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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Duhail, Rayyan to battle for early supremacy today

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail will take on Al Rayyan in the much-anticipated Ooredoo Stars League clash at the Khalifa International Stadium today. The kick-off is at 8.30pm.

Duhail are coming to the match with a three-point lead at the top of standings, following their impressive 6-1 win against Qatar SC in the league opener. Rayyan have three points and are in second place in the standings – behind on goal difference with Duhail – after winning the first-round game 3-1 against Umm Salal. Duhail's coach Christophe Galtier said the match against Rayyan carries a huge significance for their title ambitions.

"The match is big for our team. Although it is the second match in the league, it carries great importance. The games between our team and Rayyan are always full of excitement and challenge. Rayyan had a good performance last season and as we seek to achieve a distinguished season, it is necessary for us to show a strong performance in these matches," the Frenchman said.

"Al Rayyan maintained the team structure from last season, as there are not many changes in its formation, especially in the attacking line, which was very effective. The only change was in the coach who knows the league well. For our



Al Duhail's Edmilson Junior trains yesterday, on the eve of Ooredoo Stars League match against Al Rayyan.

part, we focused during the preparatory period on improving our attack significantly, and we worked on avoiding the mistakes that occurred previously, such as losing the ball unjustifiably, which could

pose a danger to us," Galtier added. Rayyan's new coach Poya Asbaghi, who has replaced replacing Leonardo Jardim, felt the match will be a closely-fought one. "A big match between two strong teams. Duhail



Al Rayyan players during a training session yesterday.

had made many changes from last season. They have a stronger team this season and I expect them to be different and fight for titles, especially since they will not play in the AFC Champions League this year,

unlike teams such as Al Rayyan, Al Gharafa and Al Sadd who will play in the AFC Champions League Elite, so they will play to win, but we have the motivation to achieve victory," the Swede said. "We will

give everything we have to the match in order to achieve victory. We need to avoid mistakes against Duhail and exploit their mistakes. Our goal is always first place and we are not looking for second or third place, so the ambition this season is to compete for championships. We will work to develop the team's performance," Asbaghi added.

In another match today, Umm Salal face Al Shamal at the Al Janoub Stadium. Shamal will be looking for second successive win after their shock win over holders Al Sadd last week. Umm Salal, on the other hand, will work to compensate for their 1-3 loss in the first round against Al Rayyan.

Shamal's Portuguese coach Nuno Almeida is eager to maintain his successful streak, relying on key players such as prolific Algerian striker Baghdad Bounedjah, who netted both their goals against Al Sadd, along with Matias Nani, Younes Belhanda, Jeison Murillo and Omid Ebrahimi.

Umm Salal are seeking to make a turnaround and their mission will not be easy, but coach Patrice Carteron will try to adjust his plan in order to win and return to winning ways and avoid a second loss, especially since he has a group of players capable of correcting the team's situation, including Kenji Gorre, Victor Lekhal, Antonio Mansi, Oussama Tannane, Marouane Louadni, Naim Laidouni and Edidiong Essien.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Man United not ready for start, says coach Ten Hag

'The team is not ready but the league starts. We can't hide from it. We have to deal with it'

AFP
Manchester

Manchester United boss Erik ten Hag said his side are "not ready" for the start of the Premier League season today, but is hoping new signings Matthijs de Ligt and Noussair Mazraoui can bed in quickly.

United open the English top-flight campaign at home to Fulham with Ten Hag in need of a fast start after finishing eighth last season. A shock victory over Manchester City in the FA Cup final in May is widely believed to be what kept Ten Hag in his job.

The Dutchman has been heavily backed in the transfer market with De Ligt and Mazraoui joining from Bayern Munich this week after the arrivals of Leny Yoro and Joshua Zirkzee. But injuries have again blighted United's pre-season preparations with Yoro, striker Rasmus Hojlund and left-back Luke Shaw all sidelined.

"The team is not ready but the league starts," Ten Hag told his pre-match press conference.

"We can't hide from it. We have to deal with it."

De Ligt and Mazraoui both previously played under Ten Hag at Ajax and he confirmed they will be in the squad to face Fulham. "It's not about the players who are not available," added Ten Hag. "It's also what I said always last season: it's about the players who are available and we have a good group, we can make a strong selection."

Despite losing on penalties to Manchester City there were

FIXTURES

Today (all times GMT): Manchester United v Fulham (1900)
Tomorrow: Ipswich v Liverpool (1130), Arsenal v Wolves, Everton v Brighton, Newcastle v Southampton, Nottingham Forest v Bournemouth (all 1400), West Ham v Aston Villa (1630)
Sunday: Brentford v Crystal Palace (1300), Chelsea v Manchester City (1530)
Monday: Leicester v Tottenham (1900)

positive signs for Ten Hag in last weekend's Community Shield. Alejandro Garnacho came off the bench to score United's goal in a 1-1 draw, but is just one of many players short of match fitness after returning to pre-season late due to international commitments over the summer.

