

Messi retires from international football

MIAMI: Lionel Messi said yesterday he was retiring from international football after leading Argentina to a second successive World Cup final in July.

The 39-year-old forward who won the World Cup in 2022 and dragged his nation to the final in the United States only to lose to Spain, said the decision had been painful.

“It was a decision that hurt and still hurts deep in my soul but I understand that it is the right time,” Messi wrote on Instagram.

“I swear I always gave everything, not just in the last few years when we won everything but before that too, and I always fought and gave my all for this shirt,” he added.

Messi led Argentina to World Cup glory four years ago by winning the final against France in a penalty shootout in Doha, but his side lost 1-0 to a superior Spain side in the 2026 final in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

Following the death of his father Jorge in August, Messi had said he had “serious doubts” about continuing to play football of any sort for “much longer”.

“I don’t know what I’ll do without you, I don’t know how to go on. I just played football, and now I have serious doubts about continuing to do so for

much longer,” he said then.

Messi’s contract with Major League Soccer club Inter Miami runs until the end of the 2028 season.

In this year’s finals, Messi inspired Argentina to another final by scoring eight goals and provided two assists in the dramatic late comeback against England in the semi-finals.

But the dream of lifting the trophy again proved one match too far as the South Americans lost to Spain in the MetLife Stadium in a match that ended in ugly scenes.

Midfielder Leandro Paredes and several

of his Argentina team-mates have received bans and fines for their part in clashes with Spain players after the final.

Messi, meanwhile, was pictured in tears after receiving his loser’s medal. He said afterwards that the pain of defeat was “immense” and that it would “take a long time for this wound to heal”.

‘Thank you for everything’

In his statement yesterday, the eight-time Ballon d’Or winner said it was time for a new generation of Argentina players to take up the torch.

“I love, I loved, and I will

always love being on the national team,” he wrote.

“I gave everything I had, I have nothing more to give, and besides, there are some very talented young players coming up behind me who deserve to be there.”

First called up in 2005 by Jose Nestor Pekerman as an 18-year-old, Messi would go on to play 207 times for Argentina and become the country’s leading scorer, with 125 goals.

Messi also won two Copa Americas in 2021 and 2024 during his 21-year international career.

Yet, prior to the trophy-laden later years, Messi did not hold the place in Argentine hearts reserved for other national idols such as Diego Maradona or Pope Francis.

After moving to Catalonia at 13 to join Barcelona, Messi could have represented Spain but chose Argentina.

His long-time team-mate Angel Di Maria, also a 2022 world champion, on Monday paid homage to Messi for this choice and his impact on the national team.

“We will be forever grateful to you for being Argentinian and for having taken Argentina to the top of the world,” Di Maria said.

“For having chosen to be Argentinian when you could have chosen something else. Thank you for everything.” — **AFP**



Lionel Messi celebrates with the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 trophy.

Defining moments of Lionel Messi’s Argentina career

PARIS: Lionel Messi announced his retirement from international football yesterday, six weeks on from Argentina’s defeat in the World Cup final and after over 200 appearances for his country stretching across more than two decades. Take a look back at the moments that defined Messi’s career with his country.

Inauspicious start

Messi’s international career began as a fresh-faced 18-year-old in 2005. His first cap was unforgettable for the wrong reasons -- ninety seconds after coming on as a substitute in a friendly with Hungary in Budapest, he was sent off for what the referee saw as an elbow. The following June he made his first World Cup appearance in the 6-0 win over Serbia and Montenegro with which Argentina began the 2006 tournament in Germany. Messi got his team’s final goal in Gelsenkirchen -- the first game and goal of what would become a legendary relationship with the World Cup.

First World Cup final

Messi was 26 when Argentina headed to Brazil in 2014, but was already established as one of the greats thanks to his achievements with Barcelona. There had been numerous disappointments with Argentina: quarter-final defeats, both to Germany, at the World Cup in 2006 and in 2010, the latter with Diego Maradona as coach. There was also a Copa America final loss to Brazil in 2007, and a miserable showing at the 2011 version of that competition on home soil. Messi went to Brazil as captain of Alejandro Sabella’s team, and made a flying start by scoring in every group game. The goals then dried up, but he took Argentina to their first World Cup final since the days of Maradona, only for the Albiceleste to fall short against Germany at the Maracana.

The crowning glory in Qatar

Messi could, and perhaps should, have bowed out after the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, when the Barcelona legend -- by now 35 and playing for PSG -- found another level to drag Argentina to victory. He scored seven goals and set up three more in seven games, including a brace in the epic final against France -- when he also converted his penalty in the shoot-out which gave Argentina the trophy for the third time in their history.

