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# GULF TIMES SPORT



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Rizwan and Shakeel tons put Pakistan in control against Bangladesh

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FOCUS

# Barshim leaves door ajar for 2028 Olympic Games

Qatari high jump legend guns for fourth successive World Championship title in Tokyo next year



By Sahana Bidappa  
Doha

In May 2012, Mutaz Barshim was diagnosed with a stress fracture in his lumbar spine, leaving his participation in the London Olympic Games uncertain until the last moment. Three years later, in 2015, Barshim reflected on that pivotal moment, saying, "Because it was the Olympics, I took my chance, and I ended up with a bronze medal (later upgraded to silver) after jumping 2.29 metres. That gave me a lot of confidence because I thought, 'If I can do that with a broken back, imagine what I can achieve when I'm healthy!'"

Twelve years later, standing on the podium with his fourth Olympic medal – bronze – draped around his neck in Paris, Barshim would look back at the moment with pride and gratitude. His crowning achievement was undoubtedly the gold he won at the Tokyo Olympics, which will forever be remembered in folklore as the Qatari legend shared the gold with Italy's Gianmarco Tamberi after both were locked in first place.

But the bronze in the Paris Games will hold a special place in his heart. At the age of 33, with injuries plaguing him – he was troubled by a calf injury in qualifying – Barshim was still able to produce magic when needed. He was eventually outdone by the Hamish Kerr of New Zealand for gold and Shelby McEwen for silver. But as he showed that night at the Stade de France, Barshim can still give his young rivals a run for their money.

Having announced that the Paris Games would be his last Olympics, Barshim stated that his next goal is to win his fourth World title in Tokyo next year. He has also set his sights on a fourth gold at the 2026 Asian Games, which will be held in Japan. So, could he push for another appearance at the Olympics in Los Angeles in 2028?

"Well, it's almost like people are trying to negotiate with me now," said Barshim with a chuckle yesterday, in his first interaction with the media since winning the bronze in Paris.

While admitting "it's possible" to compete in his fifth Olympics, the legend that is Barshim said he would do so only if he can sustain the high standards that he has set all these years.

"I know I can go for one more, but for me, it's not just about going to the Olympics and being there. When I'm there, I want to go for a win. For me, in order to do that, I need to be 100 per cent. I don't really like going to competitions without being fit. I have to just try not to get



Mutaz Barshim signs autographs after the press conference in Doha yesterday.



injured. It's really, really difficult as a passionate high jumper to do that. And that's what I've been doing for the past 2-3 years. I would let myself take the time to heal. But it's possible. You never know," he added.

Barshim, however, is confident he can be at his best at next year's World Championships in Tokyo, where he will look to create more history after winning three straight golds in London 2017, Doha 2019, and Eugene 2022. Besides, he is also looking forward to elevating the What Gravity Challenge – a competition he hosted earlier this year and won.

"There is always something new, and I will be competing in the World Championships in Japan next year. The rest of the events, like the Diamond League, only if it serves our agenda. It has to be part of the training that leads to a bigger championship. So of course, it might be a few Diamond League events," he said.

"But for me, the most important will be the What Gravity Challenge. It's my baby, and the first edition was amazing. So I'm looking forward to competing in that and the World Championships, and anything apart from that, we'll see."

The second-best high jumper in history, with a personal best of 2.45m achieved at the Diamond League in Brussels in September 2014, Barshim is only behind Cuba's Javier Sotomayor (2.45m) on the all-time list. In July 2018, he damaged his left ankle ligaments while attempting to break Sotomayor's world record, which has stood since 1993.

While Sotomayor himself recently admitted it will be tough for Barshim to break the record, the Qatari legend has not given up hope. "Every

day I wake up, I take it day by day. How can I be better? And for me, I look at everything as a challenge, and the world record is not excluded. It's always there," Barshim said, with his eyes lighting up at the mention of the world record.

"The challenge is to push yourself 110%. I'm waiting for that moment. But for the past two or three years, it really has been difficult because I wasn't 100% healthy. And it was too much of a risk to push myself to that level, knowing that you have a championship which is important for that year. I can't push myself early and end up injured. I feel like at this stage, I've done it all, and the only thing I'm looking for is to be healthy and push myself. So let's hope for the next few seasons," he said.

Barshim has already figured out what he would do after calling it a day on his illustrious career – working with youngsters in Qatar.

"The experience I've been collecting and all the knowledge is only right to give back, you know. It's only about timing – when it is the right time to feel like I want to do something now – because while you're still active, it's really, really difficult," he said.

"I have confidence. You know, we have a very good young team. For example, there's eleven people, as we speak, flying to the World Juniors. The talent is there, the infrastructure is there," he added.

Barshim wrapped up the personal interactions thanking his family and his father. "Growing up in a sports family, seeing my father compete on television. I wanted to be like him, he was role model. Today, I think I am better than him," he said in a lighter vein with a smile and a twinkle in his eye. "Yeah, it's all in the family."

## BARSHIM FACTFILE

**Date of Birth:** 24 Jun 1991  
**Age:** 33  
**Height:** 1.89m / 6'2" ft  
**Place of birth:** Doha, Qatar

### Career achievements

Olympic Games			
Rank	Year	Location	Result
Gold	2021	Tokyo	2.37m
Silver	2016	Rio de Janeiro	2.36m
Silver	2012	London	2.29m
Bronze	2024	Paris	2.34m

### World Championships

Rank	Year	Location	Result
Gold	2022	Eugene	2.37m
Gold	2019	Doha	2.37m
Gold	2017	London	2.35m
Silver	2013	Moscow	2.38m
Bronze	2023	Budapest	2.33m
4th place	2015	Beijing	2.33m
7th place	2011	Daegu	2.32m

**Awards:**  
Asian Athletics Association Best Asian Male Athlete of the Year (2022, 2023).

World Athletics' Inspirational Award - shared with fellow Tokyo Olympic gold medalist Gianmarco Tamberi (2021). Qatar Olympic Committee Best Male Athlete of the Year (2021, 2019). Spanish newspaper AS Arab Athlete of the Year (2019). IAAF Male Athlete of the Year (2017).

