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Messi moves past Olise as Power Rankings race goes to the wire

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: The final of the FIFA World Cup 2026 is shaping up to be a classic. Heading into the decider, Argentina and Spain occupy the top two places on the FIFA Men's World Ranking and both have dazzled over the past five weeks in North America.

While Argentina have won all seven of their matches, and Spain have reeled off six straight wins, they've arrived at the final in different manners and that is very much reflected in the FIFA Power Rankings.

Lionel Scaloni's side have created and finished chances at an eye-catching rate, scoring 19 goals in their seven outings. Spain have been near impenetrable, conceding just a single goal in close to 700 minutes of action.

Argentina have been driven, unsurprisingly, by the mercurial talents of captain Lionel Messi. Following their dramatic semi-final win over England, Messi has jumped up five places to the top of the creativity rankings, ahead of erstwhile leader Michael Olise. He is also closing in Kylian Mbappe at the head of the Attacking rankings.

Defensively, it's very much the Spain show in the Power Rankings, with four players in the top ten of the category, including the top three places. It's Rodri who leads the way, just ahead of full-back Pedro Porro and Pau Cubarsi, with the central defender also among the leading candidates in the race for the FIFA Young Player award.

ATTACKING

With the top three players in this category all still involved in the tournament, the race for top spot is set to go right down to the wire. It's France superstar Mbappe (8.92) who currently leads the way, but Messi (8.62) is rapidly closing the gap.

ATTACKING			
#1	KVLIAN MBAPPE		8.93
#2	LIONEL MESSI		8.63
#3	JUDE BELLINGHAM		8.22
#4	ERLING HAALAND		7.74
#5	CHARLES DE KETELAERE		7.31
#6	OUSMANE DEMBELE		7.21
#7	VINICIUS JUNIOR		7.17
#8	JOHAN MANZAMBI		7.11
#9	JULIAN QUINONES		7.05
#10	HARRY KANE		6.92

CREATIVITY

Having starred, with a pair of assists, in Argentina's latest dramatic victory, Messi (8.41) jumped a full five places to pip Michael Olise (8.22) to the creativity summit. Of the remaining contenders currently inside the top ten, fourth-placed Mbappe (7.70), fifth placed Anthony Gordon (7.67) and Spain's Lamine Yamal (7.46), one place back, will be hoping to finish strongly.

CREATIVITY			
#1	LIONEL MESSI		8.41
#2	MICHAEL OLISE		8.23
#3	JEREMY DOKU		7.78
#4	KVLIAN MBAPPE		7.71
#5	ANTHONY GORDON		7.67
#6	LAMINE YAMAL		7.47
#7	ROBERTO ALVARADO		7.33
#8	DANI OLMO		7.31
#9	BUKAVO SAKA		7.29
#10	MORGAN ROGERS		7.13

DEFENDING

Spanish players have set an impressive pace in the race to top this category, with Rodri (8.03) in a tussle to hold off team-mates Pedro Porro (7.70) and Cubarsi (7.50).

DEFENDING			
#1	RODRI		8.03
#2	PEDRO PORRO		7.70
#3	PAU CUBARSI		7.50
#4	AURELIEN TCHOUAMENI		7.36
#5	CRISTIAN ROMERO		7.34
#6	LUC DE FOUGEROLLES		7.33
#7	DAVOT UPAMECANO		7.29
#8	AVMERIC LAPORTE		7.29
#9	DAVINSON SANCHEZ		7.14
#10	CHRIS RICHARDS		7.00

GOALKEEPING

Portugal Diogo Costa (8.73) remains well clear of Jordan Pickford (8.10) in the 'Defending the Goal' category although the England No1 (7.89) maintains his grip on top spot. **FIFA**

Master and apprentice as Spain, Argentina coaches meet in final

EAST RUTHERFORD: Master will take on apprentice when Spain coach Luis de la Fuente lines up against his former student, Argentina's Lionel Scaloni, in the World Cup final on Sunday.

Nine years ago, Scaloni was just another former professional player pursuing a career in coaching, studying for his pro license at the Spanish football federation's training center in Las Rozas, on the outskirts of Madrid.

His teacher on the course? De la Fuente.

In the years since, both men have gone on to forge successful coaching careers in international football.

Scaloni, 48, took charge of Argentina in August 2018, initially on an interim basis -- less than a year after taking coaching lessons in de la Fuente's classroom.

Since then the former Deportivo La Coruna player has led Argentina into a golden age of tournament success.

He ended their 28-year wait for a major title with victory at the 2021 Copa America and then followed that up with the ultimate prize

-- the 2022 World Cup. Another Copa America title was added in 2024.

