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SPOTLIGHT

Qatar to host 2025 World Endurance Championship season opener

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Lusail International Circuit (LIC) is set to host the season opener of the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) next spring, titled the Qatar 1812 KM - 2025 FIA World Endurance Championship. This thrilling event is named in honour of Qatar's National Day.

Taking place from February 26 to 28, tickets for the motorsport spectacle are now on sale. Fans will witness multiple cars racing simultaneously across two categories: Hypercar and LMGT3, in an intense battle that will last up to ten hours.

A 200 Qatari Riyal ticket valid for all three days of the event provides access to two prime viewing areas: the Main Grandstand and Lusail Hill. While the former offers an excellent view of the start/finish line and pit lane action, the latter is a dedicated elevated viewing platform located at Turn 1, providing spectators with an unparalleled vantage point of one of the most exciting parts of the track. Additionally, Children under 12 can attend free of charge, making this an exciting family-friendly event.

Now entering its thirteenth year, the WEC continues to be the world's premier international endurance championship. In 2025, the series will span eight rounds,

with races in Qatar, Italy, Belgium, France, Brazil, the USA, Japan, and Bahrain, reinforcing its status as one of the most prestigious championships in motorsport.

Following the success of the 2024 season, a minimum of 14 manufacturers are expected to compete.

Among the highlights is nine-time MotoGP world champion Valentino Rossi, who transitioned from two wheels to four, driving the BMW M4 GT3 #46 in the new LMGT3 category. Additionally, the renowned Iron Dames, a project aimed at supporting women in motorsport team, will also be participating in the event, driving their iconic Lamborghini Huracán GT3 EVO2 #83 in their distinctive hot pink racing suits.

Last but not least, former Formula 1 world champion Jenson Button will continue his FIA World Endurance Championship campaign with the JOTA Sport team in 2025, bringing his star power to the privateer British squad after their victory at the 6 Hours of Spa-Francorchamps last year. For more details and updates, follow LIC on social media or visit the official website: tickets.lcsc.qa

EVENT SCHEDULE

February 26, 2025: Free practice sessions
February 27, 2025: Qualifying sessions
February 28, 2025: Qatar 1812 KM - 2025 FIA World Endurance Championship



Taking place from February 26 to 28, tickets for the FIA World Endurance Championship at Lusail International Circuit are now on sale.

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Lopez optimistic despite Qatar's sluggish start

'Even though we have one point from two matches, we still have eight games left'

Agencies
Vientiane, Laos

Head coach Marquez Lopez remained positive despite Qatar having to settle for a 2-2 draw against North Korea in Group A of the 2026 World Cup Qualifiers on Tuesday.

Akram Affif cancelled out Ri Il-song's opener with Almoez Ali giving Qatar the lead just before the break, however, North Korea fought back to level the tie through Kang Kuk-chol as both teams registered their first point after opening day defeats. "We started the match with the goal of winning, which was reflected in our attacking formation and our performance throughout the two halves," said Lopez.

"We controlled the match and dominated its course and were close to achieving victory but the circumstances changed after half-time, due to the rain, so the draw came with the taste of a loss. Both teams were on equal terms in the first half but we were better for most of the periods and managed to equalise early. After the red card for the Korean player, we made offensive changes in order to score and we came out winners in the first half."

North Korea equalised in the second half following Kang's set-piece but despite Qatar having the lion's share of possession when the match resumed, the two-time AFC Asian Cup champions could not convert their chances.

"In the second half, North Korea equalised from a set-piece and it is true that we were superior in numbers but the rain-soaked pitch did not allow us to move quickly and pass the ball comfortably, especially with the defensive formation of the Korea team, so we were unable to score."

Lopez, however, remains confident of Qatar's chances ahead of their fixtures against Kyrgyzstan and Iran in October. "Even though we have one point from two matches, we still have eight games ahead of us. We will do our best to achieve victories and gain the points that will enable us to compete strongly for qualification with the teams in Group A," he said.