**Hobbies:**  
Art, fashion, design, watching cartoons.

**Family:**  
Wife: Alexandra Everett. Son: Josef (born October 2020).

**Sporting relatives:**  
Father, Essa Mohamed Barshim (athletics), was a Gulf state champion and Arab Championship silver medalist in race walking.  
Brother, Muamer Aisaa Barsham (athletics), 2014 Asian Games high jump



bronze medalist, achieved a personal best of 2.28m. Brother, Meshaal Barsham (football), goalkeeper for Al Sadd and for the Qatar national team, played at the 2022 World Cup and was best goalkeeper at Asian Cup 2023. Wife, Alexandra Everett (athletics), competed as a youth in Sweden with personal bests of 56.45 seconds in the 400m and 2:13.11 in the 800m.

**Debut:**  
2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou (high jump - 1st).

**Memorable achievement:**  
Defending his world title at Doha 2019. "Coming back from a really really dark place (injury lay-off), to be able to come back to the stadium and be top of the world, defending your title on home soil, that's definitely one of the high moments."

**Nickname:**  
The Qatari Falcon.

**Languages Spoken:**  
Arabic, English

**First steps:** Started athletics as a race walker at about age 10-11 before switching to distance running. Did not enjoy either and asked his coach if he could try jumping. Took up long jump, triple jump and high jump before settling on the high jump at age 14. "Jumping was much more fun for me because it was me and other kids jumping on a trampoline." Started to take the sport more seriously at 16 when, as a student at the Aspire Academy, he cleared 2.00m for the first time.

**Inspiration:** Was inspired by his father, who competed in race walking and distance running at the regional level. "He always took me with him to the track. One of the biggest moments that inspired me is that I saw him on TV finishing first in a race in a Gulf Championship. I was jumping in front of the TV."

**Idol:** Boxer Muhammad Ali (USA), former undisputed

heavyweight champion of the world, 1960 Olympic champion (light heavyweight), nicknamed 'The Greatest' and regarded as one of the most significant sports figures of the 20th century.

"I like mentality that I can relate to. That's why I love Muhammad Ali. I know some saw him as arrogant but it was just the way he motivated himself. He said he was going to do something and then there was no going back; he had to perform."

**Coach:** Barshim been coached by Stanislaw Szczryba since age 19. "My coach and I have something that is really special. We've been working together for a very long time and to be honest it only gets better." They did not get along at first, Szczryba taking a hard approach while Barshim had just finished high school and was trying to enjoy life. But after improving his personal best by 11cm in just one training camp he started to trust the coach, who over time became his role model and a second father figure. "Now I know where to get the motivation from, and he knows how to get the best out of me. He always challenges me. He's brilliant at finding new solutions whenever something doesn't work."



CRICKET

# Rizwan, Shakeel hit centuries as Pakistan reach 448 for 6

PAKISTAN KEEPER RIZWAN HITS CAREER BEST 171 NOT OUT WHILE SHAKEEL SCORES 141

AFP  
Rawalpindi

Mohamed Rizwan and Saud Shakeel knocked brilliant centuries to guide Pakistan to an imposing 448-6 declared before Bangladesh closed the second day on 27-0 in Rawalpindi yesterday.

Rizwan's unbeaten 171 was his Test best and third century in the format while Shakeel's 141 was equally polished as the duo lifted Pakistan from a precarious 16-3 on Wednesday.

Bangladesh openers Shadman Islam was 12 and Zakir Hasan on 11, negotiating 12 overs of pace without any problem as the Rawalpindi stadium pitch has not assisted bowlers as predicted.

Bangladesh batting coach David Hemp hoped his batters match their opponents.

"It's a pretty good batting pitch and we hope it continues like this," said Hemp, a former Bermuda player.

"Our batters need to match Pakistan's batters and we need to get closer to Pakistan's total."

Bangladesh had pushed Pakistan on the backfoot on day one but it was Shakeel who repaired the innings with Saim Ayub (56) through a 98-run fourth wicket stand before another 240 runs were added for the next with Rizwan as Pakistan blunted Bangladesh's attack.

Rizwan, who hit three sixes and 11 boundaries in a 239-ball knock, added a quick 44 with Shaheen Shah Afridi who smacked two sixes and a boundary in a blistering 29 not out.

That allowed Pakistan to declare their first innings 78-minutes after tea.

Shakeel said it is too early to give a verdict on the pitch.

"The ball was moving early on (Wednesday) but if you look at Bangladesh's bowling they bowled short of length and had they pitched it up they would have got more success," said Shakeel.

"Let our bowlers bowl tomorrow then we can have a final say on the pitch."

Bangladesh failed to get a wicket in the first session as Rizwan and Shakeel batted superbly to help Pakistan reach 256-4 at lunch. Off-spinner Mehidy Hasan Mi-



Pakistan's Mohamed Rizwan reacts during the second day of first Test against Bangladesh at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi yesterday. (AFP)

raz ended Bangladesh's frustrating wait for the wicket, luring Shakeel out of the crease as wicketkeeper

Litton Das removed the bails, ending a brilliant 261-ball knock. Shakeel also scored his third

Test century and hit nine boundaries. Shakeel also survived a freakish run out attempt on 138 when

he stepped out of his crease while leaving paceman Hasan Mahmud's delivery, but made it back as Das hit the stumps.