Over a similar period, de la Fuente has overseen a resurgence in Spanish football fortunes that has left La Roja on course for a second World Cup win, to set alongside their triumph in 2010.

Appointed in December 2022 after Spain's insipid last-16 exit to Morocco at the last World Cup, de la Fuente, 65, has returned Spain to the top table of international football.

A thrilling victory at the 2024 European Championship was backed up by a run to the final of the UEFA Nations League last year.

Tuesday's semi-final master-class against France has left de la Fuente on the brink of topping those successes with a World Cup win.

"He was my mentor, and he taught me everything I know and now we are facing each other in a final," Scaloni said of de la Fuente following Wednesday's epic 2-1 semi-final defeat of England.

"I remember after Qatar when we had a conference among coaches, and I had a chat with him

for quite a while. He's done brilliant work with his team, I'm very pleased for him." Scaloni has strong personal and professional ties to Spain after spending the bulk of his playing career there. His wife, Elisa Montero, is Spanish, and the couple live with their two sons in Mallorca.

On Sunday, though, despite his warm relationship with de la Fuente, Scaloni has no doubt where his loyalties lie.

"Of course everyone knows I live in Spain and have Spanish family. I'm very, very sorry, but I'm going to try to beat Mr de la Fuente."

De la Fuente has reciprocated, describing Scaloni as a model student.

"I have great respect for Lionel," he said. "He has won everything with the Argentina national team. I agree with many of his ideas, I admire him professionally and personally. He is a great person."

"Lionel was a very diligent student, with a great attitude and interest. He had the touch of someone who is determined to grow. Being his teacher is an honour." -- **AFP**



Spain coach Luis de la Fuente (left) and Argentina's coach Lionel Scaloni.

England's Kane 'gutted' after crashing out of World Cup

ATLANTA: Harry Kane said he was "gutted" for England and their fans after his team were beaten 2-1 by defending champions Argentina in the World Cup semi-finals on Wednesday.

Anthony Gordon's strike had put the Three Lions on the cusp of a first men's World Cup final since they lifted the 1966 trophy but Lionel Messi inspired a dramatic turnaround in Atlanta.

He set up Enzo Fernandez, who blasted home from outside the area, and provided an inch-perfect cross for Lautaro Martinez's winner in stoppage time.

"Gutted for the boys, gutted for everyone -- the team, the staff, the fans," England captain Kane told the BBC.

"We played a good game, the large majority of it. When we went 1-0 up we seemed to try and hold on, which at this level is not enough."

"So, just gutted because we've worked so hard to be here and the lads have given every last bit of running, blood, sweat, tears," Bayern Munich forward Kane, who scored

six goals during the tournament, said Thomas Tuchel's men had struggled to repel constant attacks from the defending champions.

"After the goal, whether it was them putting more men forward or us not being able to match them man for man, it was just wave after wave," he said.

"Lads were putting blocks in but, in the end, it just wasn't enough." He said England had not planned to rely on defending after Gordon's goal.

"When we went ahead the messaging was to go again and get another goal," he added.

"Then once they scored their two goals it was to try and find something but we couldn't quite get the momentum back in the game." England have now reached at least the semi-final stage in four of the past five major tournaments, but have still not won a major tournament since the 1966 World Cup.

Kane turns 33 later this month and refused to be drawn on whether he imagines still being part of the

team by the time the next World Cup comes around.

He may be inspired by the performances of Lionel Messi, 39, who has scored eight goals at the 2026 tournament.

"As a person, it's always just about taking it year by year and how I feel," Kane told reporters. "The England national team is my pride and joy. It's what I love to do more than anything. Obviously, four years is a long way away. I'll be 33 this summer, but as you see on the other hand with Leo there, he's still performing at the highest level. I never want to put a limit on these things. But for now, it's just about processing another tough loss with this team."

— **AFP**



Harry Kane reacts after England were beaten by Argentina.

'Lost his Tuch?' England boss hammered by media

LONDON: Thomas Tuchel may have criticised his England stars for being too "passive" in their World Cup semi-final defeat against Argentina, but it is the beleaguered German who has come under fire from the British media for his defensive tactics.

Hampered by Tuchel's cautious substitutions, England squandered a golden opportunity to reach their first World Cup final since 1966, blowing the lead as Argentina scored twice in the closing minutes to snatch a 2-1 win on Wednesday.

British tabloid The Sun encapsulated the mood of recrimination among frustrated England fans as their headlines blared: 'Lost his Tuch?' and 'Thomas tanked it'.