JAPAN COACH SLAMS BAHRAIN FANS AFTER ROUT

Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu hit out at Bahrain fans for trying to distract his players with laser pointers and booing his country's national anthem during their World Cup qualifying clash. Japan won 5-0 in



Qatar coach Marquez Lopez reacts during the World Cup qualifying match against North Korea in Vientiane, Laos, on Tuesday.

Manama to continue their impressive start to the Asian qualifying third round, following last week's 7-0 home thrashing of China.

But Moriyasu was incensed by fans who aimed a green laser light at striker Ayase Ueda's eyes as he prepared to take a first-half penalty, which he scored. The coach was also left fuming after home fans booed the Japanese anthem before the game at Bahrain's National Stadium on Tuesday.

"Different countries have different cultures and worldviews and I want to accept that diversity," said Moriyasu. "But I would

like to see an end to the booing that happened during the national anthems at today's game, and the attempts to obstruct my players, which could have done them physical damage."

Ueda kept his cool despite the distraction and tucked his penalty past goalkeeper Ebrahim Lutfalla to open the scoring in the 37th minute.

The Feyenoord striker doubled Japan's lead early in the second half before Hide-masa Morita notched a brace and Koki Ogawa scored a fifth to complete the rout. "The Bahrain team were able to compete in

a very fair manner and I would like the fans to do the same," said Moriyasu.

Japan's win put them clear at the top of Group C after two games, two points ahead of Saudi Arabia. The top two teams are guaranteed a place at the 2026 World Cup, with the third and fourth-placed sides going into a further round of qualifying.

Japan play Saudi Arabia away in their next game, on October 10, before taking on Australia at home five days later. Moriyasu brushed off suggestions that Japan had it easy.

"We didn't create many chances in the first half today and Bahrain had their own opportunities to score," he said. "I'm glad that we were able to ride that out. The final score was a big win for us but it wasn't an easy game."

AUSTRALIA 'DISAPPOINTED' WITH INDONESIA DRAW

Australia football head coach Graham Arnold said his side were "extremely disappointed" after their goal-drought continued into a second World Cup qualifier, this time leading to a 0-0 draw with Indonesia in Jakarta. The Socceroos dominated in front of almost 80,000 fans at the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, but sit second-from-bottom of Group C with a single point from their opening two qualifying games.

Australia again failed to score following their shock 1-0 defeat at home to Bahrain last week in their opening qualifier. The Socceroos had 19 shots against Indonesia and dominated possession to force 15 corners, but still could not hit the back of the net. "It was a vastly improved performance, but we're extremely disappointed because how many chances do we create? How many chances do we give?" said an exasperated Arnold. "It's been a common theme for over a year."

Arnold praised his team for dominating the game despite the hostile home crowd, but rued the result. "The boys put in the effort. They all admitted their performance wasn't good enough in the first game (against Bahrain)," he added.

Australia next face China in Adelaide, then Japan away in next month's qualifiers, but the Socceroos boss insisted there was no cause for concern. "There are eight games to go, so it's not a disaster, but I have to go home and do a lot of thinking."

Bayern Munich teenager Nestory Irankunda had Australia's best chance of the game when he hit the post after half an hour.

China coach under pressure with World Cup hopes in peril

Beijing: China coach Branko Ivankovic was under pressure yesterday to quit after less than seven months in the job with their hopes of reaching the 2026 World Cup in danger. China are bottom of their group in the third round of Asian qualifying following two defeats in as many games, the latest a 2-1 home loss to Saudi Arabia on Tuesday.

The Saudis played much of the game in Dalian with 10 men following the 19th-minute dismissal of Mohamed Kanno, but they were the better side in the second half and scored the winner at the death through Hassan Kadish's second header of the night. Boos rang around the stadium at the final whistle with Croatian coach Ivankovic the target of much of the home fans' anger. On the social media platform Weibo, the hashtags "Chinese football. No hope" and "Ivankovic step down" began trending within minutes.

Since being appointed in February to replace Serbia's Aleksandar Jankovic, Ivankovic has won one of his six games in charge, drawing two and losing three. Asked about his future afterwards, the 70-year-old said: "The question shouldn't be directed at me."