Pacers Hasan Mahmud (2-70) and Shoriful Islam (2-77) were the pick of Bangladesh bowlers, while Miraz and Shakib Al Hasan grabbed a wicket each.

Resuming at 158-4, Shakeel and Rizwan added 98 runs in an extended two-hour and 15-minute morning session after play on the first day was delayed by a wet outfield. Looking for early wickets, Bangladesh skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto used all his bowlers but none could replicate the success achieved on day one.

The two-match series is part of the World Test Championship's third cycle with Pakistan currently sixth and Bangladesh eighth on the nine-team table.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Pakistan first innings 448-6** declared (Mohammad Rizwan 171 not out, Saud Shakeel 141, Saim Ayub 56; Hasan Mahmud 2-70, Shoriful Islam 2-77)  
**Bangladesh first innings 27-0** (Shadman Islam 12, Zakir Hasan 11)

FIRST TEST

# Smith takes England past Sri Lanka at Old Trafford

AFP  
Manchester, United Kingdom

Jamie Smith's latest Test fifty took England into a narrow first-innings lead in their series opener against Sri Lanka at Old Trafford yesterday.

England were 259-6 in reply to Sri Lanka's 236, a slender advantage of 23 runs, when a combination of bad light and rain forced an early close to the second day of the three-Test series.

Smith, promoted up the order to No 6 in the absence of injured captain Ben Stokes, was 72 not out - the 24-year-old wicketkeeper's third fifty in his four Tests.

Once again he demonstrated his ability to both support an established batsman and keep the runs coming batting with the lower order.

Together with Harry Brook (56) and Chris Woakes (25), Smith shared stands of 62 and 52 respectively before both batsmen were bowled by superb deliveries from left-arm spinner Prabath Jayasuriya, who enjoyed an economical return of 2-58 in 21 overs. After rain washed out yesterday's morning session, England were faltering at 67-3 in the 15th over, with paceman Asitha Fernando leading the way during a haul of 3-68 in 14 overs.

Sri Lanka had collapsed to 6-3, losing their first three wickets for no runs in 10 balls on Wednesday. But their bowlers still had runs to play after captain Dhananjaya de Silva top-scored with 74 after winning the toss, while Milan Rathnayake made 72 as he set a new record for the highest score by any Test debutant batting at No 9.

Shortly after play resumed yesterday under grey skies, Asitha Fernando thought he had Dan Lawrence lbw for 10. But Lawrence, recalled to open after Zak Crawley was sidelined with a broken finger, successfully reviewed umpire Paul Reiffel's decision on height.

Two balls later, however, the paceman's in-swinging to Ben Duckett, who added just five to his overnight 13, had the left-hander leg before with Sri Lanka overturning Reiffel's original not out verdict on this occasion.

Asitha Fernando's day got even better when



England's Jamie Smith in action during the second day of the first Test against Sri Lanka at Old Trafford in Manchester yesterday. (Reuters)

he dismissed Ollie Pope, captaining England for the first time after Stokes was ruled out by a torn hamstring, for six with a ball that nipped back through a gap between bat and pad. Lawrence, however, looked in good touch until on 30 he edged a ball angled across him from left-arm seamer Vishwa Fernando to diving wicketkeeper Dinesh Chandimal.

Pope's exit, however, had brought in Root, with the former England captain boasting a superb record against Sri Lanka of more than a 1,000 runs, including four hundreds, in 11 previous Tests at an average of nearly 60.

Asitha Fernando, though, ended a promising stand of 58 when Root, who had made a typically elegant 42, inside-edged an intended drive, with Chandimal diving forward to hold a fine low catch. But new batsman Smith confidently advanced down the pitch to drive Jayasuriya for six before Brook completed a 59-ball fifty. But on the same ground where Shane Warne bowled Mike Gatting with the 'Ball of the Century' in 1993, Jayasuriya made a bid for

the modern-day equivalent by snaring Brook in stunning style.

**SCOREBOARD**

**Sri Lanka 1st Innings 236**  
**England 1st Innings (overnight 22-0)**

B. Duckett lbw b A Fernando	18
D. Lawrence c Chandimal b V Fernando	30
O. Pope b A Fernando	6
J. Root c Chandimal b A Fernando	42
H. Brook b Jayasuriya	56
J. Smith not out	72
C. Woakes b Jayasuriya	25
G. Atkinson not out	4
<b>Extras (lb2, nb3, w1)</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Total (6 wkts, 61 overs, 282 mins)</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>Fall of wickets:</b> 1-30 (Duckett), 2-40 (Pope), 3-67 (Lawrence), 4-125 (Root), 5-187 (Brook), 6-239 (Woakes)	
<b>Bowling:</b> De Silva 2-0-14-0; Jayasuriya 21-5-58-2; A Fernando 14-0-68-3 (1w); V Fernando 13-0-51-1; Rathnayake 9-0-53-0 (3nb); Ka Mendis 2-0-13-0	

GOLF

# England's Hull out in front after first round of Women's British Open

AFP  
St Andrews, United Kingdom

England's Charly Hull enjoyed a superb finish, with four birdies on the back nine on the Old Course at St Andrews yesterday, to lead the Women's British Open with a five-under par opening round of 67.

The 28-year-old, bidding for her first major title after finishing runner-up in both last year's Women's British Open and Women's US Open, was in a star-studded group that also featured defending champion Lilia Vu and world number one Nelly Korda.

The trio clearly brought the best in each other's games, with the United States' Korda - who won the season's first major, the Chevron Championship - in a tie for second on four-under and Vu one of several players a stroke further back. China's Yin Ruoning had previously overcome difficult conditions to claim the early lead.

