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WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Qatar held to draw as 10-man North Korea stage comeback

'We were close to winning the match, but the circumstances changed due to the heavy rains'

By Sports Reporter
Vientiane, Laos

Asian champions Qatar yesterday settled for a fighting 2-2 draw against North Korea in torrential rain that left puddles of water on the New Laos Football Stadium in the second half.

Strikers Akram Afif (31th minute, penalty) and Almoez Ali (44) scored the two goals for Qatar in what was the second 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match for coach Marquez Lopez's side inside five days. Last Thursday, Qatar were beaten 3-1 by a resolute UAE side at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. Yesterday's 2-2 draw saw the two Group A teams look sluggish in the second half when the heavens opened up in Vientiane.

Following a cagey start, North Korea's Ri Il-song opened the scoring with a spectacular long-range shot that beat Qatar goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham in the 19th minute. With Qatar leading at half time, North Korea drew level when Kang Kuk-chol scored in the 51st minute with a similar breathtaking shot.

Qatar coach Lopez said his side dominated proceedings in the Group A clash at New Laos Football Stadium where an uneven, bumpy pitch greeted the teams.

"We started the match with the goal of winning and that showed in our attacking formation. Our performance throughout the match showed we wanted to win with an attacking game," Lopez said after the match yesterday.

"We controlled the match and dominated its course. We were close to collecting the three points, but the circumstances changed after the first half due to the heavy rains. The draw comes with the taste of a loss," he added.

After conceding an early goal, Qatar got the equaliser through a well-taken spot kick by Afif who was brought down in the Qatar box by Kuk-chol following a short pass by Almoez a few yards away. Afif chose to target the right of goalkeeper Kang Ju-hyok for Qatar's opening goal in the 31st



Qatar's Akram Afif (left) celebrates with Almoez Ali after scoring a penalty against North Korea during the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match at Laos Football Stadium in Vientiane, Laos, yesterday.

minute. Close to the first half whistle, Almoez found the net for the Asian champions. Almoez fired a spectacular shot with a right-footed drive from outside the box

to hit the back of the net. Six minutes into the second half, North Korea produced the equaliser with a Kuk-chol free-kick in pouring rain.



Qatar's Lucas Mendes heads the ball in the pouring rain.

Afif and Lucas Mendes nearly put Qatar ahead late in the second half but on each occasion the North Korean goalkeeper was alert. "The match was difficult but we were better for most of the match. After the expulsion of the North Korean player, we made attacking changes in order to score and advance, which is what actually happened and we dominated in the first half," Lopez said.

"But the match changed in the second half, and the Korean team equalised from

a set piece. I have to say the pitch, with the heavy rain pouring down, did not allow us to move quickly and pass the ball comfortably, especially with the defensive formation of the North Korean team, so we were unable to score.

"We have one point from two matches, but we still have eight matches ahead of us, in which we will do our best to get the wins and collect points," he added.

Qatar and North Korea play the return Group A match in Doha next March.

SPOTLIGHT

Australia struggle in Indonesia draw as Son lifts South Korea

AFP
Hong Kong

Australia failed to score for the second successive match, China slumped to another defeat but Son Heung-min scored a stunning goal as South Korea got off the mark in Asian World Cup qualifying yesterday.

Graham Arnold's Socceroos, having been shocked at home 1-0 by Bahrain last week, dominated a Group C encounter with Indonesia but were held 0-0 in front of almost 80,000 fans at the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta.

Australia carved out a succession of chances but lacked any cutting edge, coming closest when Bayern Munich teenager Nestory Irankunda thundered a shot against the post. "It was our game all along," Irankunda said. "We should have won it. We should have put them away in the first half."

Next month, Arnold's men face China at home in Group C and then a tough trip to in-form Japan.

"There's eight games to go," said Arnold. "It's not like it's a disaster, but I've got to go home and do a lot of thinking."

Saudi Arabia had to play the last 71 minutes of their Group C match against China in Dalian with 10 men, but Roberto Mancini's side found a way to come back from a goal behind to win 2-1 in the dying seconds.

Hassan Kadish equalised with a header from a corner before half-time and repeated the feat in the last minute of the 90 to spark wild celebrations from the visitors.

China, who were thumped 7-0 in Japan last week in their opening Group C encounter, had taken the lead in the 14th minute via an Ali Lajami own goal.

South Korea's English Premier League strike force of Hwang Hee-chan and Son Heung-min both scored as they beat Oman 3-1 in Muscat. Wolverhampton's Hwang opened the scoring after 19 minutes before Jung Seung-hyun's own goal equalised on the stroke of half-time. Tottenham's Son got South Korea's second, turning outside the box and firing home an unstoppable left-foot finish on 82 minutes. Joo Min-kyu put the result beyond doubt in the 11th minute of added time after being played in by Son.

It was South Korea's first win in the final Asian qualifying phase after they were held goalless at home by Palestine last week.

The Palestinians could not repeat their heroic performance in Seoul, however, and were beaten 3-1 by Jordan in a match played in Kuala Lumpur because of the war in Gaza.

In another Group A match Uzbekistan beat Kyrgyzstan 3-2 in Bishkek. The top two from each of the three six-team Asian groups will be guaranteed a place at the expanded 48-team World Cup



South Korea's Son Heung-min celebrates with Hwang Hee-chan after scoring against Oman during the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualification match in Muscat yesterday. (AFP)

in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The third qualifying round wraps up in June.