Another final defeat

Messi skipped his country to another title at the 2024 Copa America before going into a record-equaling sixth World Cup this year in the USA. He was about to turn 39, but doubts about his age were blown away as Messi scored eight goals in his team’s first five games and helped inspire them to another final. Messi has played more World Cup matches than anyone else (34) and scored 21 goals overall. He became only the second player to appear in three different World Cup finals, but he and Argentina were abject as they lost in extra time to Spain -- an anti-climactic ending to an international career spanning 207 matches and 125 goals. — **AFP**

Qatar Cup semis: Al Sadd target final with Al Gharafa win; Al Rayyan meet Al Shamal

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Defending champions Al Sadd will begin their Qatar Cup title defence against Al Gharafa today as the four-team tournament gets underway with the semi-finals.

Al Sadd face Al Gharafa at Khalifa International Stadium at 5pm, while Al Rayyan take on Al Shamal at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium at 7.30pm.

The Qatar Cup is contested by the top four teams of the Qatar Stars League after each season, with the winners of today’s semi-finals advancing to the final scheduled for December 11 at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Al Sadd, who defeated Al Duhail in a penalty shootout to win last year’s title, are seeking their 10th Qatar Cup crown.

The Wolves have made an impressive start to the new QSL season, recording big wins over Al Ahli and Qatar SC in their opening two matches.

However, Al Gharafa will provide a familiar and difficult challenge after defeating Al Sadd to lift the Amir Cup title in May.

The Cheetahs are seeking their fourth Qatar Cup crown after opening their league campaign with a win over



Al Sadd will look to build on their strong start to the season when they face Al Gharafa today.

Al Shahania before losing to Al Shamal.

Al Sadd coach Razvan Lucescu said his side were focused on reaching the final.

“Our team is entering the match with one goal: to win and qualify for the final,” Lucescu said.

“This competition means a lot to us. Winning two matches gives us the chance to lift the Cup, which would be a culmination of the players’ efforts and a source of great joy for the club’s fans.”

Roberto Firmino expects another demanding contest against Al Gharafa, with the Brazilian insisting Al Sadd must carry their winning momentum into the Cup.

“The match against Al Gharafa in the Qatar Cup 2026 semifinal will be difficult and intense. We have the desire to continue our winning streak and take another step closer to winning the title,” Firmino said.

“Any match against Al Gharafa is like a final and this particular match requires us to fight and struggle from beginning to end in order to achieve victory.”

Al Gharafa coach Pedro Martins



Al Gharafa players during a training session.

said his players were determined to seize their opportunity in a tournament featuring only four teams.

“We are eager to give off our best

against Al Sadd. Our objective is to secure a victory and reach the final,” Martins said.

“We are well aware of Al Sadd’s strengths, but Al Gharafa are always among the favorites to compete. We have the experience and the ambition, and everyone will do their utmost to achieve victory.”

Amro Suraj also underlined the different nature of knockout football, saying mistakes could prove costly in the battle for a place in the final.

“Cup matches are always different and do not allow for many mistakes. Perhaps Al Sadd are considered as favourites after winning their first two league matches, but we will fight hard for our chances,” he said.

Al Rayyan, Al Shamal set for thriller

The second semi-final will see Al Rayyan chase their fifth Qatar Cup crown against an Al Shamal side seeking their maiden title in the tournament.

Al Rayyan have enjoyed a perfect start to the season with back-to-back wins over Lusail and Al Wakrah, while Al Shamal drew with Al Arabi before beating Al Gharafa in their second QSL match.

Al Rayyan coach Vicente Moreno said reaching the final would be an important objective early in the season.

“This match is very important for us because it represents an opportunity to reach our first final this season and therefore we must give our all to win,” Moreno said.

“We know we are facing a strong opponent, but I have great confidence in the players.”

Al Shamal coach David Prats said his team were highly motivated to continue their progress.

“This is a very important match for us and we hope to be ready and perform at our usual level. We want to continue developing as a club and achieve victory,” Prats said.

“The team has undergone several player changes recently. Work is ongoing to maintain the same mentality and ambition the team displayed last season.”

If either semi-final ends in a draw after regulation time, the winners will be decided directly by penalty kicks.



“

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Pedro Martins
Al Gharafa coach



“

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Vicente Moreno
Al Rayyan coach



“

We hope to be ready and perform at our usual level. We want to continue developing as a club and achieve victory.

David Prats
Al Shamal coach

“

This competition means a lot to us. Winning two matches gives us the chance to lift the Cup.

Razvan Lucescu
Al Sadd coach

Scheffler storms to PGA Tour Championship win

MIAMI: World number one Scottie Scheffler produced a final day charge on Sunday to overhaul Viktor Hovland and win the PGA Tour Championship for the second time.