China have reached the World Cup only once, in 2002, suggesting problems run deeper than the coach. Hours before the game Chinese football banned 43 people, most of them players, for life over alleged gambling and match-fixing.

Nevertheless, heavyweight state media pointed the finger at Ivankovic, whose side was hammered 7-0 at Japan last week. "If a general is incompetent, the army will be exhausted," the *People's Daily* said in a comment piece which went viral on Weibo and criticised Ivankovic's tactics and substitutions. "Someone should step forward and take responsibility."

Ivankovic, whose long managerial career has included spells in Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman, said there was still time to rescue China's World Cup hopes. The top two from each of the three qualifying groups will reach the 2026 World Cup, with the third- and fourth-placed teams going into a further qualifying round. China's next game is away against Australia on October 10.

FOOTBALL

Globe-trotter Pochettino appointed new USA coach

The Argentine, who coached Lionel Messi, Neymar and Kylian Mbappe in Paris, is relishing new job

AFP
Miami

Argentine **Mauricio Pochettino** has been named as the new head coach of the United States national team, the US Soccer federation announced yesterday.

The former Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea, Paris Saint-Germain and Espanyol coach replaces American Gregg Berhalter who was fired in July after a disappointing Copa America campaign.

Pochettino is the biggest name coach to take charge of the USA and the first foreigner since German Jurgen Klinsmann, who was sacked in 2016.

Pochettino, 52, has been unemployed since his abrupt departure in May from Chelsea after just a single season in charge.

No detail of the contract length was provided by US Soccer but Pochettino will lead the team in the 2026 World Cup which the USA is co-hosting with Mexico and Canada.

"Mauricio is a serial winner with a deep passion for player development and a proven ability to build cohesive and competitive teams," said Matt Crocker, US Soccer's sporting director who led the search for a new coach.

"His track record speaks for itself, and I am confident that he is the right choice to harness the immense potential within our talented squad," he added.

Pochettino has a track record of promoting young talent at Southampton, Tottenham and Spanish side Espanyol earlier in his managerial career.

At Tottenham, Pochettino played a key role in shaping the career of England captain Harry Kane and he turned Spurs into regular top-four finishers while also guiding them to the Champions League final in 2019.

The Argentine, who coached stars such as Lionel Messi, Neymar and Kylian Mbappe in Paris, said he was relishing the chance to progress the US team.

"The decision to join US Soccer wasn't just about football for me; it's about the journey that this team and this country are on," Pochettino said.

"The energy, the passion, and the hunger to achieve something truly historic here - those are the things that inspired me. The opportunity to lead the US men's national team, in front of fans who are just as passionate as the players, is something I couldn't pass up.

"I see a group of players full of talent and potential, and together, we're going to build something

K. NOLD
GULFTIMES
12-09-2024



special that the whole nation can be proud of," he added.

Pochettino inherits a relatively young team which reached the last-16 at the last World Cup in Qatar in 2022, losing to the Netherlands in the knockout phase. But hopes that a young squad could progress towards 2026 were damaged by a poor Copa America campaign in July, when the team failed to advance out of the group stage

finishing with just one win from three games after losses to Panama and Uruguay.

Berhalter, who had been heavily criticised by fans and pundits, was dismissed and the federation

took their time in the search for his replacement. US Soccer chief executive JT Batson said he was convinced that Pochettino was the right coach to get the best out of a team which is led by AC Milan winger Christian Pulisic.

"His deep knowledge of the game, his commitment to developing talent, and his relentless drive for excellence are exactly what we need as we prepare for the 2026 World Cup," he said.

The financial package to bring in Pochettino, involved negotiations with his former club Chelsea and included help from donations from the business world.

"Pochettino's appointment is supported in significant part by a philanthropic leadership gift from Kenneth C Griffin, Founder and CEO of Citadel and Founder of Griffin Catalyst. Additional support has been provided by Scott Goodwin, Co-Founder and Managing Partner of Diameter, and several commercial partners," US Soccer said in their statement.