Iran earned a hard-fought 1-0 win against United Arab Emirates in their Group A tie. Mehdi Ghayedi was the hero for Team Melli, his goal late in the first half keeping Iran on maximum points after two matches. Chances were few and far in between in the open-

ing 25 minutes with neither Khalid Eisa in UAE's goal nor Alireza Beiranvand for Iran being tested.

Iran had the ball in the net just after the half hour mark when Mehdi Taremi's scuffed shot fell kindly for Mehdi Ghayedi to steer home but it was ruled out for offside.

Just when it looked like the match would go into half-time on level terms, Ghayedi stepped up

to give Iran the lead in the third minute of added time, winning the ball off Khaled Aldhanhani inside the opposition box before slamming a near post shot past Eisa.

Three minutes into the second half, Iran threatened to double their lead when a Ghayedi corner kick found Jahanbakhsh whose flicked header needed Eisa's intervention.

Iran went close again in the 68th minute when Saleh Hardani delivered a cross from the right with Taremi winning the header despite being challenged by two UAE defenders, only to see the ball go agonisingly wide. A quick Iran counter attack 10 minutes later saw Sardar Azmoun laying the ball for Taremi to strike but the Inter Milan man - with only Eisa to beat - misjudged the flight of the ball.

UAE thought they had a late opportunity to level proceedings from the spot after referee Kim Jong-hyeok pointed to the spot for a handball by Hardani but upon VAR review, it was overturned and with that, ended the Emiratis' hopes of a comeback.

In Riffa, Ayase Ueda and Hide-masa Morita both scored twice as Japan cruised to a second successive win with Hajime Moriyasu's side handing Bahrain a 5-0 defeat.

Ueda put the Japanese ahead from the penalty spot in the 37th minute before doubling the advantage two minutes into the second half while two further goals in three minutes from Morita ensured the points were safe for the Samurai Blue.

Japan have scored 12 times in their first two games having won 7-0 against China PR in their opening match on Thursday and sit on top of Group C, two points clear of second-placed Saudi Arabia. Bahrain remain on three points after their opening win over Australia on the Gold Coast last week.

SPOTLIGHT

Captain De Silva hails Sri Lankan show

AFP
London

Sri Lanka captain Dhanan-
jaya de Silva said Pathum
Nissanka had proved him-
self the “best batsman”
in the country after the opener’s
superb century at the Oval helped
the team end their 10-year wait for
a Test win over England.

Nissanka made 127 not out as Sri
Lanka cruised to the target of 219,
before lunch on the fourth day as
they won the third Test by eight
wickets. England took the three-
match series 2-1 after victories at
Old Trafford (by five wickets) and
Lord’s (by 190 runs).

The victory was a significant
moment for Sri Lanka whose last
Test-match win over England was
a 100-run success at Headingley
back in 2014.

“This is one of the happiest mo-
ments in my career and my life,”

said de Silva. “We had a tough time
in the last two weeks so to come
here and get a win in English con-
ditions against an English team, it
is a very good moment for me, my
team, and my country as well.”

The victory was a personal tri-
umph for Nissanka, who only re-
turned to Test cricket following a
two-year exile at Lord’s. The
26-year-old was named player-
of-the-match after also making a
fine 64 in Sri Lanka’s first innings
at the Oval.

“The moment he came in, he
proved he is the best batsman in
Sri Lanka right now,” said De Silva.

England captain Ollie Pope,
meanwhile, admitted his side
“shot ourselves in the foot” after
two poor batting displays cost
them the chance of a first home
Test sweep since 2004 after a re-
juvenated team overwhelmed
the West Indies 3-0 earlier in the
season. Pope, on his Surrey home
ground, scored his first century

since stepping as skipper for the
injured Ben Stokes at the start of
this series. Despite his 154, Eng-
land declined from 261-3 to 325
all out in their first innings. Worse
followed as they were dismissed
for a mere 156 in just 34 overs sec-
ond time around. “It’s been disap-
pointing, on the third day we shot
ourselves in the foot,” said Pope.
“With the bat we weren’t good
enough and, in the second innings,
we weren’t up to it.”

When play resumed on Monday,
Sri Lanka needed only 125 more
runs for victory, while England re-
quired nine wickets.

Chris Woakes and Gus Atkinson
showed the strain of playing six
Tests in a relatively short space of
time, while the 20-year-old duo
Josh Hull and Shoaib Bashir never
threatened to derail Sri Lanka’s run
chase.

Atkinson, who had been carry-
ing a quad injury, was subsequent-
ly withdrawn from the one-day

squad to face Australia, with Ollie
Stone taking his place.

Atkinson, a 26-year-old Surrey
quick, made his debut during Eng-
land great James Anderson’s inter-
national farewell in July and has
enjoyed a sensational start to his
Test career, taking 34 wickets in six
matches at an average of just 20.17.

Atkinson appears set for a key
role during England’s tour of Pa-
kistan next month, with county
colleague Pope saying: “Obviously
there’s a few of our guys carrying
a few small injuries but credit to
them on the way they fronted up
and cracked on.”

Joe Root, who passed the Eng-
land record of 33 Test centuries
held by Alastair Cook with twin
hundreds at Lord’s, tried to put
Monday’s loss in context by telling
the BBC: “I don’t think we played
our best cricket this week and that
is going to happen from time to
time. Coldplay can’t be number
one every week.”