Tuchel was lambasted for sending on Dan Burn and Ezri Konsa to make a five-man defence, in a failed bid to hold on after England went 1-0 up through Anthony Gordon's goal early in the second half in Atlanta. There was a feeling of deja vu for England supporters, who had watched their team let one-goal leads slip away against Croatia in the 2018 World Cup semi-final and Italy in the Euro 2020 final.

The Daily Mail slammed Tuchel, saying despite being brought in to solve the tactical issues caused by predecessor Gareth Southgate, the German had also been too negative when the stakes were highest.

"Thomas Tuchel's changes cost England against Argentina -- they were out of ideas and doomed to lose from that moment. It was a return to the bad habits Gareth Southgate was criticised for", said the Mail. -- **AFP**

Will Tuchel have to rebuild trust after England World Cup exit?

WASHINGTON: Thomas Tuchel is already looking forward to a home Euros in 2028 after England's bitter World Cup exit.

But will he have to earn back the trust of his players? The England boss has been heavily criticised for his defensive substitutions in a 2-1 semi-final defeat by Argentina in Atlanta on Wednesday, accused of ceding control to Lionel Messi's team.

Anthony Gordon put England on track for their first World Cup final since 1966 but late goals from Enzo Fernandez and Lautaro Martinez turned the match around in a dramatic finish.

Tuchel, the German appointed to

make bold, game-changing calls in the biggest moments, failed his biggest test as his team folded under intense Argentine pressure.

Defender Marc Guehi suggested England should have remained on the front foot against the defending champions.

"We should have carried on, we should have carried on pushing," he said. "It kind of felt like we scored and then the mentality was go back, defend."

Captain Harry Kane also questioned his side's approach but refused to point the finger at Tuchel's game management.

Ex-players and pundits were

more direct, expressing widespread astonishment at his tactics.

Despite the manner of England's defeat, Tuchel is understood to retain the backing of the Football Association, who appointed him in October 2024 to succeed Gareth Southgate.

The blunt and charismatic Tuchel, 52, was hired with a reputation as a tactical wizard to get England over the line at a major championship after a string of agonising near-misses under Southgate. But the 2026 tournament has ended in familiar, heart-breaking fashion.

Tuchel's initial contract took him up until the end of the 2026 World Cup but he subsequently signed a new

deal keeping him in the job until the 2028 European Championship, in the UK and Ireland.

The former Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Bayern Munich boss is already looking forward, even though England still have to face France in a third-place play-off in Miami tomorrow.

"There is still a match to play that we are not looking so much forward to, but there is still a match to play," he said.

"Of course then we keep on going. I have a contract until the home Euros and I'm looking forward to that even, like now, it's difficult to look that far ahead." -- **AFP**



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Hamilton aiming to equal Schumacher’s Belgian GP record and boost title hopes

SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS: Lewis Hamilton returns to one of his favourite circuits for the 20th consecutive year this weekend in pursuit of a victory for Ferrari to equal Michael Schumacher’s record six Belgian Grand Prix wins. After finishing third behind triumphant Ferrari team-mate Charles Leclerc and fellow-Briton George Russell of Mercedes at his home British GP two weeks ago, the seven-time world champion is set to bid for an eighth.

Italian teenager Kimi Antonelli, who reeled off a record five straight ‘maiden’ wins earlier this year, leads the title race for Mercedes on 179 points, after nine races, 25 clear of Russell and 32 in front of Hamilton.

But the precocious 19-year-old has failed to score in two of his last three races while Ferrari have found resurgent form and unexpected power to score wins for each driver in the last three outings. His once luxurious lead of 66 points has halved.

“Reliability issues have cost us points,” admitted Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff.

“In a championship as competitive as this, it’s something we cannot afford. There’s no value in having pace if we don’t get the results.” Antonelli suffered an agonising race on the majestic Spa circuit, set in the Belgian Ardennes forest, last year. He qualified 19th, started from the pit lane and finished a tearful 16th during a difficult spell in his rookie season.