The appointment is the second made by Crocker, a Welshman who previously worked with Pochettino at Southampton.

Crocker brought in another former Chelsea coach, Emma Hayes to lead the women's team who she took to an Olympic gold in the Paris Games last month.

CRICKET

Rain continues to wreak havoc in Greater Noida

Reuters
Greater Noida

Play in Afghanistan's one-off Test against New Zealand was called off without a ball being bowled for a third straight day due to rain in India's Greater Noida region yesterday.

The area has been deluged by steady rain over the last two weeks and fresh showers early yesterday prompted match officials to abandon play with the toss yet to take place.

The match is the first Test to be played at the Shahid Vijay Singh Pathik Sport Complex, which has only basic drainage systems, though it has hosted 11 'home' limited-overs matches for the Afghans.

Afghanistan play their home matches abroad due to security concerns for touring teams.

In response to criticism about the choice of venue, an Afghanistan Cricket Board official told local media they chose Greater Noida ahead of two other options in India because of its proximity to Delhi, which made travelling from Kabul easier.

"If it rains like this, no venue is



The covered ground is pictured after the one-off Test between Afghanistan and New Zealand was called off due to rains at the Shahid Vijay Singh Pathik Sports Complex in Greater Noida yesterday. (AFP)

going to be able to host a game," Menhajuddin Raz, ACB's international cricket manager, told reporters on Tuesday.

The ACB said in a statement they had ruled out playing in the United Arab Emirates due to the extreme heat there. "It's impor-

tant to understand that the Future Tours Program (FTP) is typically planned five years in advance, which makes it nearly impossible to predict future circumstances with complete certainty," the board said. With more rain forecast for the rest of the week

the match could become just the eighth Test to be abandoned without a ball being bowled. Match referee Jagavall Srinath's report to the International Cricket Council (ICC) will determine if the venue would incur any sanctions from the governing body.

Track and field superstars meet in Switzerland



Olympic pole vault champion Mondo Duplantis of Sweden is seen with India's javelin icon Neeraj Chopra at Crans-Montana, Switzerland, where the two athletes featured at an Omega Masters 2024 promotional event yesterday. Duplantis and Chopra are Omega brand ambassadors. Duplantis won the pole vault gold at the Paris Olympics last month. Chopra clinched the silver in the javelin final in Paris. (@Neeraj_chopra)

FOCUS

Australian hockey star Craig banned for 12 months after cocaine bust

AFP
Sydney

Australian hockey player **Tom Craig** has been banned for 12 months following his arrest during the Paris Olympics last month on suspicion of buying cocaine, Hockey Australia said yesterday.

Craig will serve at least half of the ban, which began on September 9, with the remaining six months to be suspended if the player met conduct requirements, a Hockey Australia statement said.

The 29-year-old was released without charge, but was given a warning by a judge after French police detained him for allegedly trying to buy cocaine in Paris days after Australia lost their hockey quarter-final at the Games.

"Craig is required to complete mandatory training and education programmes as part of his sanc-



Craig admitted he had "made a terrible mistake" following his release from custody and apologised to his family, friends, teammates and the Australia Olympic team.

"I made a terrible mistake and I take full responsibility for my actions. My actions are my own, and by no way reflect the values of my family, my teammates, my friends, my sport and the Australian Olympic team. I have embarrassed you all and am truly sorry," he said.

Anna Meares, the Chef de Mission of the Australian team in Paris, said Craig was "a good person who made a bad decision".

Craig made his international debut in 2014 and has played more than 100 times for Australia. He was part of the silver medal-winning team at the Tokyo Olympics three years ago.

He scored a hat-trick against England at the 2018 World Cup in India to help Australia to the bronze medal.

AUSTRALIA COACH SAYS TOP SIX LIKELY TO REMAIN THE SAME FOR INDIA SERIES

Sydney: Australia coach Andrew McDonald thinks the top six batsmen who finished the last Test season are likely to start the much-anticipated five-match series against India later this year, but not necessarily in the same order.