Sri Lanka's Dhananjaya de Silva in action during the second day of the third and final Test against England at The Oval, London, Britain on September 8, 2024. (Reuters)

CRICKET

Afghanistan-NZ Test Day 2 called off after huge mess

‘THIS IS A HUGE MESS. WE ARE NEVER COMING BACK HERE’

AFP
Greater Noida, India

Ground staff used electric
fans in a desperate bid to
dry the pitch in the Test
between Afghanistan
and New Zealand yesterday, but
play was called off for a second
straight day with one official call-
ing it “a huge mess”.

The one-off Test at Afghani-
stan’s adopted home near India’s
capital New Delhi was supposed
to start on Monday, but the toss
is yet to take place because of
rain and the poor condition of the
Greater Noida ground.

Yesterday, groundsmen cov-
ered areas of the pitch in antici-
pation of more rain, while others
waved electric fans over the worst
wet patches.

Ground staff dug up one wet
outfield area in the midwicket re-
gion, refilling it with dry soil and
laying fresh turf.

Umpires carried out repeated
inspections and finally called off
play in the mid-afternoon.

The venue, hosting its first
Test, has only basic drainage and
has been criticised for its facili-
ties dubbed “ill-equipped” by
The Times of India newspaper.

Despite sunshine on Monday
and yesterday the outfield re-
mained soaked after days of pre-
ceding monsoon rain.

The teams stayed in their hot-
els yesterday morning but New
Zealand, who were unable to
complete any of their training
sessions ahead of the Test, later
put up nets on the ground and
players went through their drills.
Afghanistan has hosted several



Groundsmen repair the outfield with artificial grass before the start of the one-off Test between Afghanistan and New Zealand at the Shaheed Vijay Singh Pathik Sports Complex in Greater Noida yesterday. (AFP)

Twenty20 and one-day inter-
nationals at Greater Noida since
2017. The Board of Control for
Cricket in India (BCCI) has of-
fered Afghanistan venues to train
and host matches outside their
troubled nation, including in the
northern Indian cities of Luc-
know and Dehradun.

Afghanistan Cricket Board
(ACB) officials have been cautious
about criticism, fearing it could
spoil relations with the BCCI, but
said they were disappointed.

“This is a huge mess. We are
never coming back here,” an ACB

official was quoted as saying by
Indian media.

But after the second day’s play
was scrapped, Afghanistan offi-
cials spoke officially to reporters.

“Everyone, including the
ground authorities, have worked
hard,” Menhajuddin Naz, the ACB
international cricket manager,
told reporters.

“Even if it had been any other
venue, they would have struggled
to get it back on time.”

Naz said they had been offered
to host the Test in the northern
city of Kanpur or the southern

city of Bengaluru, but had opted
for Greater Noida.

“We chose Greater Noida as it
was most convenient in terms of
logistics. It was closer to Delhi
and also connectivity from Kabul
was better,” said Naz.

This is only Afghanistan’s 10th
five-day match since they were
granted Test status in 2017.

There has been no public re-
action from Tim Southee’s New
Zealand, who will next travel to
Sri Lanka for two Tests before
returning for three more against
India.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Stokes returns to England squad for Pakistan Test series

AFP
London

Captain **Ben Stokes** will
return to the England Test
side after missing this
month’s series victory
against Sri Lanka, the country’s
cricket board (ECB) said yesterday
after they announced a 17-mem-
ber squad for October’s tour of
Pakistan.

Stokes, who sustained a ham-
string tear in English domestic
tournament The Hundred last
month, is continuing his recovery
along with Zak Crawley who frac-
tured his right little finger at Edg-
baston in July.

England will tour Pakistan for a
three-match series starting from
October 7.

“Zak Crawley returns to the
squad after missing out since the
West Indies series in July. Cap-
tain Ben Stokes is also included
as he continues his recovery from
a hamstring tear,” ECB said in a
statement.

Spinner Rehan Ahmed, who

made his red-ball debut in Kara-
chi during the last Pakistan tour
in December 2022, returns to
the squad with counterpart Jack
Leach who will feature for the first
time since the opening test in In-
dia in January this year.

The 20-year-old Josh Hull, who
made his Test debut in the third
test against Sri Lanka on Friday,
is also included in the squad along
with the uncapped duo of Brydon
Carse and batter Jordan Cox.

England have added eight play-
ers from the 2022 squad - Rehan,
Harry Brook, Crawley, Ben Duck-
ett, Leach, Ollie Pope, Joe Root,
and Stokes - who had won the last
test series 3-0 against Pakistan.

The Pakistan Cricket Board is
expected to announce the venues
for the series later this week.

SQUAD: Ben Stokes (c), Rehan
Ahmed, Gus Atkinson, Shoaib
Bashir, Harry Brook, Brydon
Carse, Jordan Cox, Zak Crawley,
Ben Duckett, Josh Hull, Jack
Leach, Ollie Pope, Matthew Potts,
Joe Root, Jamie Smith, Ollie Stone,
Chris Woakes.



GOLF

PGA, PIF meeting in NYC for ‘multiple days’

Reuters
New York

Tiger Woods and a con-
tingent of PGA Tour of-
ficials are in New York for
“multiple days” of meet-
ings with representatives from the
Saudi Arabia Public Investment
Fund, a sign of increased intention
in lagging negotiations to merge
professional golf circuits, *ESPN*
reported yesterday.

PGA Tour commissioner Jay
Monahan said last month before
the PGA’s Tour Championship at
East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta that
the priority level in negotiations
was “enhanced” due to player and
fan feedback that made clear they
wanted a resolution that brought
together the best in the game.

ESPN reported terms of the deal
are centered around the idea the
PIF would add \$1bn into PGA Tour
Enterprises, a for-profit entity
created with the addition of Strate-
gic Sports Group.