F1: WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP STANDINGS

DRIVERS

1. Kimi Antonelli (ITA) 179 pts, 2. George Russell (GBR) 154, 3. Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 147, 4. Charles Leclerc (MON) 108, 5. Lando Norris (GBR) 97, 6. Oscar Piastri (AUS) 82, 7. Max Verstappen (NED) 76, 8. Isack Hadjar (FRA) 52, 9. Pierre Gasly (FRA) 42, 10. Liam Lawson (NZL) 39, 11. Arvid Lindblad (GBR) 20, 12. Oliver Bearman (GBR) 18, 13. Franco Colapinto (ARG) 18, 14. Gabriel Bortoleto (BRA) 6, 15. Carlos Sainz Jr (ESP) 6, 16. Alexander Albon (THA) 5, 17. Esteban Ocon (FRA) 3, 18. Fernando Alonso (ESP) 1

CONSTRUCTORS

1. Mercedes 333 pts, 2. Ferrari 255, 3. McLaren 179, 4. Red Bull 128, 5. Alpine 60, 6. Racing Bulls 59, 7. Haas 21, 8. Williams 11, 9. Audi 2, 10. Aston Martin 1, 11. Cadillac 0

However, he experienced similar disappointment at the 2025 Monaco Grand Prix, where he was lapped twice and finished 18th, before turning that on its head this year. He was gloriously triumphant and dived into the harbour to celebrate his fifth consecutive win.

If his car is reliable, and Mercedes recover their power and straight-line speed advantage, he and Russell will be the men to beat, but Hamilton, with all his experience and his rediscovered vim, will be a contender, as will four-time champion Max Verstappen.

Hamilton might already have the record for Belgian wins if it had

not been for some wretched luck in the past, notably in 2008 when he finished first in teeming rain but was stripped of his win by a controversial post-race 25-second sanction.

This time, he will be 18 years’ wiser and hoping Ferrari’s renaissance, notably their straight-line speed, can carry him into the fight for victory. But that goes too far for Leclerc and Red Bull’s Verstappen if he has regained trust in his car.

The Dutchman, for whom Belgium is a second ‘home’ race -- his mother is Belgian and he was born in Belgium -- where he is always backed loudly by his ‘orange army’, aims to add to his three previous wins.

But he departed Silverstone cursing a failed rear wing on his car for a second time.

After a disappointing home race in Britain, champions McLaren also need to prove a point. Oscar Piastri won last year ahead of team-mate and defending champion Lando Norris, another son of a Belgian mother, with Leclerc, winner in 2019, third. Energy management will once again be an issue on a power-hungry high-speed circuit with fast straights and sweeping corners, often prone to dramatic changes of weather leading to dramatic races.

“It could be tricky with the limitations on the straight, but historically, we have done well here,” said a hopeful Verstappen. “So, let’s see and hope for the best.” — **AFP**



Ferrari’s British driver Lewis Hamilton rides a skateboard in the paddock.

Norris to take Belgian grid penalty after battery change

SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS: World champion Lando Norris has taken a 10-place grid penalty for this weekend’s Belgian Grand Prix after McLaren announced yesterday that it was fitting his car with a new battery.

In Formula One’s new hybrid era, with cars powered 50/50 by battery and petrol engine, Norris has struggled with reliability mainly due to problems with the electronics in his car’s power unit.

McLaren said Thursday that the “power electronics unit” will be Norris’s fourth this season, one more than permitted in the regulations so a 10-place grid drop is mandatory.

Norris was unable to start the Chinese Grand Prix in March, had problems in practice with a second battery in Japan and then had more trouble in practice at the Monaco Grand Prix.

The team said their engine suppliers Mercedes were introducing an updated power unit in Belgium for McLaren but to take advantage of it “we must incur a 10-place grid penalty on Lando’s car in order to take a new unit”.

“We have chosen to do this in Belgium, a circuit where overtaking is relatively more prevalent, as opposed to the following two events in Hungary and Zandvoort (Netherlands).” McLaren had already said they plan to introduce a rear wing upgrade in Spa ahead of further upgrades in the following races. — **AFP**

Attention to detail as Kerr targets El Guerrouj’s mile world record

LONDON: Josh Kerr is hoping hitting peak physical form blends with minute planning and the latest in running shoe innovation to help propel him to a world record in the men’s mile.

Kerr has chosen tomorrow’s Diamond League meet in London to have a tilt at the 3min 43.13sec set by Morocco’s Hicham El Guerrouj in Rome back in 1999.

The 28-year-old US-based Scot, 2023 world 1,500m champion and Olympic silver medallist, currently holds the British record over the mile with 3:45.34, set in Eugene in 2024.

“It is the most historic track record, but the current mark... has not been bettered this century,” Kerr said in a series of all-encompassing articles for British newspaper The Daily Telegraph laying bare his approach to the race. “It’s too long. It’s time to bring this record into the modern era through training, technology and effort.

“I have won three world titles and two Olympic medals but joining Sir Roger (Bannister), as well as middle-distance legends Steve Ovett, Sebastian Coe and Steve Cram on the roll call of mile record holders, would be the biggest moment of my career.” Kerr’s bid to break the 27-year-old record is built on a combination of factors, not least shoe technology.