Steve Smith moved up from number four to open the batting after the test retirement of David Warner midway through last season and McDonald said it was by no means certain he would stay there.

"While we've got an eye to it, we haven't made any firm decisions around that one," McDonald told SEN radio from England yesterday.

"We've already had some chats in Sydney initially around what we're thinking for the summer, and that goes right down to depth bowling and all those hypotheticals and 'what-ifs' that we always go through.

"Clearly, if we make a shift with Steve Smith, then someone else will have to go to the top. We've seen Cameron Green be really successful at number four as well. So that adds layers to the decision-making.

"But nothing is firm and fixed at the moment." While Smith hardly set the world on fire in his outings as an opener, Green scored 174 not out against New Zealand at number four in the last series of last season.

Regardless of what the selectors decide about whether Smith opens, his place in the side alongside Green, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne,



Travis Head and Mitchell Marsh looks assured. "We've spoken about that, and we're still a big believer in the best six batters," he added.

"We feel as though that the team that finished in New Zealand, should they get a clean run at it and be well prepared, then they would be the best-placed players to fill that, there's no doubt about that."

McDonald said Australia would prioritise the series against India in the home summer and might rest test players from the white-ball series against Pakistan that precedes it to allow them to play red-ball cricket in the Sheffield Shield.

The India series opens in Perth on Nov. 22 with tests following in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney.

QATAR BOXER FARES ALI AL-THANI RETURNS HOME WITH BRONZE AT ASIAN MEET IN UAE



The Qatar Boxing and Wrestling Federation (QBWF) honoured boxer Fares Ali al-Thani on his arrival back home after winning the bronze medal at the Asian Junior and Promising Championships hosted by UAE. The competitions were held over two weeks with the participation of 470 male and female boxers representing 26 countries. Fares claimed the bronze in the over 80kg category presenting high technical levels during his three matches where he achieved victory in the first and second rounds, but lost in the semi-final against an Iranian competitor. Khalid al-Mas, member of QBWF and head of the boxing department, expressed his happiness with the success achieved by the promising boxer in his first participation in the Asian Championship, noting that he deserves this honour given his good performance at the continental championship.

FOCUS

Honda and Alpine commit breaches of Formula One cost cap

AFP
Paris

All 10 Formula One teams respected the cost cap on their chassis-manufacturing in 2023, although engine manufacturers Alpine and Honda breached procedural regulations, the sport's governing body, the FIA, announced yesterday.

"The review of the reporting documentation was a thorough and intensive process spanning five months with all F1 teams and all PU (power unit) manufacturers giving their full support in providing the required information," FIA said.

The body's Cost Cap Administration (CCA) noted "all F1 teams and all PU manufacturers acted at all times in a spirit of good faith and co-operation throughout the process".

While all 10 F1 teams were found in compliance for 2023, there were unspecified breaches for two of the four engine manufacturers: Alpine and Honda, who supplied Alpha-Tauri and world champions Red Bull.

The CCA said "although Alpine Racing SAS and HRC (Honda) have



both been found to be in procedural breach, neither have exceeded the cost cap level."

"Both Alpine Racing SAS and HRC have acted at all times in good faith and are currently cooperating with the CCA to finalise the matter."

The cost cap came into effect after the 2021 season and was set at \$140.4mn for 2023.

It is intended to limit spending to make the sport viable and also to close the competitive gap between big and small teams.

"The violation in question is an administrative issue and is in no way linked to excessive spending," Alpine told AFP in a statement.

"We recognise and accept the conclusions of the report and we maintain regular dialogue with the FIA to ensure compliance in the future."

GOLF

Team Europe hope to repeat last year's Solheim Cup glory

'It literally feels like the '23 Solheim was just yesterday. It's so fresh in mind, it literally feels like it'

Reuters
Gainesville, Virginia

Less than 12 months ago, Team Europe hoisted the Solheim Cup after playing the US Team to a 14-14 tie. The Europeans retained the cup after winning it narrowly in 2019 and 2021.