"We will not (be) 100 percent," said Ten Hag. "But we have to go from game to game to improve, to get higher performance levels in the team and individual players, and we will see how quick we can go into this process."

Fulham won at Old Trafford for the first time in 20 years in February. Any repeat on Friday will have United fans fearing another season to forget.

Meanwhile, Arne Slot faces a tricky start to his Premier League career when Liverpool travel to an Ipswich side back in the top-flight after a 22-year absence and buoyant after successive promotions. Liverpool are yet to make a single signing in the transfer window but have been rampant in pre-season with eye-catching wins over Arsenal, United and Sevilla.

Victory at Portman Road would bring some relief to Liverpool fans still coming to terms with the end of Klopp's iconic reign. The Reds could then build some momentum with a comfortable run of fixtures to come before the October international break.

But Ipswich defender Axel Tuanzebe is confident of maintaining Ipswich's proud home record over the past two seasons. "We're going to empty the tank and give everything we've got," Tuanzebe said. "They're just humans" he added. "It is just 11 v 11 on the pitch. Not many teams win at Portman Road and we intend to keep it that way."

New Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca has a baptism of fire against his former club. Maresca was part of Pep Guardiola's coaching staff at City before leading Leicester to promotion from the Championship last season.

The Italian inherits a chaotic situation at Stamford Bridge with a first team squad now boasting over 50 players and question marks over the future of most of them.

Chelsea's issues were exposed in a torrid pre-season, that included a 4-2 defeat to City in the USA. By contrast, there have been few changes for Guardiola's champions. Brazilian winger Savinho is the only new arrival, while Argentine forward Julian Alvarez departed this week for Atletico Madrid.

City's England trio of Kyle Walker, John Stones and Phil Foden, plus Spanish midfielder Rodri, only returned to training this week after competing in the Euro 2024 final and are unlikely to start against Chelsea.



Manchester United players at a training session yesterday.

RUGBY

NZ and Australia look to restore pride after losses

ALL BLACKS TAKE ON ARGENTINA TOMORROW AT EDEN PARK

Reuters
Sydney

New Zealand and Australia will be out to restore some pride with Rugby Championship victories this weekend after chastening reverses at the hands of Argentina and South Africa last Saturday.

The Pumas deservedly stunned the All Blacks 38-30 in the tournament opener in Wellington and this week Felipe Contepomi's team will take aim at New Zealand's 30-year, 51-test unbeaten run at Auckland's Eden Park.

The Springboks have selected a weaker side for their second clash against the Wallabies in Perth but Australians will take little solace from that given the gulf in quality between the two teams in last Saturday's 33-7 demolition in Brisbane.

The All Blacks have won 20 of the 28 editions of the southern hemisphere test championship and the loss to Argentina - only a third in 38 meetings at test level - has likewise caused much soul-searching in New Zealand.

Rookie coach Scott Robertson yesterday injected 95 caps of experience onto his bench in the shape of former captain Sam Cane and made three changes to his backline - most notably starting Will Jordan for the first time this season.

The All Blacks have generally delivered a fierce response after losing test matches, particularly up front, and Robertson is hoping he has inherited at least that strand of the team's DNA.



All Blacks players during one of their recent games in the build-up to the new season in San Diego last month. The All Blacks take on Argentina in their Rugby Championship match tomorrow. (@AllBlacks)

"Every All Black forward pack after a result like that gets a chance for a bit of redemption, another opportunity," the former test loose forward said yesterday. "It's great to move forward now, we looked at it, now here we go, Eden Park, let's get to it."

Contepomi is also in his first season in charge and had already overseen a home win over France before the Wellington triumph.

The former test flyhalf has brought back skipper Julian Montoya after injury but otherwise largely kept faith in the team that secured last week's famous victory. Flanker Pablo Matera loses the

captaincy but will once more be the heart and soul of the Pumas, while unrelated backs Santiago and Mateo Carreras will again be ready to attack from anywhere.

Australia coach Joe Schmidt has perhaps yet to find the heart and soul of his Wallabies team and the green shoots of recovery identified in three wins in July were scorched by the world champions in Brisbane last Saturday.

Winger Marika Korobete will add a bit of genuine world class to his side for tomorrow's test at Perth Stadium but there will need to be a vast improvement everywhere if Australia are to bridge

the gap to the Springboks. "The reality is that we need to be more combative and accurate this Saturday," Schmidt said.

Springboks coach Rassie Erasmus has defended his decision to make 10 changes to his starting side, pointing out that there are still 14 World Cup winners in the team and only two new caps. "This is not something up in the air, we've picked a team that we think can win," he said after naming his side on Tuesday.

"Hopefully the young guys can learn from the older guys and they can bring exuberance and excitement."

'Internal pressure' the spur as England Women bid to end Rugby World Cup drought



Twickenham, United Kingdom: England Women's head coach John Mitchell has insisted the expectations surrounding his squad are as nothing compared to the "internal pressure" driving the team ahead of next year's Rugby World Cup.