Four-time major champion Scheffler, who also won the season-ending Tour Championship in 2024, carded a four-under-par 66 to finish on 16 under and seal a three-shot victory at East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta.

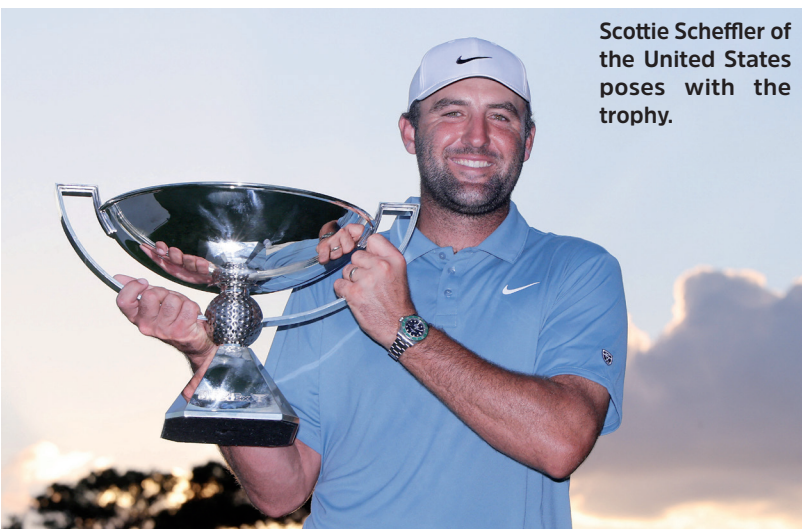
Scheffler started the day three off the pace following third round but chipped away at Hovland's advantage before pulling clear down the stretch to clinch the 22nd title of his PGA Tour career, and the \$10m winner's check.

"Today was a day in which I was fortunate to get off to a good start and then was able to make some birdies to kind of seal the deal," Scheffler said afterwards.

"Just continuing to battle, day in and day out is something that I'm very proud of... coming from behind and being able to win tournaments is a really cool feeling."

Hovland, who had been chasing his second Tour Championship win after lifting the 2023 title, saw his hopes evaporate with a closing two-over-par 72. He finished on 13 under.

Earlier, Scheffler had launched his bid for the title with a brilliant birdie



Scottie Scheffler started the day three off the pace following third round but chipped away at Hovland's advantage before pulling clear down the stretch to clinch the 22nd title of his PGA Tour career, and the \$10m winner's check.

on the par-three second, his tee-shot finishing just an inch from the cup for a simple tap-in.

Another birdie followed on the fourth when he rolled in a 23-foot putt for birdie. There was a hiccup on the seventh with a bogey, but he pulled that shot back with his third birdie of the day on the eighth.

Birdies on the 10th and 13th left him at four under before a bogey checked his momentum on 15.

But he dealt the decisive blow on the 16th, when a sensational second shot from the bunker left him with an 11-foot birdie putt which he duly rolled in for a two-shot advantage.

Writing on the wall

Hovland had a golden chance to

pull a shot back on the 15th, but his putt curled agonizingly wide of the hole to leave him trailing by two shots with two to play. The writing was on the wall on for Hovland after his third bogey of the day left him trailing by three shots to leave Scheffler untouchable.

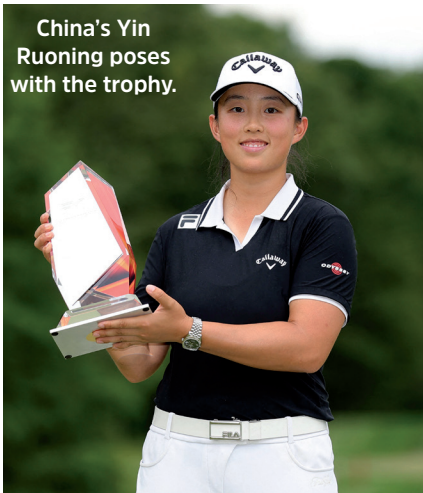
It was a frustrating final day for Hovland, who had rattled in putt after putt in Saturday's third round on his way to a five-under-par 65. His sure touch on the greens deserted him on Sunday, though, with only one birdie made.

Ryan Gerard finished in third place on 12 under after a closing 72.

Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy, who had thrust himself into contention with a dazzling seven-under-par 63 on Saturday, found the going harder with a closing one-under-par 69.

McIlroy finished in a cluster of seven players on 11 under, five off Scheffler's winning total.