Now the Solheim Cup is returning to even-numbered years, and both teams are running it back, the host venue changing from Malaga, Spain, to Gainesville, Virginia.

Europe captain Suzann Pettersen was asked yesterday at Robert Trent Jones Golf Club if either team could glean an advantage from the back-to-back Solheim Cup setup.

"I don't really think it matters, to be honest," Pettersen said. "I think the nice thing, it literally feels like the '23 Solheim was just yesterday. It's so fresh in mind, it literally feels like it. So it's kind of nice to kind of get that feel and kind of energy going again."

The Solheim Cup was established in 1990 as an even-numbered year event and pivoted to

odd-numbered years in 2003 to avoid overlapping with the Ryder Cup, which had been postponed a year due to the Sept 11 attacks.

Then the Covid-19 pandemic pushed the 2020 Ryder Cup back a year, so the Solheim Cup is now returning to the evens.

Pettersen is captaining her team for the second year running, with Stacy Lewis doing the same for the Americans.

"I think it was only the right thing to do for both Stacy and myself to kind of do this because I think it would have been an awful hard job for someone new to come in and do everything in 11 months' time," Pettersen said.

The Norwegian will benefit from the existing infrastructure of last year's victorious team. Ten of her 12 players from 2023 are back, with Esther Henseleit of Germany and Albane Valenzuela of Switzerland the only newcomers.

"I wouldn't say a lot of challenges. It's just a lot of work," Pettersen said.

"Even before we hit a tee shot last year that we had already kind of done the outfits for this year.

"So really just kind of a lot of

crisscross stuff and admin stuff, logistics.

"From the players' perspective, the rankings kind of overlap quite a bit.

"I think it's going to be nice once we kind of get this one out of the way and then we're back on the regular every other year.

"I think that's good for the game."

Pettersen said she's glad to leave the pressure of trying to win at home to the Americans, who will rely on Nelly Korda, Lilia Vu, Rose Zhang, Lexi Thompson and a host of other accomplished players to end their drought.

The European captain wouldn't buy much into the idea that her team has built-in advantages, but the positive vibes from their win last September are undeniable.

"It's been a quick year since Spain," she said.

"Obviously it was a quick turnaround, fast celebration. ... I think it's a great challenge to try and go out there again and get the job done.

"The players are all up for it, and they're always going to be a big task."



Nelly Korda of Team USA plays a tee shot prior to the Solheim Cup at Robert Trent Jones Golf Club in Gainesville, Virginia, yesterday. (AFP)

TENNIS

USA sweep aside Chile in 'epic' Davis Cup clash

AFP
Paris

The United States began their hunt for a record-extending 33rd Davis Cup title by sweeping aside Chile yesterday.

Bob Bryan's side belied their underdog status in terms of rankings to down the more fancied South Americans 3-0 in their group stage opener in Zhuhai.

They may have won the first of their record haul in the inaugural edition of the annual men's team competition in 1900.

But the last time they picked up the famous 'salad bowl' trophy was back in 2007.

At the Hengqin international tennis centre, world number 309 Reilly Opelka, no. 40 Brandon Nakashima and doubles duo Austin Krajicek and Rajeev Ram proved too strong for Nicolas Massu's men.

Opelka got the first point on the board for the Americans, beating Cristian Garin 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (7/3).

Next up was Nakashima, who enjoyed a dream Davis Cup debut, downing world number 22 Alejandro Tabilo 7-6 (7/5), 2-6, 7-6 (7/3).

Then it was the turn of Paris



Brandon Nakashima of the US in action during his Davis Cup match against Chile's Alejandro Tabilo at Hengqin International Tennis Center, Zhuhai, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

Olympic silver medallists Krajicek and Ram to carry on the good work, despatching Tomas Barrios Vera and Matias Soto 4-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7/3).

Given the closeness of the three matches which all went down to deciding set tie-breaks it was little wonder Bryan described it as "an epic day of tennis".