The Red Roses have been standard setters in preparation, payment and squad development as the women's game has become increasingly professional, with England winning a record 30 consecutive Tests from 2019-2022. But that remarkable run ended with the bitter disappointment of an agonising 34-31 loss in Auckland to arch-rivals New Zealand in the Covid-delayed World Cup final of two years ago.

Next year's World Cup, however, takes place in England, with officials at the Rugby Football Union, the national governing body, determined to break new ground by having their 82,000 capacity Twickenham headquarters in southwest London sell-out for the final.

But just reaching the showpiece match is unlikely to be enough to satisfy England or their supporters given the Red Roses have lost the last two World Cup finals to New Zealand's Black Ferns.

England begin their 2024/25 season with Tests at home to France and New Zealand next month before travelling to Canada for the top tier of the WXV women's tournament, where they take on the hosts and the United States before facing the Black Ferns again.

Their upcoming schedule means that four of England's next five matches will see them playing three of their major World Cup rivals, with France first up in

Gloucester on September 7. Then, before the World Cup, there is the Six Nations, with England - the dominant force in European women's rugby union - bidding for a seventh straight title after Mitchell's first campaign in charge earlier this year yielded a third consecutive Grand Slam.

'Unfairness'

The Red Roses' bid for World Cup glory fell at the final hurdle three years ago when, at 14-0 up in the showpiece match and seemingly in complete command, wing Lydia Thompson was sent off for a high tackle on Black Ferns star Portia Woodman.

Mitchell said England were trying to create as much "unfairness" in training as possible to leave them better prepared should they find themselves in a similar situation next year. "You look at the last World Cup where there was a red card, and you saw red cards in our last (Six Nations) competition," Mitchell told reporters at Twickenham yesterday.

"So there's all those things that you've got to factor in and you've got to rehearse for, and between players and staff we co-create a lot of these situations so that when it comes to, I guess, it happening, we've probably got a better chance of dealing with it," Mitchell, also a former defence coach with the England and Japan men's teams, added: "We don't really need to worry about the pressure on the outside because we've got enough on the inside to be able to keep us motivated and continue to challenge ourselves."

England have won just two Women's Rugby World Cup titles, the last in 2014.

CRICKET

Pacer Joseph grabs five wickets as South Africa bowled out for 160



Shamar Joseph (second left), Gudakesh Motie (left) and Kavem Hodge (third left) of West Indies celebrate the dismissal of David Bedingham of South Africa during the first day of the second Test at Guyana National Stadium in Providence, Guyana, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Providence, Guyana

West Indies fast bowler Shamar Joseph took five wickets before unheralded tailender Dane Piedt rescued South Africa's pride on the opening day of the second Test yesterday.

Joseph claimed 5-33 while Piedt, called into the team for his ability as an off-spinner rather than with a bat, clubbed an undefeated 38 to steer the Proteas from 97-9 to 160 all out.

The 24-year-old Joseph, playing in only his sixth Test, had been recalled to the team in place of Kemar Roach after missing last week's rain-lashed drawn opener in Trinidad.

Playing on his home ground, Joseph clean-bowled South Africa opener Aiden Markram for 14 before sending back skipper Temba Bavuma (0), David Bedingham (28), Kyle Verreynne (21) and Keshav Maharaj (0).

Jayden Seales, 22, also had the Proteas batsmen struggling to counter the pace by dismissing



South Africa's Dane Piedt in action on day one of the second Test against the West Indies in Guyana yesterday. (@ProteasMenCSA)

dangerman Tony de Zorzi for just one to precipitate the collapse after the tourists has opted to bat first. De Zorzi had made 78 and 45 in the first Test.

Seales also accounted for Wiaan Mulder and Kagiso Rabada, both without scoring.

However, West Indies' hopes of restricting South Africa to an

embarrassing double figure total were dashed by Piedt, batting at number 10.

The 34-year-old's 38 was his team's top score and featured four boundaries and a six.

Nandre Burger hit 23 before he was last man out having shared a final-wicket partnership of 63 with Piedt.

FOCUS

New Zealand's star batsman Conway opts for casual contract in new move

Reuters
Auckland

New Zealand opener Devon Conway has opted for a casual rather than central contract for the upcoming 2024-2025 season, allowing the left-hander the flexibility to play in South Africa's SA20 league next January.

Johannesburg-born Conway, who has played 20 tests, 32 ODIs and 50 Twenty20 since qualifying for New Zealand in 2020, will be available for all nine Black Caps tests and next year's Champions Trophy, New Zealand Cricket (NZC) said.

"The decision to move away from a central playing contract isn't one I've taken lightly, but I believe it is the best for me and my family at this present time," the 33-year-old said in a news release.

"Playing for the Black Caps is still the pinnacle for me and I'm hugely passionate about representing New Zealand and winning



games of international cricket."

Conway follows his former captain Kane Williamson, who will also play in SA20, in being granted a casual contract as NZC look to keep their best talent for most of the season in the face of lucrative offers from Twenty20 leagues.

"In the current environment it's important to have flexibility in our system to navigate some of the challenges posed by franchise cricket," said Scott Weenink, NZC chief executive.