Starting on the 10th hole, the former world number one defied strong gusts to reach six-under-par through 14 holes.

Although she dropped a couple of shots late in her round, a four-under 68 was a hugely creditable score. Yin held the outright lead for most of Thursday before being surpassed by Hull.

Bidding to become the first home winner of the tournament since England's Georgia Hall in 2018, Hull reached the turn in one-under par.

But it was a very different story on the way back in, with Hull landing three birdies in six holes to share the lead with Yin before a closing birdie on the 18th gave her sole possession of first place.

Andrea Lee, Patty Tavatanakit, Lee Mi-hyang, Mao Saigo and Jenny Shin are alongside Vu on three-under-par.

Hull, meanwhile, dramatically eagled her final hole, the ninth, to finish on one-under alongside Linnea Strom.



England's Charly Hull watches her drive from the 2nd tee on the opening day of the 2024 Women's British Open Golf Championship at St Andrews, Scotland, yesterday. (AFP)

CYCLING

# Impressive O'Connor wins Vuelta stage six to take red jersey from Roglic



Decathlon AG2R La Mondiale Team's Ben O'Connor celebrates winning Stage 6 of Vuelta a Espana in Yunquera, Spain, yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Madrid

Australian Ben O'Connor completed his collection of stage victories in all three of cycling's Grand Tours by winning stage six of the Vuelta a Espana yesterday, and also took the overall lead after his solo run left everyone behind.

O'Connor was part of a breakaway group early in the race but by the penultimate climb and with 28 kilometres left to race, the Decathlon-AG2R La Mondiale rider went for glory on his own, punching the air in celebration as he crossed the line.

"It was beautiful racing, I think,

all around," O'Connor said. "I was looking at the triple Grand Tour winners, and a list of guys that have done it before this race started, and now my name is on that list."

Italy's Marco Frigo (Israel-Premier Tech) came in second, four minutes and 33 seconds behind O'Connor, with German Florian Lipowitz (Red Bull-Bora-Hansgrohe) finishing third.

Three-times former champion Primož Roglic began the day top of the general classification but O'Connor took the red jersey from the Slovenian who finished in the peloton, six minutes and 31 seconds adrift of the winner.

O'Connor now has a four minute 51 seconds lead over Roglic after his impressive ride on the 185.5km

stage from Jerez de la Frontera to Yunquera, with Joao Almeida a further eight seconds back in third.

"I guess I have the red jersey as well so, it's going to be a once in a lifetime experience maybe, so I'm going to enjoy every moment," the new leader said.

The stage had a unique start, with the riders setting off from inside a Carrefour supermarket, and after navigating the aisles they faced a category one climb less than 60 kilometres into the race.

By then, there had been several attacks from the peloton, with a large group of over 30 riders managing to get away, but that was whittled down to 13 who pushed the gap out to five minutes on the bunch with 70km to ride.

O'Connor and Gijs Leemreize dropped the others on the second climb, before the Australian left the Dutch rider behind as he powered to take the stage, having already won stages at the Giro d'Italia in 2020 and the Tour de France in 2021.

This early into the race, Roglic and Red Bull appeared more concerned with conserving energy, and they did have Lipowitz up ahead in the break, but they may live to regret allowing O'Connor get so far ahead. O'Connor, who finished fourth in this year's Giro and in the 2021 Tour de France, came into the Vuelta looking for a podium finish, but after opening up such a large lead he may now have even loftier ambitions.

# Djokovic targets Grand Slam record at US Open

**NEW YORK:** Novak Djokovic, fired up by his emotional Olympic Games triumph, targets new Grand Slam records at the US Open from Monday as title rival Jannik Sinner arrives in New York dogged by questions over two positive drugs tests.

Defending champion Djokovic can become the oldest Open era champion at the tournament if he secures a fifth title, a record he would share with Jimmy Connors, Pete Sampras and Roger Federer.

The 37-year-old would also move to 25 Grand Slam triumphs, taking him clear of the 24 he currently shares with Margaret Court.

The final major of the year comes at a critical time for Djokovic.

This year he has succeeded as Australian Open champion by Sinner who also relieved him of his world number one ranking.

Carlos Alcaraz took his French Open title with the Spanish crowd-pleaser then sweeping Djokovic off court in a one-sided Wimbledon final.

However, Djokovic, returned to the clay courts of Roland Garros to stun Alcaraz in the Olympic final.

His tearful victory in Paris allowed him to become only the fifth player to complete a career Golden Slam of all four majors and Olympic gold.

The victory also silenced the increasing number of doubters who had written off the Serb as a spent force in a new era where Sinner, 23, and 21-year-old Alcaraz are steadily moving centre stage.

Djokovic, who underwent surgery on his right knee in June, described his Olympic victory as his "biggest sporting success".

It was also the 99th title of his professional career.

"At the age of 37 and facing a 21-year-old who is probably the best player in the world right now, winning Roland Garros and Wimbledon back-to-back, I can say that this is probably the biggest sporting success I have ever had," insisted Djokovic.

Sinner arrives at the final Slam of the season having captured the Cincinnati Masters title. However, that triumph was quickly overshadowed when it emerged he had been cleared of any wrongdoing after twice testing positive for a banned substance earlier in the season. Sinner tested positive for clostebol, an anabolic agent prohibited at all times by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

But he escaped a lengthy ban after officials accepted his explanation that the substance had entered his system as a result of contamination from a support team member.

"I will now put this challenging and deeply unfortunate period behind me," said Sinner. The green light for him to continue playing was blasted as "ridiculous" by Australian player Nick Kyrgios who is currently not active on the circuit.

Alcaraz, who won his first major at the US Open in 2022, was badly bruised by his defeat to Djokovic in the Olympic final.