Monahan indicated the PGA
Tour was in a newfound position
of strength with financial back-
ing and sponsorship commitment
increased in 2024 while stating
there was a strong push to progress
talks with the PIF, which funds LIV
Golf.

“What we’re hearing from fans,
what we’re hearing from players
- we’re both in position to bring

the best players in the world back
together. I think that’s a good and
aspirational goal,” Monahan said
last month.

“As I said earlier, we’re in those
discussions. We’re at the table.
They’re complex. It’s going to take
time. But ultimately, the PGA Tour
is the best tour in the world. ... I
think it’s the right time to be hav-
ing these conversations, not only
for the PGA Tour, but for the game.
That’s why we’re having those
conversations.”

Rory McIlroy voiced frustration
over lagging negotiations during
the event at East Lake.

A “framework agreement”
striving to combine in some form
the existing PGA Tour, LIV Golf
and DP World Tour was announced
in June 2023.

ESPN reported the PGA Tour
is represented in negotiations by
Woods, golfer Adam Scott, PGA
Tour Enterprises chairman Joe
Gorder and Fenway Sports Group
owner John W Henry.

Henry is one of several Ameri-
can pro sports franchise owners
involved in SSG, the conglomerate
established to offer equity to PGA
Tour players.

“I think when you get into pro-
ductive conversations,” Mona-
han said at East Lake, “that en-
hances the likelihood of positive
outcomes and that enhances the
spirit of those very conversations.
I think that’s where things stand.”

BOTTOMLINE

Ugandan athlete Cheptegei’s killer dies in hospital

AFP
Nairobi

A Kenyan man who killed
Ugandan runner **Re-
becca Cheptegei** has
died from injuries sus-
tained when he poured petrol over
the Olympic athlete, the hospital
treating him said yesterday.

The attack on the 33-year-old
has been greeted with sorrow
and anger as yet another horrific
example of gender-based vio-
lence in Kenya. Police said Dick-
son Ndiema Marangach, 32, as-
saulted Cheptegei in her home in
Endebess near the Ugandan bor-
der on September 1. The mother-
of-two suffered 80 percent burns
and died last week.

Marangach also incurred 41
percent burns, according to the
Moi Teaching and Referral Hospi-
tal in the Rift Valley city of El-



doret. “He developed respiratory
failure as a result of the severe
airway burns and sepsis that led
to his eventual death,” the hospi-
tal said in a statement, add-
ing that he died at 6:30 pm (1530
GMT) on Monday.

“We consider his case as justice
delivered,” Cheptegei’s father,
Joseph Cheptegei, told AFP.

“We’re now only interested in
burying our daughter,” he added,
expressing exhaustion over the
ordeal. Cheptegei is due to be

buried on Saturday near her fam-
ily home in eastern Uganda, ac-
cording to the country’s Olympic
Committee.

Her father criticised officials,
saying they should have done
more to protect his daughter after
her complaints about Marangach.
“I blame the police for taking
too long to act when we had re-
peatedly sought their interven-
tion,” he said.

Local media say Cheptegei’s
young daughters witnessed the
attack, which came just weeks
after she made her Olympic de-
but in the women’s marathon in
Paris, where she finished 44th.

Police said Marangach snuck
into her home while she was at
church with her children.

Her family say the couple had
argued over ownership of the
property where she lived with her
16-year-old sister Dorcas Cherop
and daughters.

Kenyan newspaper *The Daily
Nation* reported on Monday how
Cherop witnessed the assault.

“It was a horrifying scene that I
don’t want to remember,” she told
the paper. “When I dashed out
with a blanket so as to cover up
my sister and extinguish the fire
which was consuming her, Dick-
son kicked me, and I fell down.”

“He threatened to slash me
with the panga (machete) he was
carrying,” she said.

Violence against women is
widespread in Kenya, which saw
725 femicide cases in 2022 alone,
according to the latest UN figures.

A 2023 report by Kenya’s Na-
tional Bureau of Statistics found
34 percent of women had experi-
enced physical violence since the
age of 15.

At least two other athletes,
Agnes Tirop and Damaris Mutua,
have lost their lives in domestic
violence incidents since 2021.

TENNIS

Canada and Germany win opening ties in Davis Cup

'He came out very good, very focussed. It was very important for the whole team' to start with a win'

Reuters
Manchester

Canada began their Davis Cup Finals campaign in confident fashion as wins for Denis Shapovalov and Felix Auger-Aliassime assured them of victory in their opening Group D tie against Argentina in Manchester yesterday.

Left-hander Shapovalov may have slipped down the rankings but showed shades of his best form as he beat 31st-ranked Francisco Cerundolo 7-5 6-3.

Auger-Aliassime was then equally assured in a 6-3 6-3 victory over Sebastian Baez to put Canada 2-0 ahead with a doubles rubber still to be played.

Earlier Germany posted a 3-0 victory over Slovakia in Zhuhai, China which is hosting the Group C matches.

Maximilian Marterer beat Lukas Klein 6-4 7-5 before Yannick Hanfmann beat Jozef Kovalik 3-6 6-3 7-6(3). Tim Puetz and Kevin Krawietz then completed the job with a doubles victory.

"I've very happy. We performed well today," reflected German captain Michael Kohlmann. "In all matches we kept trying to find ways to win somehow. Yannick maybe wasn't playing his best tennis but he kept fighting and found a way to win the match, and Maxi gave us a great start."

"He came out very good, very focussed, very concentrated. It was very important for the whole team to start with a win."