Conway and Williamson have

been included in the 15-man squad for a one-off test against Afghanistan and a two-match series in Sri Lanka in September.

Another Black Caps opener, Finn Allen, has joined fellow internationals Lockie Ferguson and Adam Milne in turning down a central contract and will be available for selection on a match-by-match basis.

Two as yet undetermined players will be granted central contracts to replace Conway and Allen, NZC said.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Ireland finalise plan to build national cricket stadium near city of Dublin

Reuters
Dublin

Ireland will build a national cricket stadium at the national sports campus in Blanchardstown near Dublin that will stage matches during the Twenty20 World Cup of 2030 which it will co-host with England and Scotland, the government said yesterday.

The first phase of the facility's construction, to be completed in 2028, will include a main stadium with a seating capacity of 4,000 spectators apart from practice arenas and a performance centre, the government said in a statement.

"It is really pleasing to see how the sport has grown, at all levels, in Ireland over recent years," Cath-

erine Martin, minister for sport said. "A National Stadium and high performance centre will provide Cricket Ireland with the facilities required to further grow participation numbers." Cricket Ireland's CEO Warren Deutrom said the announcement was comparable in significance to the country becoming a full member of the International Cricket Council (ICC) in 2017.

"It is a huge tribute to everybody involved at all levels in Irish cricket who have got us to the stage whereby the government genuinely regards us as a sport of national significance worthy of major investment," he said.

Injured Johnson replaced by Abbott in Australia squad
Australian fast bowler Spencer

Johnson will miss the Twenty20 series against England and Scotland next month after sustaining a side strain and has been replaced by all-rounder Sean Abbott, Cricket Australia (CA) said on Thursday.

Left-arm Johnson, who has played five T20 internationals and a solitary one-day international, picked up the injury while playing for The Oval Invincibles in The Hundred competition.

CA said in a statement that the 28-year-old Johnson would return home for further assessment and rehabilitation before a busy spell starting in November.

Mitchell Marsh will captain both white-ball squads, with pace bowler Pat Cummins sitting out the tour to rest.

TENNIS

Sabalenka, Zverev start Cincinnati with strong wins

'I just hope my form can get better. I'm happy I got the win today'

AFP
Cincinnati

Aryna Sabalenka polished her opening-match record at the Cincinnati Masters on an overcast yesterday by defeating Italy's Elisabetta Cocciaretto 6-3, 6-4 while men's second seed Alexander Zverev also advanced.

Third seed Sabalenka, who missed Wimbledon and the Paris Olympics with a shoulder injury, has now won six of seven opening matches at the American Midwest venue in the ATP and WTA tuneup for the US Open.

Sabalenka advanced as rain threatened play after three days of summer sunshine, finishing on a third match point for her 15th Cincinnati victory.

"I'm happy with my level in the tough moments," the winner said. "Elisabetta is a difficult opponent. She fought to the last point."

Cocciaretto was treated for a left hip problem midway through the second set and was seen by the trainer for a thigh tape adjustment at changeovers.

Zverev dodged a few raindrops late in the second set before wrapping up an ATP-leading 50th match win this season.

The German, who won the title here in 2021 after losing his first six career matches at the venue, advanced to the third round 6-3, 6-2 over Karen Khachanov.

The victory in 76 minutes was a repeat of the Tokyo Olympic final won by Zverev.

Khachanov committed 26 unforced errors in defeat against a long-time rival whom he now trails 5-2.

Zverev, who confessed to feeling poorly last week in Montreal despite making the quarter-finals, said his form is now much improved.

"I felt well on court. If you feel good in training it's easier to bring it to the match," he said.

"I just hope my form can get better. I'm happy I got the win today."

Zverev had no explanation for his 2023 run of success, saying: "It's just been a good year, but I've also had some tough losses."

Spain's Pablo Carreno Busta lined up as the German's next opponent after defeating Australian



Aryna Sabalenka plays a forehand during her match against Elisabetta Cocciaretto of Italy during Day 5 of the Cincinnati Open at the Lindner Family Tennis Center in Mason, Ohio, yesterday. (AFP)



Alexander Zverev of Germany in action during his match against Karen Khachanov yesterday. (AFP)

Max Purcell 6-3, 6-3.

Fifth seed Hubert Hurkacz, who made a surprise comeback from July knee surgery by reaching last

week's Montreal quarter-finals, won his opening match, defeating Yoshihito Nishioka 3-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-1.

MOTORSPORT

'Super good or disaster,' says champ Bagnaia on Marquez as teammate

AFP
Spielberg bei Knittelfeld, Austria

Double world champion Francesco Bagnaia heads into this weekend's Austrian MotoGP targeting a hat-trick to maintain Ducati's domination at the Red Bull Ring circuit.

The second half of the season resumes for this 11th race of 20 with 'Pecco' just three points adrift of Jorge Martin in the championship standings.

And in a tantalising twist to the season Bagnaia's soon-to-be ex-teammate Enea Bastianini is now sitting third, 49 points adrift, after his superb Silverstone double five weeks ago.