He broke down in tears on court before admitting he had "let Spain down". His build-up to New York wasn't helped by a second round exit in Cincinnati to Gael Monfils in a match which saw the usually composed Alcaraz smash his racquet on court.

He described the defeat as the "worst match" of his career.

In the women's singles at the US Open, Coco Gauff is the defending champion but the 20-year-old has endured a worrying dip in form in recent weeks.

A stormy exit from the Olympics in the third round was followed by early losses in Toronto and Cincinnati.

No woman has successfully defended her US Open title since Serena Williams in 2014. Five-time major winner and world number one Iga Swiatek, the 2022 champion in New York, made the Cincinnati semi-finals where she was defeated by Aryna Sabalenka. Sabalenka, the Australian Open champion, was runner-up to Gauff at the US Open last year, losing from a set up in the final.



Novak Djokovic of Serbia acknowledges the crowd before playing during the Stars of the Open exhibition match at USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in New York yesterday. (AFP)

TENNIS

# Sinner gets tough draw at US Open

Djokovic, winner of gold medal at Paris Olympics, will face a qualifier

Reuters  
New York

**T**op seed Jannik Sinner, whose doping case has dominated the lead-up to the US Open, faces a tough road to the New York final while in-form Aryna Sabalenka will also be tested, according to the draw released yesterday.

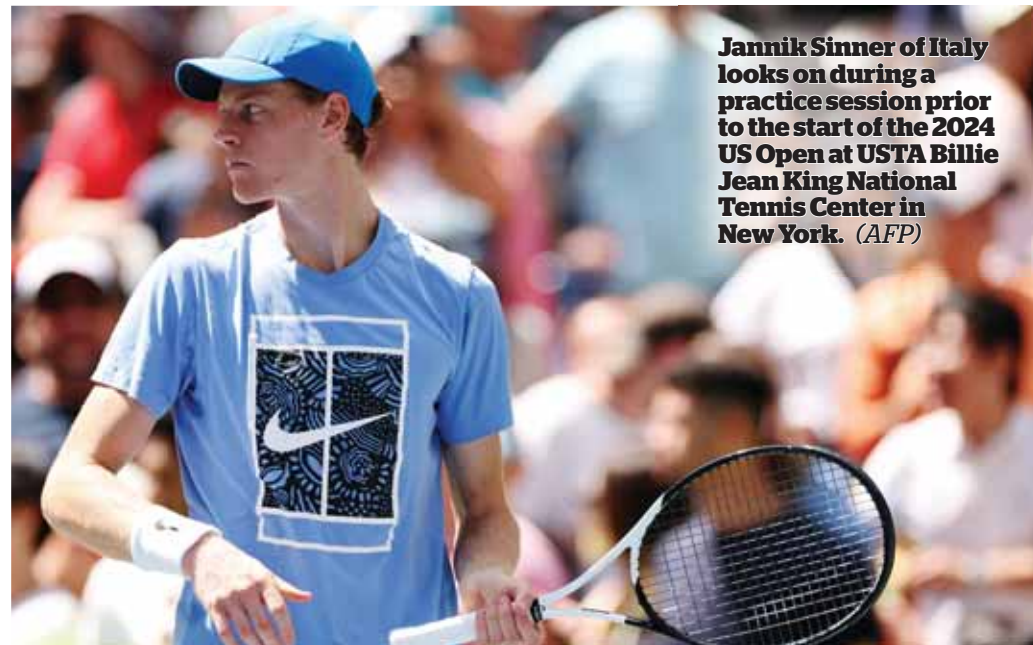
Sinner won in Cincinnati this week to claim his fifth title of a breakout season before the revelation that he avoided a ban over two positive tests in March as it was ruled the Italian bore no fault or negligence for the violations.

The Australian Open champion is projected to face 14th seed Tommy Paul in the fourth round, 2021 winner Daniil Medvedev (5) in the quarter-finals, Carlos Alcaraz (3) in the semis and defending champion Novak Djokovic (2) in the final.

Djokovic, who has not competed since winning the gold medal at the Paris Olympics, will begin against a qualifier and is expected to meet Andrey Rublev in the quarter-finals and fourth seed Alexander Zverev in the semis.

Reigning French Open and Wimbledon champion Alcaraz, who lost the opening match of his only US Open tune-up event, will also start against a qualifier and could face Poland's Hubert Hurkacz in the quarter-finals.

Among the first-round matches to watch on the men's side is big-hitting Ben Shelton, who



Jannik Sinner of Italy looks on during a practice session prior to the start of the 2024 US Open at USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in New York. (AFP)

electrified the home crowds last year with a spirited run to the semis, against 2020 champion Dominic Thiem, who is retiring at the end of the year.

In the women's draw, top seed Iga Swiatek, a five-time Grand Slam winner who reached the fourth round last year, will start against a qualifier and faces a potential quarter-final clash against Canadian Open champion and Cincinnati runner-up Jessica Pegula.

Second seed Sabalenka, looking to go one further after finishing runner-up in New York

last year, returns well-rested after a mid-year break to focus on her health. She will be confident about her chances after winning the tune-up event in Cincinnati.

Sabalenka's fortnight may include a third-round date with Ekaterina Alexandrova (29) followed by a fourth-round clash with Madison Keys (14), Zheng Qinwen (7) in the quarters, defending champion Coco Gauff (3) in the semis and Swiatek in the final.

Gauff, who last year became the first American to win a US Open singles title since 2017, will

begin her title defense against Frenchwoman Varvara Gracheva.

Among the more high-profile first-round women's matchups, four-times Grand Slam winner Naomi Osaka, in her first New York appearance since becoming a mother, will face Latvian 10th seed and former French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko.