World No. 104 Marterer set the

tone for the overall result, proving efficient on serve and generally unperturbed by Klein - ranked 24 spots beneath him - in what was his first live singles contest in a Davis Cup tie.

"I'm pretty happy with my performance," Marterer said. "I served well, stayed calm in some important moments that's what matters a lot in tennis, so happy to get through it."

For all Marterer's assuredness, it was a different story for Hanfmann - the world No. 96 and German No. 1 this week - who got off to a sluggish start against Slovakian No. 1 Kovalik.

"It wasn't the best performance from me today but I served well, I stayed in the match and I was able to find a way to win," Hanfmann reflected.

"Sometimes it's not pretty but if you get the win in the end it's a good performance."

Sixteen nations are competing in four groups in Manchester, Bologna, Valencia and Zhuhai with the top two from each group moving through to the Davis Cup Final 8 Knockout Stage which is being held in Malaga, Spain in November.

In other ties, last year's runners-up Australia are up against France in Valencia in Group B while the Netherlands face Belgium in Bologna in Group A.

Reigning champions Italy begin their quest in Group A today against Brazil.

Britain's Draper working to get fit ahead of action

Jack Draper is working on his fit-



Canada's Denis Shapovalov in action during his singles match against Argentina's Francisco Cerundolo on day one of Davis Cup - Group D - matches at AO Arena, Manchester, Britain, yesterday. (Reuters)

ness after picking up a niggles at the US Open and is set to link up with his Davis Cup teammates, a spokesperson for Britain's number one said.

The 22-year-old lost 7-5 7-6(3) 6-2 to eventual champion Jannik Sinner in the semi-finals at Flushing Meadows on Friday, with the Briton vomiting three times in the second set as he struggled with New York's heat and humidity at the year's final Grand Slam.

"After a short turnaround following the US Open, Jack will be joining the team in Manchester ahead of the first match on Wednesday," the spokesperson told British media.

"Jack and his team are working hard to get fit and Leon (Smith) will take all this into account when he makes his team selection."

Captain Smith's team take on Finland today followed by Argentina on Friday, and 2022 champions

Canada on Sunday in Group D of the tournament.

Australia captain Hewitt shrugs off De Minaur loss

Australia's hopes of ending their 21-year title drought in Davis Cup have suffered a blow with Alex de Minaur ruled out of the group stage due to lingering problems with his hip.

De Minaur made a run to the US Open quarter-finals but was ham-

pered by the hip as he exited the Grand Slam in a straight sets defeat by Briton Jack Draper. Australia captain Lleyton Hewitt confirmed the world number 11 was sidelined ahead of their opener against France in Valencia.

"Alex has done some incredible stuff in Davis Cup over the last three or four years now," said Hewitt.

"But he's been battling since Wimbledon and he's hasn't really been close to 100%. He was desperate to play, but in the end it really wasn't much of a choice."

Hewitt said Australia, also pooled with the Czech Republic and Spain, were in an "awfully tough group".

However, he was confident his team could progress without De Minaur, pointing to the form of players at the US Open.

Alexei Popyrin upset Novak Djokovic at Flushing Meadows to reach the last 16, while Jordan Thompson and Max Purcell combined to win the men's doubles title.

"We back ourselves against anyone," he said. "These guys put in the hard yards, not just this week leading into this tie, but throughout the year. They'll be full of confidence when we start."

Australia, the second most successful nation in Davis Cup behind the United States, reached the finals of the last two tournaments, losing to Italy last year and Canada in 2022. Australia won the last of their 28 titles in 2003, with Hewitt winning a singles rubber to help beat Spain in the Melbourne decider.

FORMULA ONE

Designer Newey excited to work with Alonso

Reuters
Silverstone

Adrian Newey, Formula One's star designer, said he was thrilled to be joining Fernando Alonso at Aston Martin next season but expressed regret at missing a chance to work with Lewis Hamilton.

The arrival of 'the man who can see air', a genius whose ability to conjure up winning cars from his drawing board has made him one of the highest paid figures in the sport, was announced yesterday.

Several teams had been chasing Newey since he decided to leave Red Bull, including Ferrari - the team seven-times world champion Hamilton is joining from Mercedes next year.

"I've always had a huge amount of respect for Fernando, and for Lewis," the 65-year-old Briton told Reuters Television at Aston Martin's Silverstone headquarters. "It wasn't possible to work with both of them, different teams, so I had to choose one."

Newey, whose cars have so far won 25 drivers' and constructors' championships for Williams, McLaren and Red Bull, said Spain's double world champion Alonso, a man he described as a former 'arch-rival', was a true great. "Fernando, I think he's just



Aston Martin chairperson Lawrence Stroll with drivers Lance Stroll and Fernando Alonso, and new managing technical partner Adrian Newey after the press conference at AMR Technology Campus, Silverstone, Britain, yesterday. (Reuters)

a mightily impressive driver and individual. Like me, he's been in the sport for a long time now, but he still remains fully motivated, and he's just such a character," Newey said.

"One thing they all tend to have in common is a lot of mental reserve," he explained.

"And by that I mean that when

they're driving the car, it feels like they're only using 10% of their brain to drive the car.

"The rest is going into thinking about what the car's doing, what they need to do to change their driving style, to change the settings in the car, how the race is developing, where their rivals are, when to push the tyres, when

to ease up on the tyres, all those things. "They have that huge reserve, and that also typically makes them very good at describing what the car is doing."