Bryan, who with his twin brother

Mike won 16 Grand Slam doubles titles and was part of the 2007 Davis Cup title-winning team, added: "Everyone showed a lot of heart, a lot of guts. Hats off to the Chileans. Hats off to our guys who were really digging deep, especially in the big moments. I don't think it's ever happened in Davis Cup that all matches went to the third set breaker - historic day.

Just feeling very, very proud of the players." Opelka, who underwent wrist surgery in July, reflected: "Being the underdog in the tie, it's great to start with a win."

Despite his recent operation he fired 27 aces en route to victory, saying: "My serve's the shot that had been taking me the longest to get back since my injury.

"I didn't serve well at the US Open, but every week it's been getting better and better."

Nakashima meanwhile was basking in banking his first Davis Cup point at the first attempt.

"It feels amazing. It was my first Davis Cup win and to do it like that was super special."

The Americans have a day off now before Friday's next Group C clash with Slovakia, hurting after Tuesday's 3-0 loss to Germany, who take on Chile today.

The USA are aiming to make it out of the group stage to progress to the finals for the first time since 2022. In other match-ups, defending champions Italy take on Brazil in Bologna, Carlos Alcaraz's Spain face the Czech Republic in Valencia, and Finland play Britain in Manchester. The top two nations in each of the four groups in the round robin phase will qualify for the eight-team final in Malaga, Spain from November 19-24.

Rahm aims to maintain Ryder Cup eligibility amid tight schedule

New York: Jon Rahm plans to take part in three DP World Tour events in the coming weeks to ensure he is eligible for the Ryder Cup but the former world number one said yesterday he is unsure he will be able to play after refusing to pay his fines. Rahm, who made the switch to LIV Golf last year, must play in four DP World Tour events - with the Olympics counting as one - to qualify for the Ryder Cup as an automatic selection or appear for reigning champions Team Europe as one of the captain's picks. But with LIV Golf events clashing with the DP World Tour, the 29-year-old is refusing to pay his fines for playing in the Saudi-backed league without being released.

Rahm said he plans to play in his home Spanish Open later this month, the Alfred Dunhill Links Championship and the Andalucia Masters but he is still in talks with the DP World Tour. "Whether they let me play or not is a different thing. I'm not a big fan of the fines... I don't intend to pay the fines and we keep trying to have a discussion with them about how we can make this happen," Rahm told reporters ahead of LIV Golf's next event in Chicago.

"I don't go to the Spanish Open for the glory or anything else. I think it's my duty to Spanish golf to be there and I also want to play (the Andalucia Masters) in Sotogrande.

"At that point, it would almost be doing not only me but Spanish golf a disservice by not letting me play. So yeah, that's why we're trying to talk to them and make that happen."

Rahm also said he would fly back home this month with his wife Kelley Cahill expecting their third child after overcoming a "dark moment" with the pregnancy. The Spaniard said they might induce labour after the LIV Golf event in Dallas from Sept. 20-22 if the baby does not come earlier, before he flies out to Madrid for the Spanish Open from Sept 26-29. "It could be a case where I go home, deliver the baby, and then fly Tuesday or Wednesday to Madrid," Rahm added.

"So I could have a case of flying Thursday morning and teeing off Thursday afternoon. I'd say right now we have that going on, but if the baby comes early we'll see what happens. I probably would still try to go back home and spend some time with them before I'm gone for the other weeks."

SPOTLIGHT

Ronaldo says Ten Hag's attitude too negative for Man United

AFP
London

Cristiano Ronaldo says Erik ten Hag's attitude is too negative, urging the Manchester United manager to target the Premier League title even though the club need to "rebuild from the bottom".

The Portugal star, who now plays for Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia, fell out with Ten Hag before his second spell at Old Trafford ended late in 2022. Ronaldo believes his former club needs sweeping changes but that Ten Hag should not rule out winning major trophies in the meantime.

The Dutchman has said he is "quite confident" of claiming more silverware this campaign after lifting the League Cup and FA Cup over the past two seasons. But he said in July his team are a "long way away" from being ready to win the Premier League, which they have not won since Alex Ferguson's final season in charge in 2013.