Wimbledon and French Open runner-up Jasmine Paolini will face 2019 US Open champion Bianca Andreescu for a third consecutive Grand Slam.

The US Open will be played from Aug 26-Sept 8.

## ALCARAZ-AGASSI VS DJOKOVIC-MCENROE: STARS LIGHT UP NEW YORK



Andre Agassi (right) of the US and Carlos Alcaraz of Spain play against John McEnroe of the US and Novak Djokovic of Serbia during the Stars of the Open exhibition match at USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in New York. (AFP)

**NEW YORK:** Past US Open champions and fans' favourites treated an Arthur Ashe crowd to superstar matchups and hilarious mic'd-up interactions during the Stars of the Open at Flushing Meadows.

If bright smiles could have secured a victory, Carlos Alcaraz and Andre Agassi could have easily stated their case, but it was the pair of four-time US Open singles champions, Novak Djokovic and John McEnroe, who defeated the Spaniard-American duo 10-8 at the Fan Week exhibition. Italians Matteo Berrettini and Jasmine Paolini began the night by defeating Sebastian Korda and Iga Swiatek 11-9.

Juan Martin del Potro, former World No 3 in the PIF ATP Rankings, made a grand return to Arthur Ashe Stadium. The 2009 titlist, who earlier practised with Djokovic, partnered fellow Argentine Gabriela Sabatini to an 11-9 win against Andy Roddick and Caroline Wozniacki. Home favourites Sloane Stephens and Frances Tiafoe closed the night with a 10-6 victory against actor Boris Kodjoe and Taylor Townsend.

### Hurkacz and Jabeur ring the Nasdaq Closing Bell

In tennis, the closing bell is when the chair umpire calls, "Game, set and match". Hubert Hurkacz and Ons Jabeur participated in a different version of it in Manhattan.

The ATP and WTA stars visited the Nasdaq MarketSite in Times Square to ring the Closing Bell alongside USTA Chairman of the Board and President Dr Brian Hainline and USTA CEO Lew Sherr.

"It was so cool. Didn't know what to expect coming here. That was just so much fun," Hurkacz told *ATPTour.com*. "Obviously Nasdaq is so big. To take part in such an event that is really well known around the world is special. To see your face in Times Square is a little bit surreal."

"It was super fun being here today to ring the closing bell at Nasdaq," Jabeur said.

"It was a fun experience, I'd never done that before. There is always fun stuff to do (for) the first time. It was very nice to start the week in New York here."

The US Open, the final Grand Slam of the year, will be played from Aug 26-Sept 8.

FORMULA ONE

# Unbeaten Verstappen eyes 'very close' Dutch Grand Prix in Zandvoort

AFP  
Zandvoort, Netherlands

**D**efending Formula One champion Max Verstappen said yesterday he was less confident ahead of his home Grand Prix than at this time last year, with a "very close" race in prospect. Verstappen has never lost in front of his adoring fans since Zandvoort returned to the F1 circuit in 2021 and completely dominated the drivers' championship last year with 19 Grand Prix victories.

But after a strong start this season, the Red Bull driver has failed to win the last four Grand Prix races and he said the feeling was very different coming into Sunday's battle than in 2023.

"Let's just say that last year coming here, I was a lot more confident that we had a big chance of winning the race," Verstappen told reporters.

"But that's how the season is already, you know. It's a lot more competitive," he added.

With 10 races left, Verstappen enjoys a 78-point advantage over his closest rival, Lando Norris, but is looking nervously over his shoulder as his rivals make up ground.

"Lately you see there are a lot of cars actually winning races and drivers, of course. So, it's just very unknown. I mean, it's very close," he said. "So for sure, I'm not coming into this weekend saying that, 'yeah, we're going to win the race'. I just want to have a clean weekend, understand the car a bit more, learn from it," he said.

Verstappen is celebrating his 200th Grand Prix on Sunday and appeared to suggest that he was more than halfway through his career at the age of 26. Asked if he thought he would celebrate another 200 Grand Prix, he replied: "No. Nice and easy. So we've passed halfway, for sure."



He said he doesn't feel like he already has 200 races under his belt and it has been an "incredible ride", singling out his first Grand Prix win and the first of his three World Championships as highlights.

But he said he was not looking currently beyond the end of his contract with Red Bull in 2028.

"There's a lot of time to decide what happens. So, I just keep everything open.

I'm quite easy-going about it." Closest rival Norris gave an honest assessment of his chances of narrowing the gap with Verstappen.

"Of course it's still in reach, but it's a lot of points and it's against Max," he quipped.

"I know it's a lot and it's going to be a very difficult challenge, but with how we're performing, with how I know I can go out and perform when things click and things go well, then I still want to believe it's possible."

His McLaren has been performing progressively quicker throughout the first half of the season but Norris admitted that some errors of his own had cost valuable points.

"I have just made too many mistakes and a few too many points given away which is not the level I need to be at if I want to fight for a championship at the end of the day," said the 24-year-old Briton.

A stone's throw from the beach, the cir-

cuit at Zandvoort is known for sand on the track and rapidly changeable weather - last year's race saw a heavy downpour.

Wet weather is forecast for practice and qualifying today and tomorrow and while Sunday's race day looks set fair, violent wind gusts are expected throughout.

"Apparently it's going to be quite exotic weather on Saturday which I'm looking forward to," said Alpine's French driver Pierre Gasly.

"Because it's a tough track on the dry but then in the wet it becomes suddenly a lot more challenging."

Daniel Ricciardo from RB Racing said gusts of up to 80 kilometres per hour were expected. "Those winds are hard," said the Australian, adding that qualifying laps might be slower than expected.

But Finland's Valtteri Bottas of Kick-Sauber was sanguine about the conditions.