Ducati decided not to renew Bastianini's contract for 2025.

And in June they elected to overlook Martin, who rides for their satellite Pramac team, in favour of Marc Marquez to replace the KTM-bound Italian next year. Marquez, the six-time former champion with Honda, has been revitalised since joining Ducati's Gresini outfit this term after a couple of seasons marred by multiple injuries and a misfiring bike.

Bagnaia gave a frank reply when asked about the presence of the Spaniard in the other half of the Ducati garage in 2025.

"I think it could be super good, or a disaster," he chuckled.

"It could be a disaster in case we start to scream or we start to have some 'discussions' but we are both very smart and he

will adapt perfectly." His future teammate then arrived for the interview with motogp.com. After the pair shook hands Marquez said he hoped the pair's relationship "inside the garage will be good".

He added: "I think the (inter-team) competition increases the level of the riders. "I wish to have a good level, like this I can learn from him especially as he's the top Ducati rider."

Marquez has plenty of experience riding alongside world champions like Dani Pedrosa (in the discontinued 125cc category), Jorge Lorenzo and Joao Mir, in his days at Honda. "You can learn from them and they can learn from you," he said.

"But I think next year I need to learn more from Pecco because he's the fastest guy out there."

Martin, who will ride for Aprilia next term, will be desperate to show Ducati what they are missing out on in not signing him with another strong weekend at a circuit where he notched up his first MotoGP win in 2021. "For sure the circuit is really nice for Ducati. It's going to be difficult but I had a good weekend in Silverstone," said the series leader. Bagnaia, the winner in Spielberg in 2022 and 2023, rated the circuit "one of the best tracks for our bike".

On the close title battle with Martin he reflected: "To be leading the championship now is not that important - it's like starting the season over again, we have 10 races to go and only three points in it."



Gresini Racing MotoGP Spanish rider Marc Marquez (left) and Ducati Lenovo Team Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia attend a press conference at the Red Bull Ring in Spielberg, Austria, yesterday, ahead of the Austrian MotoGP Grand Prix weekend. (AFP)

Japan's Ogura to join Trackhouse in MotoGP

Japanese rider Ai Ogura will step up to MotoGP next season after signing a two-season contract with Trackhouse, the Aprilia satellite team announced yesterday on the sidelines of the Austrian Grand Prix. The 23-year-old has made steady strides through the ranks, finishing third in the 2020 Moto3 championship and runner-up in the 2022 Moto2 title hunt. He has won two races in Moto2 this season and is currently in second place, just 18 points behind championship leader Sergio Garcia of Spain. Ogura will partner Raul Fernandez, who signed a contract extension with Trackhouse last month, with Miguel Oliveira leaving the team. (AFP)

CYCLING

Niewiadoma in yellow after Vollering crashes, Vas wins stage

Reuters
Paris

Blanka Vas sprinted to win stage five of the Tour de France Femmes yesterday but her SD Worx-Protime teammate and defending champion Demi Vollering surrendered the overall lead after losing time in a crash as Katarzyna Niewiadoma took advantage.

Vollering was one of several riders involved in a crash six kilometres from the finish and the Dutchwoman looked in pain as she battled to the line to limit the damage done in the general classification.

The peloton was chasing down a group of three riders when the incident happened on a sharp bend and Poland's Niewiadoma, who began the day third overall and 34 seconds off Vollering, made the most of the crash to take the yellow jersey.

In the end it came down to a battle between Vas and Niewiadoma for the stage win and it was the Hungarian who claimed a narrow victory, with Germany's Liane Lippert coming in third.

"It's crazy, I still can't believe it. I don't know what to say; I did not expect this today because I felt so bad during the race," Vas said. "My radio was not working so I did not know what happened at the back but Demi crashed so I think we lost the yellow so it's a shame and now I have mixed feelings."

Niewiadoma, of Canyon-SRAM Racing, had lost out on stage four in a sprint finish, coming in third behind the Dutch duo of Puck Pieterse and Vollering, but she now has the consolation of the overall lead, having finished third the previous two years.

"It feels very special for sure, I just learned about getting the yellow jersey a couple of minutes ago so I feel like it still didn't really reach me, but super happy," Niewiadoma said.

"Today's stage was very chaotic in general, I feel like all the stages so far were very hectic and dangerous, so we knew that we just had to stay in the front."

The Pole has a 19-second lead over American Kristen Faulkner, who finished fourth on the stage,



Team SD Worx-Protime's rider Blanka Vas celebrates as she crosses the finish line to win the 5th stage of the third edition of the Women's Tour de France cycling race in Amneville, France, yesterday. (AFP)

a 152.5-kilometre ride from Bastogne to Amneville. Pieterse, who also crashed, dropped from second to third, 22 seconds behind the leader.

Vollering's misfortune drops her to ninth overall with a gap of one minute 19 seconds to make up over the final three stages if she is to retain her title.

Today's stage six is a hilly, 159.2km ride from Remiremont to Morteau.