Newey left McLaren before Hamilton made his F1 debut in 2007 but the list of champions he has worked with includes Ayrton Senna, Mika Hakkinen, Sebastian Vettel and Max Verstappen.

"I do have a huge amount of respect for Lewis and what he's achieved, and again, the way he's conducted himself," said Newey.

"I think the way people conduct themselves is such an important thing as well.

"So yes, I would love to work for Lewis, or work with Lewis rather, and I believe he feels the same way - I haven't been in any regular contact with him - but unfortunately it wasn't to be."

Newey leaves Red Bull after a year in which that team's boss Christian Horner was investigated and ultimately cleared of alleged improper behaviour to a female employee.

Joining Ferrari would have meant a move abroad but Newey said that element had not been a key consideration.

"All the foreign teams now, their meetings are in English anyway. I think in that sense, it could have been an adventure. It just didn't quite pan out," he said.

Aston Martin hope to win big with 'bargain' Newey

Silverstone: Aston Martin owner Lawrence Stroll hailed Adrian Newey as a bargain after announcing the star designer would be joining his Formula One team next March as Managing Technical Partner and shareholder.

Newey, 65, said in May he was leaving champions Red Bull in search of a new challenge and he has found it in the task of taking the Silverstone-based outfit to the top of the championship.

The 2025 season is due to start on March 16 with the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne and is the last before a new engine era and major rules revamp in 2026. Newey will start on March 1.

"I can tell you Adrian is a bargain," Stroll said of the man he will reportedly be paying somewhere between £20 to £30m (\$26 to 39m) a year - making him one of the highest paid in the paddock. "I've been in business for over 40 years now, and I've never been more certain. It's not an investment. He's a shareholder and a partner," added the Canadian, describing Newey as a key element to the team's title aspirations. "We intend to be around for a very long time together. So it's relatively inexpensive for everything Adrian brings in a partnership."

Aston Martin are currently fifth overall but Newey, impressed by the owner's vision and the gleaming facilities, looked forward to helping them scale the heights. "They have all the key pieces of infrastructure needed to make Aston Martin a world championship-winning team and

I am very much looking forward to helping reach that goal," said the Briton. He described Aston Martin as uniquely 'old school' in the sense of having a wealthy owner actively running the show and following his passion.

Cars designed by Newey have won 25 drivers' and constructors' championships for Williams, McLaren and Red Bull. His 2023 Red Bull was the most dominant in the sport's history with 21 wins from 22 races.

Newey, who was also sought by Ferrari and McLaren, will have overall responsibility for the cars raced by 43-year-old double world champion Fernando Alonso - an 'arch-rival' he has long wanted to work with - and Stroll's son Lance.

The team have also recruited top talent from rivals. Former Mercedes engine head Andy Cowell was announced in July as new chief executive officer, replacing former McLaren boss Martin Whitmarsh, while former Ferrari technical director Enrico Cardile has also arrived.

Aston Martin have an exclusive partnership with Honda, Red Bull's current engine suppliers, for five years from 2026. Stroll said he had been determined to sign Newey as soon as the designer became available and initial conversations confirmed the interest was mutual.

"It's the biggest story since the Aston Martin name returned to the sport and another demonstration of our ambition to build a Formula One team capable of fighting for world championships," he declared.

SWIMMING

World Aquatics boss asks anti-doping agencies to meet and bury the hatchet

Reuters
Sydney

World Aquatics (WA) president **Husain al-Musallam** does not think swimming is facing an image crisis but wants the global and national anti-doping agencies to meet and iron out their differences.

Three years after 23 Chinese swimmers were cleared to compete in the Tokyo Olympics despite testing positive for banned substances, the spectre of doping loomed over the competition at the

recent Paris Games. The issue has been further exacerbated by the ongoing feud between the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

USADA is sceptical of the probe into the case involving the Chinese swimmers, while its own undercover tactics of using dope-tainted swimmers to catch drug cheats has irked WADA.

"Swimming is doing good, I'm not worried," al-Musallam, who was in New Delhi to attend Sunday's general assembly of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), told Reuters.



"Whenever somebody raises a concern, it should not make me worried. Rather it should make me rethink what I can do to improve

the situation and make it clearer."

The 64-year-old Kuwaiti administrator, also an OCA director general, was satisfied with the probe into the Chinese swimmers some of whom, he said, were tested 20 times this year alone.

WADA rules needed to be respected and any speculation about doping was idle gossip, he said.

Asked about the ongoing dispute among anti-doping agencies, al-Musallam acknowledged the need for talks also engaging the International Testing Agency (ITA) and the China Anti-Doping Agency (CHINAADA).

"It is in fact one of the recom-

mendations of our anti-doping review committee," al-Musallam said.

"To call these five bodies, sit together and say 'What's going on? Here are the rules, and this is what's happened. These are the results and this is the analysis.' We need to be more positive about the sport, and not be so negative."

"If there is something need to be fixed, we are always ready to fix it. But show me the truth and reality."

WADA conveyed growing concerns about US athletes attending major events without being sufficiently tested in a recent communication to USADA.

SPOTLIGHT

Deschamps sure Mbappe will be back among goals

Mbappe was brought on in the 67th in 2-0 win over Belgium

Reuters
Lyon, France

France coach Didier Deschamps said he has no concerns about the form of Kylian Mbappe and expects Real Madrid's new forward to rediscover his scoring touch when he reaches full fitness.

After France opened their Nations League campaign with a 3-1 defeat by Italy in Paris, Deschamps fielded a much-changed team against Belgium on Monday, with Mbappe and Antoine Griezmann starting on the bench in their 2-0 win.