"You can't adjust the wind, but you can adjust the sails," he said.

## QATAR STARS LEAGUE

# Mujica nets hat-trick as Sadd thrash Arabi; Duhail stay top

New signing Abdelkader scores as Qatar SC notch first win of the season after beating Al Shamal

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Spanish star Rafael Mujica scored a hat-trick as Al Sadd blanked Al Arabi 5-0 in their third round match of Ooredoo Stars League at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. It was a second successive win in the league for the defending champions who ran roughshod over the rivals. Al Sadd led 3-0 at half time.

Al Duhail also kept up their unbeaten run in the league as they benefited from an own goal from Umm Salal captain Victor Lekhal (45+4th minute) for a 1-0 win at the Khalifa International Stadium. Duhail stay top of the table with 9 points and ahead of Al Sadd (six points).

In the third match of the day, Qatar SC notched their first win of the league beating Al Shamal 1-0 as their new recruit Ahmed Abdelkader struck in the 45+1st minute. The evening however belonged to Al Sadd and Mujica who struck in the 8th minute (penalty), 26th minute & 89th minutes of the match.

Akram Afif (19th minute), and Giovanni Henrique (60th minute) scored a goal each. Almost nothing seemed to go Al Arabi's way right from the start. And while VAR ruled out a penalty against them in the very 5th minute of play, they weren't as lucky a second time in the 8th minute when Ahmed Fatehi was pulled up for landing his shoe on the calf of Al Sadd's Hashim Ali while going for a high ball inside the danger area. After a VAR check, the referee pointed to the spot and

Spaniard Mujica struck firmly to open the floodgates for his team. Afif showed his mercurial class soon as Al Arabi after a throw in, inside their own half, made a horrendous cross pass and the alert Al Sadd star dashed in to rattle the net (2-0).

One of the best goals of the match followed next as Afif provided a fantastic through ball to Mujica, who grabbed the chance just outside the box and went on to beat a diving goalkeeper to his right (3-0).

One of the few Al Arabi attempts came in the 42nd minute when Ahmed Alaaeldin was within the striking range but he produced a feeble shot which was easily cut off.

In opening half's added time Al Sadd came close to adding their fourth goal but this time Afif with only the goalkeeper to beat delayed a bit and an Al Arabi defender retrieved the ball from him in good time.

Just before the half time whistle, a Giovanni shot went on to hit the cross bar.

Al Sadd, however made it 4-0 at the hour mark as Giovanni out-sprinted a rival defender to break in from the right and send the ball diagonally into the far left corner. Al Arabi lifted their defence comparatively and held back further Al Sadd strikes but were mostly had to battle to gain possession as Al Sadd completely held charge. A few of their late strikes went over the goal while a Hassan al-Haydos kick hit the outside of the left post.

Al Sadd had more to celebrate towards the end as Afif provided Giovanni with another fine assist to storm in from the left while ensuring that he was not off-side to calmly score his hat-trick goal and the team's fifth of the match.



Al Sadd's Rafael Mujica (right) celebrates after scoring against Al Arabi during the Ooredoo Stars League match at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

## DIAMOND LEAGUE

## Tebogo tops 200m, Wanyonyi on fire in mixed night for Olympic champs

AFP  
Lausanne

Emmanuel Wanyonyi went close to breaking David Rudisha's vaunted 800m world record in yesterday's Diamond League meet in Lausanne in what was a mixed night for Olympic champions making their return after the Paris Games. Wanyonyi repeated the blistering form that saw him win in the French capital, going within 0.20 seconds of the 1min 40.91sec world record set by Rudisha when winning Olympic gold in London in 2012. The Kenyan will have another chance at the next meet on the elite calendar, in Silesia, Poland on Sunday.

Other Olympic champions who were successful included Botswana's Letsile Tebogo, who blasted to an impressive 19.64sec to win the 200m. The 21-year-old, whose 200m gold in Paris was the first ever for his country, admitted that he had come to Lausanne on the back of eight days of no training, having made a rapturous return to Gaborone.

"The most important thing for me is that even after such achievements like the ones I did at the Olympics, at the end of the day, you just have to keep running to maintain the form throughout the season," he said.

Greece's Miltiadis Tentoglou left it late to win the long jump in 8.06m and Ukraine's Yaroslava Mahuchikh claimed victory in the women's high jump in 1.99m.

It was not all good news for newly-crowned Olympic champions, however, with Grant Holloway, Cole Hocker and German shot putter Yemisi Ogunleye all failing to back up their Paris form by topping the Swiss podium.

There was at least some redemption for Norway's Jakob Ingebrigtsen in beating Hocker in the 1,500m. The Norwegian had been an odds-on favourite for Olympic gold in Paris, but set out too quickly and eventually finished fourth. "It's been almost two weeks since Paris so there was plenty of time to recover," Ingebrigtsen said of his win in a meet record of 3min 27.83sec. "For me a lot of it has been mental including going home, taking some easy days and then getting back to work. Tonight's race gave me good answers."

Perhaps the biggest upset was in the men's 110m hurdles as Olympic champion and



Botswana's Letsile Tebogo sprints to 200m victory ahead of United States' Erriyon Knighton and Fred Kerley at Diamond League meeting in Lausanne yesterday. (AFP)

three-time world gold medallist Holloway was edged into second by Jamaica's Rasheed Broadbell, who won in 13.10sec. "Coming off that high from the Olympics, it's challenging to keep that same pace, but I'm focused on learning from this race to run better next time," Holloway said. "Once you've reached your goals, it can be tough to keep pushing, but I'm prepared to defend my world titles. As long as I'm improving, it's a good sign."