Outclassed Tashkent team fades out of women's Tour debut

Yanina Kuskova rode yesterday's fifth stage of the women's Tour de France as the sole survivor of a team that had thought twice about even being there. Tashkent City Women Professional Cycling Team, from the second-tier Continental Tour, has struggled on its debut in the women's Tour de France. Barely halfway through the race's fourth stage on Wednesday, six of its seven riders had already quit.

"Our budget is perhaps 100 times smaller than any other Continental team," said sporting director Gleb Groysman. "We hesitated to come." The team is made up exclusively of women from Uzbekistan and was set up to help the country qualify riders for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

On Monday's first stage from Rotterdam, Tashkent lost four of its seven riders, unable to keep up with the pace of the peloton even on completely flat terrain. Mohinabonu Elmurodova, Madina Kakhkhorova, Ekaterina Knebeleva and Asal Rizaeva all failed to reach the finish line in The Hague. On Wednesday, Nafosat Koziyeva chose not to start the hilly stage from Valkenburg to Liege. Then Margarita Misyurina retired just before the halfway. Kuskova survived Thursday's fifth stage, finishing in a large group that crossed the line 4 minutes and 58 seconds behind the winner. The 22-year-old sits in the middle of the overall classification, in 76th place, 15 minutes 9 seconds behind leader Katarzyna Niewiadoma.

"The girls cried every day," Groysman, a Russian-American, told AFP. Of the seven riders, four are in the under-23 category. The team travelled with just two replacement bikes and a few wheels.

"Most of our riders are students and they only earn 200 to 300 euros (\$220-\$330) a month from cycling," said Groysman. The Tashkent team was set up in 2022, at the instigation of the government.

It achieved its Olympic goal with one rider in the men's time-trial and two in the women's road race. One of those women, 44-year-old Olga Zabelinskaya,

did not enter the Tour, the other was Kuskova. Uzbekistan sprinter Djamolidine Abdoujapparov won the points classification in the men's Tour de France three times between 1991 and 1994. Yet it "is absolutely not a cycling country", said Groysman, who puts the number of female riders at less than 100. The team qualified under this season's International Cycling Union (UCI) rules, which required race organiser Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO) to invite last year's top two Continental Tour teams.

French squad Cofidis were top, while Tashkent managed second place despite entering just two professional races in Europe. It was in Asia, where the competition is weaker, that Tashkent accumulated points. "It was up to them to change the rules," said Groysman. And the sport's overseers already have as this season marked a transition to the new ProTeams format for cycling's second tier, as of next year.

If it is proving hard for Tashkent riders to finish this year's stages, next year it will be difficult for them even just to start the Tour.



Tashkent City Women Professional Cycling Team's rider Yanina Kuskova competes during the 3rd stage of the third edition of the Women's Tour de France race in Rotterdam on Tuesday. (AFP)

LIGUE 1

Fresh start for PSG but same old Mbappe questions for Enrique

'I WISH MBAPPE THE BEST, AND THAT MADRID LOSE AGAINST US'

Reuters
Paris

Paris St Germain begin life without Kylian Mbappe when the Ligue 1 season kicks off this weekend but manager Luis Enrique found himself still facing questions about the departed player at his press conference yesterday.

The long-running saga of Mbappe's transfer to Real Madrid finally ended at the beginning of June when the French forward joined the La Liga side, but if PSG's manager thought the theme of his press conferences would change, he was mistaken. Mbappe's Real career began with a goal in their Super Cup 2-0 success against Atalanta on Tuesday and, inevitably, when he faced the media before today's trip to Le Havre, Enrique was asked by a Spanish journalist if he had watched the game.

"My God these Spanish people are boring... I didn't imagine you were going to ask me a question about Kylian again," the manager said as he shook his head. "But I don't have anything to hide. I have always adored Kylian Mbappe and he is a unique and exceptional person. I wish him the best, and that Madrid lose against us."

PSG will now need to find goals elsewhere after Mbappe went out on a high with his best-ever season at the club, netting 44 times in 48 games, and the coach is looking forward to the challenges that lie ahead. "If someone else scores 40 goals, that would be great," he said. "But based on my experience, it is better to have four players scoring 12 - that would make 48, which is more than 40. I think it's a fascinating challenge. It's a challenge to show that football is a collective sport."

Enrique accepts that his side will have to adjust after losing their all-time record goalscorer, but points to the wealth of attacking options in his squad.

"This year in the team - and it's quite



Paris St Germain coach Luis Enrique speaks at a press conference yesterday, on the eve of his team's Ligue 1 opener against Le Havre.

rare - there are players capable of playing in many positions, Lee (Kang-In), (Marco) Asensio, Warren Zaire-Emery, I have endless possibilities in the middle and in at-

tack, that's my difficulty," the former Barcelona boss said.

"We will have to change things compared to last season. Before, we went towards

goal and we all looked for the same player, Kylian, who had a natural ability to score. Now a range of possibilities are open."