Mbappe struggled at Euro 2024 after breaking his nose against Austria and took four games before scoring his first league goals for Madrid after his move from Paris St Germain.

"The French team will always be stronger with him and I'm convinced that in a month he will be better," Deschamps said. "There are very high demands in his club. I have no worries with Kylian."

Mbappe was brought on in the 67th against Belgium and looked bright as he tried to add his name to the scoresheet, missing narrowly from a tight angle 10 minutes from time and having an effort saved in the 86th minute. Michael Olise and Manu Kone were handed their first caps against Italy while Lucas Digne played his first game for France in more than two years against Belgium, with Matteo Guendouzi also returning.

Deschamps says he is using the Nations League as a platform to widen the pool of talent at his disposal and plans to continue down that path regardless of the results.

"I'm sticking to my course, to put as many players as possible in situations where we can test them," he said. "It is the time to do that even if it you lose games. You don't replace players with 50 caps by snapping your fingers. "I'm well aware that I am not putting the team in the best conditions," he said of the numerous changes to the line-up. But we have to go through it. It gives us answers."

CAPTAIN DE BRUYNE'S BELGIUM FUTURE IN DOUBT

Belgium captain Kevin De Bruyne's future with the national side has been thrown into doubt after he slammed his teammates as "not good enough" after a 2-0 Nations League defeat to France. The 33-year-old Manchester City midfielder vented his frustration at the players and coach Domenico Tedesco's tactics after Monday's loss in Lyon.

De Bruyne complained a lot was not right with the Red Devils - third in the 2018 World Cup - who sank after a promising first 20 minutes. "There were six of us at the back. Even in the second half when we were trailing it was like that," he said.



Belgium's midfielder Kevin De Bruyne (left) and France's forward Kylian Mbappe speak after their UEFA Nations League match in Lyon on Monday. (AFP)

"It's our way of playing that is in question. There are players who did not fulfil their role, full stop. If you are not good enough, you still have to give everything, which some people aren't doing. I can accept that we are no longer at the level of 2018 but things are unacceptable."

De Bruyne was also filmed on the sidelines saying several times to technical director Franky Vercauteren "Ik stop" ("I stop") with the national team. Belgian media reported that De Bruyne also made comments in the locker

room that were hurtful to his teammates.

But Tedesco insisted he did not believe that the 107-times capped player was set to exit. "Kevin is a winner, it's normal for him to be disappointed. But I don't fear his departure," said Tedesco.

Belgium are third in League A Group 2, level on three points with France, with Italy leading with six points. On Tuesday, visiting a children's hospital in Brussels, De Bruyne said he had "slept little" but it was "neither the place nor the time to talk about football".

NATIONS LEAGUE

Odegaard injured during Norway's victory over Austria

Reuters
Oslo

Martin Odegaard suffered what appeared to be a serious ankle injury as Norway beat Austria 2-1 in the Nations League on Monday, with goals from Felix Horn Myhre and a late winner from Erling Haaland.

The Arsenal skipper left the pitch after receiving treatment for several minutes in the second half following a collision with Austria's Christoph Baumgartner, and Norway boss Stale Solbakken said it looked bad.

"Martin Odegaard's injury looked bad in the dressing room as well I saw he was sitting with the physiotherapists around him but he had no chance to continue and we know it was an ankle sprain," the coach said. "Yes it's a sprain, and as those of us who had played football know, with luck it can turn out ok if the ligaments aren't torn."

Norway's doctor Ola Sand added that the 25-year-old was doing well, but that an MRI could be carried out tomorrow. "Martin is doing quite well now. He got a small ankle sprain. We will see throughout the evening and tomorrow what happens next and what we will do about it."

"Ankle sprains are difficult to deal with straight away, so we almost have to see how things go forward. We will examine him when we are back at the hotel. Maybe we use ultrasound to look at it. If we are unsure, there will be an MRI tomorrow," Sand said.

Norway are second in League B Group 3, level on four points with Slovenia, who they will play next on Oct. 10.

Meanwhile, Italy kept up their

perfect start to the UEFA Nations League. The Italians built on an impressive win away in France at the weekend as they beat Israel 2-1 in a game played on neutral territory in Budapest due to the security situation in the Middle East.

Goals in each half from Davide Frattesi and Moise Kean were enough for Italy to win in a subdued atmosphere at the Borsik Arena, home of Honved. Luciano Spalletti's team have reacted well to their disastrous European Championship title defence, which ended at the last-16 stage, and deserved their second win in a matter of days.

Frattesi followed his goal in the 3-1 win in France by chesting home Federico Dimarco's pinpoint cross in the 38th minute to open the scoring. Fiorentina striker Kean made it 2-0 just after the hour mark with his first Italy goal in almost exactly three years, before Mohamed Abu Fani pulled one back at the end for Israel.

Italy are top of Nations League Group A2 with the maximum six points, while France and Belgium are level on three points apiece.

Meanwhile, RB Leipzig's Benjamin Sesko bagged a hat-trick as Slovenia beat Kazakhstan 3-0 in Ljubljana. In Group B4, Wales followed their goalless draw against Turkey by beating Montenegro 2-1 away for their first win under new coach Craig Bellamy.

They got off to a terrific start, with Kieffer Moore and Harry Wilson both scoring inside the first three minutes. Driton Camaj then pulled one back for the hosts. Turkey beat Iceland 3-1 in Izmir, a game in which Kerem Akturkoglu of Benfica hit a hat-trick. There were also wins on Monday for Romania and Kosovo respectively in League C.