One of the events of the season has been, without doubt, the men's 800m, with four athletes in the Olympic final dipping under the 1min 42sec mark for the first time ever. And once again it did not disappoint in Lausanne as Wanyonyi of Kenya set a sensational world lead of 1:41.11 for victory.

It was the joint second fastest time ever run - alongside Denmark's Wilson Kipketer. Aided by wavelength technology and two pace-setters, Wanyonyi gritted his teeth right through to the line, with Rudisha's once-unouchable mark seemingly on course to be broken at some time in the near future.

Wanyonyi will not be resting on his laurels, however, heading straight to Poland for Sunday's Diamond League meet, while also due to compete in next month's finals in Brussels. "I'm so happy to have run the world lead today in Lausanne," said Wanyonyi. "My body is moving very well. I got up to come here and told my body 'you can do something for me, I need to run very fast!'"

France's Gabriel Tual, who finished third behind Wanyonyi and Canada's world champion Marco Arop, said he didn't think Rudisha's record would stand for much longer. "When you see the wavelength light just in front, it's really not far," he said. "I think it'll be broken either in Silesia or Brussels."

Another winner in the Swiss city meet, coming just 12 days after the last of the track and field action at the Stade de France, was Femke Bol. The Dutchwoman won the 400m hurdles in 52.55sec to compensate somewhat for her bronze medal showing in Paris behind record-setting Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone and Anna Cockrell.

## LIGUE 1

## PSG coach Enrique plays down prospect of more new signings

AFP  
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique insisted yesterday he is "delighted" with his current squad as he played down the possibility of more new signings arriving before the transfer window closes next week.

PSG have already invested a reported 175 million euros (\$195mn), not including bonuses, on four players this summer but have not recruited a new striker to fill the gap left by Kylian Mbappe.

Mbappe, the club's all-time top scorer, departed for Real Madrid when his contract expired, and the French champions were dealt a further blow when Portugal attacker Goncalo Ramos came off hurt early in last week's 4-1 win at Le Havre in Ligue 1.

Ramos suffered an ankle injury just quarter of an hour into the opening match of the season and is set to be out for three months after undergoing surgery.

"Unfortunately Goncalo picked up an injury. It is a blow, but we still have a very good team and I have full confidence in the players in my squad," Luis Enrique told reporters on the eve of PSG's first home game of the campaign, against Montpellier today.

"The president (Nasser al-Khelaifi), (sporting director) Luis Campos and I are always open to improving the squad but it is very, very difficult to strengthen the team that we have."

PSG last weekend completed the signing of the 19-year-old Rennes winger Desire Doue for a reported 50mn euros.

The addition of the player who

helped France win the silver medal at the Paris Olympics followed the signing of Portugal midfielder Joao Neves, also 19, from Benfica for a fee that could eventually reach 69.9mn euros.

Last season's Champions League semi-finalists have also signed Ecuador defender Wilian Pacho from Eintracht Frankfurt and the Russian goalkeeper Matvey Safonov from Krasnodar.

Talk of a move for Napoli striker Victor Osimhen has cooled, with the August 30 transfer deadline approaching.

The injury to Ramos leaves Randal Kolo Muani as the obvious choice to lead the attack, although Luis Enrique could be tempted to use Marco Asensio as an unorthodox centre forward.

"We are looking around to see if players are available at normal prices, but I am delighted with the team we have," the coach added.

"I think the president and Luis Campos have already done really well in the transfer window."

"Everything is fine at the moment but if another player arrives then that's perfect."



## LEVERKUSEN COACH ALONSO SAYS BAYERN 'FAVOURITES' FOR BUNDESLIGA TITLE

Berlin: Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso said yesterday that Bayern Munich are the Bundesliga title favourites this season, despite his side's incredible league and cup double last campaign.

"For me, the favourites are Bayern, that's clear," Alonso said at a press conference ahead of today's Bundesliga season opener away at Borussia Moenchengladbach.

"Our goal is to stay in the top four. That's realistic - we have a good squad."

Leverkusen won the Bundesliga for the first time in club history, condemning Bayern to a first trophyless season since

2011-12 and ending their 11-year reign in Germany.

In addition to new coach Vincent Kompany, Bayern have had a busy summer, bringing in Michael Olise and Joao Palhinha from the Premier League and Hiroki Ito from Stuttgart.

Leverkusen have not lost a match in Germany in May 2023. Last season they became the first side to go through a Bundesliga campaign unbeaten, while claiming the German Cup alongside a run to the Europa League final.

Leverkusen kicked off the new season

last weekend by beating Stuttgart on penalties in the German Super Cup after a 2-2 draw. Alonso said Leverkusen's title-winning season, during which they lost just one of 53 matches in all competitions, was "in the past".

"Last year was really nice...but we're starting from scratch again," he said. "We need to earn everything again. We need to win our points and for that we need good performances. We know every game will be difficult - and that will be the case against Gladbach."

Alonso said everyone would be available

for the trip to derby rivals Gladbach with the exception of Argentina midfielder Exequiel Palacios, who has a knee injury.

### FULHAM SIGN BERGE FROM BURNLEY ON FIVE-YEAR DEAL

Fulham have signed Norway midfielder Sander Berge from Burnley on a five-year contract for an undisclosed fee, the Premier League club announced.

Berge joins Fulham following the departure of Joao Palhinha, who left for German giants Bayern Munich earlier in the summer transfer window.

"It feels fantastic," Berge said in a Fulham statement. "It's been a little bit back and forth the last few weeks, but I'm finally sitting here in the shirt in this beautiful stadium, knowing that my future is here, which feels great."

"Fulham has always been a team that excited me. I've played them both in the Championship and Premier League, and it's fantastic how they play."

Berge, 26, could make his debut for Marco Silva's side against Leicester in the Premier League at Craven Cottage tomorrow.