PSG were unbeaten away from home in the league last season but had a tough battle at Le Havre, where keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma was sent off early on and they secured a 2-0 win only with a goal in the 89th minute. They were also held 3-3 at home by the same opposition late in the season and Luis Enrique expects another difficult task as his side begin their league title defence.

"Despite the result, it was tough away to Le Havre. We really had to dig in and we will face the same difficulties this time," the Spaniard said. "Our aim is to start the season in the best possible way and to make our fans happy from the first game. We are ready and delighted to get started."

PSG have not been as busy as usual in the transfer market, with Portuguese teenager Joao Neves their biggest signing so far from Benfica. They may still move for a top-class striker before the deadline at the end of the month. Napoli's Victor Osimhen, who previously starred in Ligue 1 for Lille, has been linked with a move to the French capital, although it is unclear whether he would fit in with Enrique's preferred style of football.

For now, though, PSG's efforts in the transfer market have been focused elsewhere, with an estimated 125mm euros invested on three players. Nineteen-year-old Portuguese midfield prodigy Neves, who appeared for his country at Euro 2024, has arrived from Benfica for 59.9mm euros, a fee which could rise by 10mm euros when bonuses are factored in.

The defence has been strengthened with the recruitment of Ecuador centre-back Willian Pacho, 22, from Eintracht Frankfurt for up to 45 million euros. PSG's first summer signing was the Russian goalkeeper Matvey Safonov, 25, from Krasnodar in his homeland for a reported 20mm euros. He will provide competition for first-choice custodian Donnarumma.

CAS reject Indian wrestler Phogat's Olympic appeal

Lausanne: Indian wrestler Vinesh Phogat on Wednesday lost her appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) after her disqualification from the women's 50kg final at the Paris Olympics for being overweight.

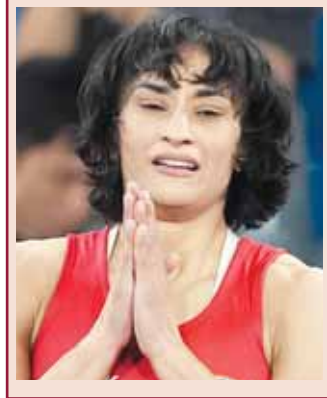
Phogat, who has won three Commonwealth Games gold medals, was due to face Sarah Hildebrandt of the United States for the gold medal in Paris but was 100 grams (3.5 ounces) over the 50kg limit at the weigh-in for the final. She had made the weight before all her earlier bouts.

The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) filed an appeal with global governing body United World Wrestling (UWW) to reconsider the decision. Phogat asked CAS to award her a shared silver medal.

The CAS said the matter which was examined by retired Australian judge Dr Annabelle Bennett as sole arbitrator, "has been dismissed". "Consequently, the UWW decision is confirmed," the statement added.

Hildebrandt took gold in the final against Cuba's Yusneylis Guzman Lopez, who was relieved after losing her semi-final to Phogat. Indian Olympic Association president P T Usha said she was "shocked and disappointed". The IOA, a statement said, was exploring "further legal options".

World bronze medalist Phogat, 29, was in the public eye for months last year as part of a long-running protest against the then-chief of Indian wrestling when he was embroiled in a sexual harassment scandal. Following her disqualification from the Paris Olympics final, Phogat announced her retirement from wrestling.



FOOTBALL ROUND-UP

Pochettino agrees to become US national team coach: reports

Mauricio Pochettino has agreed terms to become the new coach of the United States national team, according to multiple reports yesterday. *The Athletic* and *ESPN* reported that unnamed sources confirmed Pochettino, who parted ways with English Premier League side Chelsea in May, would replace Gregg Berhalter as boss.

Pochettino, 52, would arrive as the United States prepares to co-host the 2026 World Cup alongside Mexico and Canada. Pochettino left Chelsea after finishing sixth in the Premier League in his only season in charge, after previous stints with Paris Saint-Germain and Tottenham.

Reports said the deal was struck after multiple conversations with US Soccer Federation technical director Matt Crocker and that no contract has been signed nor has the federation's board of directors agreed a deal with Pochettino.

ESPN said the Argentinian cannot sign a contract with US Soccer until a pay situation with Chelsea is resolved. Pochettino would be expected to take over the US squad in time for a friendly against Canada on September 7 at Kansas City.

SAUDI PIF ENTERS NORTH AMERICAN FOOTBALL WITH CONCACAF DEAL

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) has signed a partnership deal with North American football governing body CONCACAF ahead of the region playing host to the 2026 World Cup. The deal offers support for CONCACAF (Confederation of North, Central America, and Caribbean Association Football) men's, women's and youth national team and club competitions.

It follows PIF investment in other areas of global football, tennis and backing LIV Golf, a competitor to the PGA Tour and European Tour. In a release announcing the move, CONCACAF and PIF said the goal of the deal is to spark growth in the sport throughout all 41 CONCACAF federations. The United States, Mexico and Canada will co-host the 2026 World Cup.

CONCACAF says the investment, which was not outlined in detail, will support a boost in the number of official youth championships to be contested in the coming years.