The required pace to break the record involves an athlete running an average of 16.2 mph or 55.5sec laps.

Kerr, known as being highly selective in the races he runs, wears Brooks running shoes, and the Scot contends the latest pair he’ll be donning, after months in the design lab, “will change athletics”.

Kerr said the newly custom-designed shoes, with a stiff but lightweight carbon fibre plate embedded in the sole, were “ultra aggressive” and offered up a rocker effect, with no cushioning beneath the heel.

Kerr will line up in a strong field tomorrow including American Yared Nuguse, whose North American mile record of 3:43.97 guarantees a dramatic race in the British capital. — **AFP**

Scheffler makes steady start at British Open

SOUTHPORT: Scottie Scheffler made a steady start to his defence of the British Open with a two under par 68 as a bogey at the last cost Bryson DeChambeau a share of the clubhouse lead at Royal Birkdale.

Scheffler is two shots back after failing to make the most of a fast start under glorious sunshine and scorching temperatures in England’s northwest coast.

After his record of 78 successive cuts made dating back four years came to an end at last week’s Scottish Open, the world number one looked refreshed with four birdies in five holes between the second and the sixth.

But bogeys at the seventh and par-five 17th dropped him back and a birdie putt at the last came to a halt just inches shy of the hole.

“I got off to a hot start in the round today and wasn’t able to make as many birdies as I would have hoped to down the stretch,” said Scheffler, who has not won on the PGA Tour since January.

“If I continue to strike the ball the way I did today and just keep giving myself looks, that’s part of it. Golf is played over 72 holes, and I definitely liked what I saw today.”

DeChambeau is set to snap his unwanted streak of failing to make the cut at the previous three majors this year.

The two-time US Open



US golfer Scottie Scheffler watches his drive from the 10th tee on day one of the 154th Open.

champion has often struggled in the wind of links conditions at the British Open but, with the weather set fair for the next three days, he is hoping to take advantage.

“There’s still a lot of golf to be played, but, ultimately from my perspective, I was really excited about

the way I played,” said DeChambeau.

England’s Daniel Brown and South Korean Im Sung-jae set the clubhouse lead at four under.

The world number 136, Brown, also topped the leaderboard after the opening round at Royal Troon two years ago.

Root’s 99 not out sees England to ODI series-levelling win over India

CARDIFF: Joe Root’s typically composed 99 not out steered jittery England to a four-wicket win over India in the second one-day international in Cardiff yesterday that levelled this three-match series at 1-1.

Root walked out to bat with England 0-1 after Ben Duckett was caught behind off Jasprit Bumrah from the first ball of the innings.

England were 8-2 when Jacob Bethell nicked a rising delivery from Prasidh Krishna to wicket-keeper Ishan Kishan, a replacement for the ill KL Rahul, before skipper Harry Brook fell to a skittish scoop. Root, not for the first time in his long career, led an England revival as they chased down a modest target of 234 with 35 balls remaining to turn Sunday’s finale at Lord’s into a series decider.

The former England captain faced 133 balls, including nine fours, and was only denied what would have been his 21st ODI century when the recalled Gus Atkinson, riding his luck with a few

streaky shots, pulled Prasidh Krishna for four.

When Sam Curran (22) was excellently taken standing up to the stumps by Kishan off Shivam Dube, England were faltering at 94-4.

But Root completed a 76-ball fifty -- his second half-century in three days following his 76 not out in a six-wicket India win in Tuesday’s series opener at Edgbaston. Fellow veteran Jos Buttler fell for just 17, clean bowled trying to drive left-arm spinner Axar Patel. Root needed a reliable ally and it seemed he had found one in Will Jacks.

But having made 30, Jacks inexplicably backed away to leg and slapped paceman Gurnoor Brar straight to extra cover. Root threw his head back in anguish as India gained renewed hope with England 197-6 off 40 overs.

Earlier, Jofra Archer led a much-improved England bowling display as India were dismissed for 233. Fast bowler Archer took 3-47 from his 10 overs after Brook won the toss. — **AFP**



Merlier claims hat-trick of Tour de France stage wins

Belgian rider Tim Merlier celebrates as he wins the 12th stage of the Tour de France yesterday. The Soudal-Quick Step rider edged out Dutchman Olav Kooij and fellow Belgian Jasper Philipsen to claim his third stage win of this year’s Tour, and sixth overall. (AFP)



England’s Joe Root watches the ball after playing a shot.