Norway's captain Martin Odegaard (centre) is consoled after he got injured during the Nations League match against Austria on Monday.

FOCUS

Another AFCON blow for Ghana, Diaz strike rescues Morocco

AFP
Johannesburg

A dismal start to 2025 Africa Cup of Nations qualifying by star-studded Ghana continued on Monday when they conceded a late goal to only draw 1-1 with lowly Niger. Defenders scored both goals in the Group F clash in Moroccan city Berkane with Alidu Seidu putting Ghana ahead on 44 minutes and Oumar Sako equalising after 81 minutes.

In Group B, top-ranked African team Morocco needed 93 minutes to break down stubborn minnows Lesotho in Agadir with Real Madrid midfielder Brahim Diaz netting for a 1-0 win. Ceding home advantage because they lack an international-standard stadium, Lesotho had been written off as no-hopers against opponents 135 places higher in the world rankings.

Niger were another nation unable to enjoy home advantage, moving their matchday two fixture to Morocco because they do not have a suitable venue. But the Nigeriens shrugged off the handicap to snatch a point when Sako slammed the ball into the net after a goalmouth scramble following a corner.

Ghana, reeling from a shock 1-0 home loss to Angola last week in their opening qualifier, had gone ahead when Seidu scored with a deflected shot from the edge of the area.

The failure of four-time African champions Ghana to win either



Ghana's Mohammed Salisu (left) vies for ball with Niger's Oumarou Aliou.

qualifier is baffling given their formidable line-up. Five of the team that began against Niger - Tariq Lamptey, Thomas Partey, Abdul Fatawu, Mohammed Kudus and Antoine Semenyo - play in the Premier League. A sixth starter against Angola from the Premier League, Jordan Ayew, was dropped by coach Otto Addo with Inaki Williams from La Liga outfit Athletic Bilbao taking his place.

Nine starters against Niger operate in England, Spain or France, leaving goalkeeper Lawrence Ati-Zigi and midfielder Majeed Ashimeru as the only two not with a top-five European league club. Morocco, automatic AFCON qualifiers as 2025 hosts but playing to gain competitive match practice, kept many stars on the bench until early in the second half.

Sensing a shock outcome, coach Walid Regragui introduced four

substitutes on 56 minutes, including Diaz, Youssef en-Nesyri and Hakim Ziyech. The trio combined to win the match with a Ziyech cross chested back by En-Nesyri to Diaz, who beat Lesotho captain and goalkeeper Sekhoane Moerane with a low shot into the corner.

Former champions Senegal made a disappointing debut last week, conceding an added-time goal to be held 1-1 at home by Burkina Faso. Like Ghana, they were desperate for maximum points from their second outing, and achieved that goal by edging brave Burundi 1-0 through a 71st-minute penalty converted by Ismaïla Sarr.

After exceeding expectations by drawing in South Africa last week, Uganda went top of Group K by defeating Congo Brazzaville 2-0 in Kampala via goals from Aziz Kayondo and Jude Ssemugabi.

Depay joins struggling Corinthians in Brazil

Sao Paulo: Struggling Brazilian giants Corinthians have signed Dutch attacker Memphis Depay, a free agent since his contract with Atletico Madrid ended during the summer.

"Memphis Depay is a Corinthian," the club wrote on social media late on Monday. The club added that the contract was "until 2026". Local media reported that Corinthians, mired in financial problems, will fork out a total of around 70mn reais (\$12.5mn) and that a team sponsor will cover part of the salary. Depay, 30, started for Netherlands as they lost to England in the Euro 2024 semi-finals, has scored 46 goals and provided 32 assists in 98 appearances for his country.

The attacker came through at PSV Eindhoven and had spells at Manchester United, Lyon and Barcelona before joining Atletico at the beginning of 2023. He scored 13 goals in 40 games, but his time in Madrid was marred by injuries. Corinthians of Sao Paulo, known as the "Timao" (Great Team),



are one of the best supported teams in the country but are in the relegation places in the Brazilian Serie A, lying 17th after 25 games league although they have qualified for the quarter-finals of the Copa do Brasil and Copa Sudamericana.

China slaps lifetime bans on 43 over gambling, match-fixing

Beijing: Chinese football banned 43 people for lifeyesterday over alleged gambling and match-fixing in the domestic game, China's public security ministry said, according to state media.

The news came hours before a home 2026 World Cup qualifier between China and Saudi Arabia and less than a week after the national team suffered a humiliating 7-0 defeat to rivals Japan. The Chinese Football Association (CFA) accused Son, who played for Shandong Taishan in the Chinese Super League, of participating in match-fixing and taking bribes.

The international midfielder, who appeared in three of South Korea's four matches at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, returned to South Korea in March after being held in China since May 2023.

in a two-year probe into illegal gambling and match-fixing in the domestic game, China's public security ministry said, according to state media.

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The international midfielder, who appeared in three of South Korea's four matches at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, returned to South Korea in March after being held in China since May 2023.

Beijing said at the time that he was detained "on suspicion of accepting bribes by non-state employees", without providing details.

A representative for the 32-year-old Son, who now plays in South Korea's top domestic league, told Yonhap News Agency they were "bewildered" by the allegations and that Son would hold a news conference to address the claims. Also banned from Chinese football for life is Jin Jingdao, another former Shandong Taishan player, and fellow Chinese internationals Guo Tianyu and Gu Chao.

China's football governing body has itself been under scrutiny. About 10 high-ranking CFA officials have been brought down in corruption probes so far.