England's Tommy Fleetwood, the 2025 champion, was one shot back from McIlroy, tied for 11th on 10 under alongside Australia's Adam Scott and Cameron Young of the United States. — **AFP**



Yin holds off Kim to win sixth LPGA title, end title drought

NEW YORK: China's Yin Ruoning held her nerve to end her two-year title drought and claim the sixth LPGA Tour victory of her career with a two-shot triumph at the FM Championship on Sunday.

Yin, 23, endured a rollercoaster round before carding a closing two-under-par 70 to finish the tournament on 14 under.

The 2023 Women's PGA Championship winner rattled in five birdies and three bogeys on her way to victory at TPC Boston, in Norton, Massachusetts.

Yin finished with a crucial birdie four on the par-five 18th to complete her first win on the tour since 2024.

"I was really emotional when I was on the 18th green and just felt like all the hard work paid off," Yin said afterwards. "Just really happy how I grinded out there today."

Yin admitted she had been nervously looking over her shoulder at playing partners Kim Hyo-joo and Kim Sei-young down the stretch.

Kim Hyo-joo shot a one-under-par 71 to finish on 12 under, while Kim Sei-young carded a one-over-par 73 to tie with Rose Zhang for fourth place, one back from Allisen Corpuz of the United States on 11 under.

"I felt like that was the longest 18th hole I've ever played -- because they're just so good and they don't really make mistakes," Yin said.

Yin said she had doubted whether she would ever win another title after a frustrating sequence of near-misses this season and last year.

"I've had quite a few times where I was really close but just keep missing by one or two," she said. "I was always harsh on myself...I doubted if I can win on this tour again."

"I was not a happy person last year; but this year I think I learn a lot. The biggest thing I learn is that life comes from you, not at you. And that good things take time and just be patient about it." — **AFP**

Pakistan ditch coaches, send seven players home after England losses

LONDON: Pakistan have replaced head coach Sarfaraz Ahmed and pace-bowling chief Umar Gul, and sent seven players home, in a dramatic response to successive Test thrashings by England.

The tourists suffered an innings and 103-run loss in the series opener at Headingley before going down by 194 runs at Lord's on Sunday as England took an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the three-match campaign.

The team has been labelled one of Pakistan's worst and the Pakistan Cricket Board has taken drastic action ahead of the third Test at Edgbaston starting on September 9.

"The Pakistan Cricket Board has today announced that seven players have been released from the Test squad following completion of the Lord's Test," said a PCB statement yesterday.

"The players include Mohammad Rizwan, Imam-ul-Haq, Salman Ali Agha, Ali Usman, Aamir Jamal, Muhammad Awaiz Zafar and Khurram Shahzad.

"Additionally, Sarfaraz Ahmed and Umar Gul have also been released and will be replaced by Mike Hesson and Ashley Noffke in the backroom staff."

New Zealander Hesson was already Pakistan's white-ball chief, and, with Australian Noffke, will take charge for the rest of the tour.

Opener Imam-ul-Haq suffered a low-grade calf tear at Lord's, but received criticism for not batting in either innings.

Experienced wicket-keeper Rizwan, spinner Usman and seamer Shahzad played in both games. Salman captained the team in the defeat at Headingley before regular skipper Babar Azam returned from injury at Lord's.

Pakistan arrived in London already bottom of the World Test Championship table, with defeat at Lord's their 15th loss in 20 Tests and tenth away from home in 11 games. — **AFP**

Liverpool sign Barcola from PSG

LONDON: France winger Bradley Barcola has become Liverpool's second-most expensive signing after joining the Premier League giants from Paris Saint-Germain yesterday.

A source close to PSG said that Barcola's transfer is worth "€125m (£107m, \$145m) plus €20m in easily achievable bonuses".

The total fee of £124m is second only to the £125m Liverpool paid Newcastle for Sweden star Alexander Isak.

Barcola's transfer fee is also the highest paid for a Ligue 1 player.

The 23-year-old is the third forward costing over £100m (\$135m) that Liverpool have signed in two years.

Isak arrived at Anfield last year and Liverpool also paid around £100m to sign Florian Wirtz from Bayer Leverkusen.

Neither player has yet lived up to the hefty price tag, although Isak missed much of last season due to injury.

Barcola, who signed what Liverpool said was a "long-term deal", had yet to play for PSG this season amid the transfer speculation.

"It's a great pride to be able to play for Liverpool. I'm very happy," he told his new club's website yesterday.

"It took a long time but I'm really



Bradley Barcola poses for a picture during the signing. PIC: Liverpool

happy today to be able to play for Liverpool and all I want is to be on the pitch and be able to play.

"I hope to achieve very big things. First of all, winning the Premier League - it's one of my biggest dreams in my life. It is to do that and to stay in this team in the long term -- that's why I signed a long contract -- and I hope I can do it."

