

Nahid Rana then cleaned up Saud Shakeel with a wide yorker for just six, and Taijul snared Masood for a determined 71, with Mahmudul Hasan Joy taking a sharp catch at short leg.

Pakistan slipped to 200-5 at tea, but it was the stubborn sixth-wicket stand between Rizwan and Agha that frustrated Bangladesh.

But Taijul then deceived Agha with a well-disguised arm ball to rattle his stumps and Hasan Ali fell without scoring two overs later, caught by captain Najmul Hossain Shanto at first slip.

Rizwan and Sajid then batted out the remaining overs.

However, Bangladesh pace bowling coach Shaun Tait remained confident the side would get over the line on day five.

BRIEF SCORES

Pakistan 232 and 316 for 7 (Rizwan 75*, Masood 71, Agha 71, Taijul 4-113) ***need another 121 runs to beat Bangladesh*** 278 and 390. — ***AFP***