GERMAN STALWART REUS ROLLS INTO LA GALAXY

Former Borussia Dortmund and Germany midfielder Marco Reus has signed a two-and-a-half-year deal to play for LA Galaxy, the Major League Soccer side announced. Reus, 35, was a free agent after leaving Dortmund at the end of last season, playing his final game in the Champions League final defeat against Real Madrid.

It dropped the curtain on a 12-year stint at the German club, where he played 429 games across all competitions and scored 170 goals. He also won



48 caps for Germany and appeared at Euro 2012 and the 2018 World Cup. Galaxy currently top the Western Conference in the MLS, and lie second behind Inter Miami in the overall table. Their next game is at home to Atlanta United on August 24.

SPURS SUSPEND BISSOUMA OVER LAUGHING GAS VIDEO

Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou said midfielder Yves Bissouma has been suspended for Monday's trip to Leicester after he was seen inhaling laughing gas in a video on social media. The 27-year-old has since apologised for what he described as a "severe lack of judgement".

Possession of nitrous oxide - also known as laughing gas - for recreational use has been a criminal offence in the United Kingdom since 2023 and can result in a two-year prison sentence for repeat offenders. "We've suspended him for Monday's game," said Postecoglou. "The door is open for him and hopefully we can help him to realise the decisions he makes impact more than just him. Hopefully it allows him to make better decisions moving forward."

Bissouma, who joined Spurs from Brighton for £30mn in 2022, had played 45 minutes in Spurs' friendly loss to Bayern Munich on Saturday afternoon. Later that day he posted a video of himself on social media which showed him inhaling from a balloon.

In more positive news for Postecoglou, Dominic Solanke is in line to make his debut as the Premier League gets underway this weekend. Solanke has joined from Bournemouth in a deal that could rise to £65 million (£83 million) after scoring 19 Premier League goals last season.

Tottenham finished fifth in Postecoglou's first season as they faded after a stunning start to the Australian's reign. The former Celtic boss believes his side are better placed to qualify for the Champions League this season.

GYMNASTICS

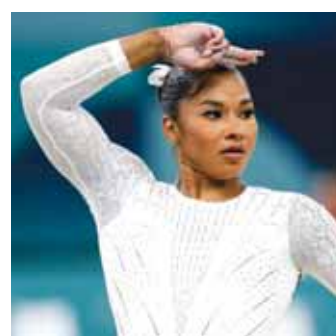
Chiles says losing Olympic medal 'devastating' and unjust blow

AFP
Los Angeles

American gymnast Jordan Chiles said yesterday that being stripped of a bronze medal at the Paris Olympics has been devastating and heartbreaking and delivered her an unjust blow.

The 23-year-old from Los Angeles also said a swirl of social media attacks has been extremely hurtful as she tries to recover from the controversy over the floor exercise final. A score revision over degree of difficulty lifted Chiles to third in the floor exercise but Romania appealed the decision and the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) ruled the US appeal came too late, prompting the International Gymnastics Federation to award the medal to Romanian Ana Barbosu.

USA Gymnastics appealed the CAS decision with time-stamped video evidence the appeal was



made in time, but CAS said it could not reconsider its decision, prompting USAG to vow it would push the case to the Swiss Federal Tribunal.

"While celebrating my Olympic accomplishments, I heard the devastating news that my bronze medal had been stripped away," Chiles said in a statement posted Thursday on X, formerly Twitter. "I had confidence in the appeal brought by USAG, who gave conclusive evidence that my score followed all the rules. This appeal

was unsuccessful. I have no words. This decision feels unjust and comes as a significant blow, not just to me, but to everyone who has championed my journey. To add to the heartbreak, the unprompted racially driven attacks on social media are wrong and extremely hurtful. I've poured my heart and soul into this sport and I am so proud to represent my culture and my country."

Despite the heartache and setbacks, Chiles said she thinks a just outcome will result at some stage. "I am now confronted with one of the most challenging moments of my career," she wrote. "Believe me when I say I have had many. I will approach this challenge as I have others - and will make every effort to ensure that justice is done. I believe that at the end of this journey, the people in control will do the right thing."

Chiles won a gold medal as part of the triumphant US team, her second Olympic medal after a team silver in Tokyo.

Getafe hold Athletic as new La Liga season kicks off

Athletic Bilbao and Getafe shared a fair 1-1 draw as Spain's new La Liga campaign kicked off yesterday. Los Leones midfielder Oihan Sancet fired his team ahead at San Mames with a fine finish from range after 27 minutes. Getafe had chances to level after the break but Peter Gonzalez hit the post and Athletic goalkeeper Alex Padilla made a superb save to deny Carles Alena one-on-one. Jose Bordalas' side were on top and levelled through Nigeria midfielder Chrisantus Uche on his Getafe debut, steering home a header from a corner. Ernesto Valverde brought on winger Nico Williams, who starred for Spain as they won Euro 2024 this summer, in response but Copa del Rey winners Athletic could not find a winner.