Barcola, a member of the PSG squad which won back-to-back Champions League titles in the past two seasons, has long been a Liverpool target.

He scored 39 goals in 152 appearances and won three successive Ligue 1 titles during his time in the French capital after joining PSG from domestic rivals Lyon in a £38.6m deal in 2023.

Barcola also scored three goals for France during their run to the semi-finals at the recent World Cup.

Liverpool have been looking to strengthen in wide areas since the departure of Mohamed Salah at the end of last season.

They have already signed Spain World Cup-winning winger Victor Munoz from Osasuna in the current transfer window and he has made a bright start, scoring the equaliser in Liverpool's 2-2 draw against Nottingham Forest on Saturday, which followed the same scoreline in their Premier League opener at Newcastle on August 23.

Barcola was not always first-choice at PSG, with Ousmane Dembele, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Desire Doue providing stiff competition for places, but he still played a key part in their Champions League triumphs. — **AFP**

Man City sign Palmeiras winger Allan on five-year deal

LONDON: Brazilian winger Allan has joined Manchester City on a five-year deal from Palmeiras for a reported fee of £34m (\$46m).

Allan, 22, came up through the ranks at Palmeiras, starting off in the Brazilian club's academy before making 96 first-team appearances. This season, he has scored four goals and contributed three assists in 21 matches in Brazil's top flight, which Palmeiras are currently leading.

"This is a surreal moment for me. Manchester City, with everything they have won over the past 15 years, are one of the most attractive clubs in the world for players," Allan told the Premier League club's website yesterday.

"To be able to sit here today and say I have joined them is the proudest moment of my life.

"I love Palmeiras and always will -- but the decision to come to City was an easy one. I want to be

the best footballer I can be and the conversations I've had with the people at City so far has convinced me there isn't a better place for me to fulfil my ambitions.

"My intention is to help City continue winning trophies. If I can do that, it would be a dream come true."

City are currently top of the Premier League table after starting the season with wins over Bournemouth and Crystal Palace. — **AFP**



Palmeiras' Allan (left) in action in this file photo.

Joe Root says new balls behind batsmen's struggles in England

LONDON: Joe Root believes a new batch of Dukes balls are the reason why there have been few big scores in Test cricket in England this season.

Neither England nor Pakistan have managed an individual century in the first two Tests of an ongoing three-match series, where the hosts have established an unbeatable 2-0 lead.

Pakistan have yet to pass 200 as a team in four innings so far.

There have only been two totals above 400 all summer -- the first by New Zealand in their series-deciding win over England at Trent Bridge and the second by England in their innings and 103-run thrashing of Pakistan in the first Test at Headingley.

Bowlers have largely dominated with recalled England seamer Ollie Robinson taking 23 wickets in three Tests at a staggeringly low average of 8.34 following eight more scalps in a series-clinching 194-run win over Pakistan at Lord's.

"I think the balls have been very different this year," said England captain Root after watching his pacemen overpower Pakistan on Sunday to wrap up a convincing victory at Lord's.

"I think there's a different lacquer to them. I've not got evidence on that,



England's Joe Root cleans the ball as England's Dan Lawrence prepares to bowl on day four of the second Test against Pakistan.

I probably need to ask Dukes, but I think there's a lacquer on the seam. They don't want them to go out of shape and get them changed."

Root, England's all-time leading run-scorer in Test cricket, managed just 28 runs in two innings at Lord's and has now been lbw nine times in his past seven matches.

He believes the balls are also helping make pitches more bowler-friendly.

"They seem a lot firmer and probably if they're dinting the wickets then it's going to seam off the dints, it's going to make it move more."

He added: "Sometimes you do come across summers where you know it is the perfect storm. You get overcast conditions, you get a bit of rain to contend with, the balls are slightly different and it's hard. But that's part of the challenge of Test cricket." — **AFP**

Bangladesh and India 'sincere' over delayed series, says BCB chief

DHAKA: Bangladesh and India are "sincere" in their search for a new date for a white-ball series that was first supposed to take place last year, Bangladesh cricket chief Tamim Iqbal said.

The three one-day internationals and three T20 matches in Bangladesh were originally planned for August 2025 but then political relations soured between the two countries.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) then said the series would be played this September, but there is no sign of it happening imminently.

"Both boards are very sincere that this thing happens," Tamim, president of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), said on the podcast Not out Noman on Sunday.

"Both BCCI and BCB, we are looking at windows as well, which time what can be done." He added: "Intentions are very positive."

There was no immediate response from the BCCI.

Dhaka and New Delhi have been at odds since a 2024 mass uprising toppled then Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

She fled to India, her long-time ally, where she remains in hiding.

In February, Bangladesh refused to send a team to India for the T20 World Cup, citing security concerns.

India last toured Bangladesh for a cricket series in 2022.

Bangladesh visited India in September-October 2024. — **AFP**



Qatar crowned Asian U19 handball champions

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatar clinched the U19 Asian Men's Youth Handball Championship after defeating Bahrain 28-24 in the final in Amman, Jordan, yesterday.

Qatar dominated from the outset, taking a 16-10 lead into

half-time before maintaining control in the second half to secure the continental title with a four-goal victory.

The triumph capped an unbeaten campaign for Qatar, who finished top of Group B with eight points after victories over Saudi Arabia (30-22), Kuwait

(30-19), Iran (24-22) and Syria (42-29). Qatar then continued their impressive run in the knockout stage, thrashing hosts Jordan 33-13 in the quarter-finals before defeating South Korea 32-28 in the semi-finals to book their place in the title decider.

Bahrain reached the final

after beating Iran 26-23 in the other semi-final.

Qatar's continental triumph also secured their qualification for the 2027 IHF Men's Junior World Championship in North Macedonia, where they will make their seventh appearance at the global tournament.

Benzema brings brief Al Hilal stint to an end

RIYADH: Former France and Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema has left Al Hilal just under eight months after joining the Saudi club.

"Al Hilal Club Company and French player Karim Benzema have mutually agreed to terminate their contractual relationship, bringing his time with Al Hilal's first football team to an end," wrote the club on their website yesterday.

"Al Hilal Club Company expressed its appreciation for Benzema's contributions during his time with the team, as well as the professionalism, commitment, and leadership he demonstrated both on and off the pitch," said the statement.

Benzema thanked the club on social media.

"A chapter comes to an end," he posted.

The former Ballon d'Or winner moved to Saudi Arabia from Real Madrid in 2023, joining Al Ittihad and leading the Jeddah club to a Saudi Pro League title in 2025.

After a dispute over a

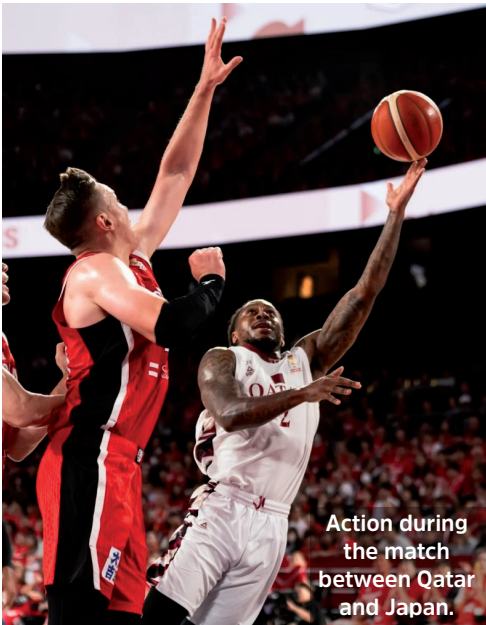
The former Ballon d'Or winner moved to Saudi Arabia from Real Madrid in 2023, joining Al Ittihad and leading the Jeddah club to a Saudi Pro League title in 2025.

contract extension in late January he moved to Al Hilal in Riyadh for the rest of the season.

He had one year left on his contract, but has a deal until 2030 as an "ambassador" for Saudi tourism and the 2034 World Cup.

The announcement that the 38-year-old was leaving came the day after Al Hilal signed 30-year-old England centre forward Ollie Watkins from Aston Villa for a reported £50m (\$68m).

Spanish sports daily *AS* reported that Benzema had no intention of retiring and had offers from the American MLS and other Saudi clubs. — *AFP*



Qatar beaten by Japan at FIBA Asia Qualifiers

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatar suffered a heavy 123-70 defeat to Japan in the fourth window of the second stage of the FIBA Asia Qualifiers for the 2027 Basketball World Cup at Toyota Arena Tokyo yesterday.

Japan dominated the opening quarter 29-11 before Qatar produced a better second period, narrowly losing it 24-23. The hosts then pulled away with a 40-11 third-quarter surge and finished with a 30-25 advantage in the final quarter.

Rui Hachimura led Japan with 30 points, while Abdullah Musa was Qatar's top scorer with 14. Mohamed Hashem grabbed eight rebounds for Qatar, while Abdulrahman Yahya had four assists.

The result left Japan on 14 points in Group F and Qatar on 12. Qatar, who are automatically qualified for the 2027 World Cup as hosts, are using the qualifiers as part of their preparations for the global event.

The delegation had travelled to Tokyo after an 83-57 defeat to China before facing Japan. Qatar will resume their campaign in the fifth window against South Korea in Doha on November 26, followed by Japan on November 29.

Alcaraz wins US Open first-round match after injury layoff as Sabalenka advances

NEW YORK: Carlos Alcaraz opened his US Open title defense in solid fashion yesterday, defeating Russia's Roman Safiullin in straight sets in his highly anticipated first singles match in more than four months.

Executing a game plan of controlled aggression, the Spaniard defeated Safiullin, 6-4, 6-4, 6-4. Alcaraz revealed no lingering effects from a wrist injury that kept him out of the last two Grand Slams.

Alcaraz acknowledged feeling "some doubts" heading in, but told a courtside interviewer he was thrilled to be back in New York, where he won his first of seven Grand Slams.

"I missed the crowd, I missed the energy, I missed competition, I missed everything," he said. "I'm really happy to compete again."

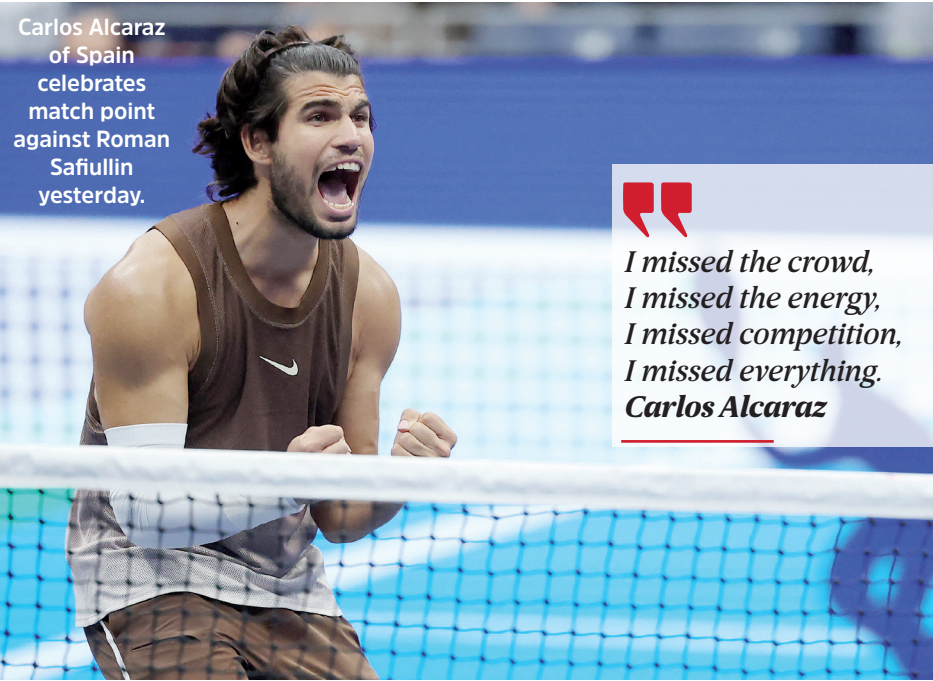
A powerful baseliner with a prior win over Alcaraz, Safiullin kept close in all three sets, but never looked likely to threaten the Spaniard.

The match was even at 3-3 when Alcaraz snagged a break with a big forehand, the signature weapon he used to take control of many of the longer rallies.

Safiullin broke early in the second set, but Alcaraz, moving well and breaking up rallies with surprise drop shots and occasional serve and volley plays, quickly broke back and broke again.

He broke early in the third set and never looked back.

A two-time winner in



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain celebrates match point against Roman Safiullin yesterday.

I missed the crowd, I missed the energy, I missed competition, I missed everything. Carlos Alcaraz



Aryna Sabalenka plays a shot to Camila Osorio during their match yesterday.

Sabalenka kickstarts US Open three-peat bid

Meanwhile, Aryna Sabalenka's bid for a rare US Open three-peat got off to a winning start as she dispatched Camila Osorio, while French rising star Arthur Fils suffered a surprise loss.

World number one Sabalenka shook off her recent lackluster form to beat Colombia's Osorio 6-2, 6-4, in the Belarusian's opening match at New York.

"I feel like this is one of my favourite stadiums," Sabalenka said at the giant Arthur Ashe venue in Flushing Meadows, where she has won two of her four Grand Slams.

Sabalenka has not won a tournament since her victory

in the Miami Open in March, and was bundled out of Wimbledon in the fourth round by Naomi Osaka.

But she looked comfortable for most of her opener, landing several of her thunderous groundstrokes to see off her counter-punching opponent.

On the men's side, recent Cincinnati Masters champion Fils suffered disappointment, losing his opening match to Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Fils, 22, entered the contest with the highest expectations of his career, having this month become the first French player to win a Masters 1000 in over a decade.

The Frenchman had won all five of his previous encounters with Tsitsipas.

But Fils, ranked 11th, fell to Tsitsipas 4-6, 7-6 (7/3), 6-1, 6-4.

"I am speechless, I don't know what to say," said Tsitsipas, a former top five player who has slumped to 53 in the world.

The US Open got off to a dramatic opening day Sunday, as ailing Novak Djokovic suffered his earliest Grand Slam exit in 20 years, falling in five brutal sets to Mariano Navone.

The 39-year-old was reduced to tears by a crowd trying to will him to victory, but his physical distress left him powerless, and has thrown his Grand Slam future into doubt. — *AFP*

Saka strikes as flawless Arsenal punish troubled Villa

BIRMINGHAM: Arsenal extended their flawless start to the Premier League season as Bukayo Saka sealed the champions' 1-0 win against troubled Aston Villa yesterday.

Saka's second-half strike at Villa Park wrapped up Arsenal's second successive victory.

In a statement of intent to their title rivals, Mikel Arteta's side have taken maximum points from their opening two games without conceding a goal.

It was the ideal way for Arteta to mark his 250th league game in charge of the Gunners.

For Villa, the feeling of frustration is growing after a second consecutive defeat.

Unai Emery's team slumped to a 4-0 loss at Brighton in their opener in the midst of the club's astonishing summer sale.

Motivated in part by the need to keep in line with Premier League financial rules, Villa have ripped apart their Europa League-winning squad, selling Konsa, Morgan Rogers, Ollie Watkins, Emiliano Martinez, Lucas Digne and Youri Tielemans.

Villa look a shadow of the



Arsenal's Bukayo Saka (centre) celebrates after scoring against Aston Villa yesterday.

vibrant team that ended their 30-year trophy drought last term, leaving Emery with a daunting job on his hands.

In keeping with the sense of a club under renovation, one end of Villa Park was closed to fans on Monday due to building work to increase the capacity.

Nicolas Jackson made his Villa debut after arriving from Chelsea as Watkins's replacement in attack, while Japan goalkeeper Zion Suzuki,

a recent signing from Parma, was given his maiden appearance.

Villa winger Emiliano Buendia lashed a fierce strike against the crossbar in a rocky start for Arsenal.

The Gunners eventually recovered their composure and Villa defender Pau Torres was forced to make a superb block to stop Christos Tzolis tapping in Saka's cross.

Arsenal appealed in vain for a penalty when Riccardo Calafiori

tumbled under contact from Torres late in the first half.

After his side showed a distinct lack of cutting edge in the opening period, Arteta replaced Tzolis with Eberechi Eze at the interval.

The change made an impact and Victor Lindelof needed to make a last-ditch intervention to stop Kai Havertz converting Rice's pass.

Martin Odegaard curled a free-kick inches wide after VAR overturned the initial decision to award a penalty for Ian Maatsen's barge on Saka because the foul took place just outside the area.

It was only a temporary reprieve for Villa as Saka broke the deadlock at the climax of a perfectly constructed raid in the 59th minute.

Eze's pass picked out Calafiori's run into the Villa area and the defender's low cross was poked in by Saka from close range.

Havertz's blast was saved by Suzuki before Konsa made his debut to a mix of boos and applause from conflicted Villa fans.

With Konsa helping to shutdown Villa's forwards, Arsenal were able to wrap up a gritty success. — *AFP*

Munoz reunites with Glasner after joining Forest from Palace

LONDON: Colombia right-back Daniel Munoz will be reunited with manager Oliver Glasner at Nottingham Forest after completing a move from Premier League rivals Crystal Palace yesterday.

No fee has been disclosed but the *BBC* said Forest had spent around £22m (\$30m) to sign Munoz on a three-year deal.

He joined Palace in January 2024 and, under Glasner, helped them win the FA Cup -- the first major trophy in the club's history -- as well as the Community Shield in 2025 and the Europa Conference League in May.

Munoz made 46 appearances in all competitions last season, scoring four goals in 29 Premier League games.

"The first thing is that this is a winning club," said Munoz.

"I think that when this is the expectation, the mentality, both for the management and the technical team, and for the players, this makes it special.

"I think that Oliver Glasner is special, I have a very good relationship with him and we did big things together, it was an incredibly special period. What he did with our previous club, I have a lot of respect and a lot of admiration for him."

Forest are still searching for their first Premier League win of the season following a 1-0 loss to Leeds and a 2-2 draw with Liverpool. — *AFP*