"Manchester, they need to rebuild everything, in my opinion," Ronaldo said in

an episode of the Rio Ferdinand Presents podcast, due to be released today. "The coach, they say they cannot compete to win the league and Champions League. Manchester United coach, you cannot say that you're not going to fight to win the league or Champions League. You have to be, to mentally say, listen, maybe we don't have that potential, but I cannot say that. We're going to try. You have to try."

United upset Manchester City in the FA Cup final in May but they endured their worst Premier League campaign last term, finishing eighth, and the 20-time English champions have lost two of their opening three matches this season.

"This club needs time to rebuild because it's still one of the best clubs in the world, but they need to change," Ronaldo said. "They understand that. This is the only way. This is why they show, they start to change again, the structure of the club, the president, the infrastructures and everything. The owners of the club."

British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe completed his purchase of a minority stake in the club in February and has since overseen

major changes in the club hierarchy after taking control of football operations. "I believe that the future will be bright," said Ronaldo. "I believe, but they don't depend only on the talents. It's more than that. It's all club, all, not only players, club, everything as a unit, united. "They have to rebuild from the bottom. If not, they cannot compete. It will be impossible."

Five-time Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo, who spent six seasons with United earlier in his career, scored 27 goals in 54 appearances during his second spell at Old Trafford after signing from Juventus in 2021. Following his exit just over a year later, he claimed he felt "betrayed", while saying of Ten Hag: "I don't have respect for him because he doesn't show respect for me."

However, the 39-year-old said he still loves the club. "I'm not happy the way it all happened but, in the same way, we cannot control some points of our life sometimes, but it's done, already done," he said. "To prove that I'm right or wrong, this is not my issue any more. I say what I have to say and for me it's done. I love that club. I'm not that kind of guy that forgot the past."



Cristiano Ronaldo fell out with Erik Ten Hag before his second spell at Manchester United ended late in 2022.

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Colombia down Argentina, Brazil slump to defeat

Colombia are in second place with 16 points from eight matches

AFP
Montevideo

Colombia avenged their Copa America final defeat with a 2-1 victory over Argentina while Brazil crashed to a 1-0 defeat against Paraguay in South American qualifying for the 2026 World Cup on Tuesday.

Skipper James Rodriguez buried a nerveless 60th-minute spot-kick to seal a hard-fought win for Colombia over the reigning world champions, who were without injured captain Lionel Messi. It was sweet revenge for Colombia, who were beaten 1-0 by Argentina in a bitterly disappointing Copa America final loss in Miami two months ago.

"I don't think I've ever scored against them - there's a first time for everything," Colombia captain Rodriguez said of his winning spot-kick. "We want to get used to playing finals. Today was just another game, but against a team that has won everything - this victory tastes even better."

The victory at Barranquilla's Metropolitan Stadium lifted Colombia into second place in South America's 10-team qualifying competition with 16 points from eight matches, just two points behind leaders Argentina. Colombia, backed by a passionate home crowd, took the lead in the 25th minute when Rodriguez chipped a cross to the back post where Yerson Mosquera rose to head home.

But three minutes after the interval, the visitors drew level when a misplaced pass from Rodriguez was pounced upon by Nicolas Gonzalez, who raced away and slotted past advancing Colombia keeper Camilo Vargas. Twelve minutes later, though, Colombia restored their lead in controversial fashion.

Nicolas Otamendi clattered Daniel Munoz with a wild challenge and after several minutes, Chilean referee Piero Maza was sent to the VAR monitor and awarded a penalty. Rodriguez stepped up and confidently slotted home, sending Argentina's penalty specialist Emiliano Martinez the wrong way. Colombia striker Jhon Duran missed a great chance to make it 3-1 when he was found unmarked in the centre of the box but fired straight at Martinez.



Colombia's James Rodriguez celebrates after scoring against Argentina during the World Cup qualifiers at the Estadio Metropolitan in Barranquilla, Colombia. (Reuters)

Despite the defeat, Argentina remain comfortably on course for a place at the 2026 World Cup which is being co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico. With the tournament expanded to 48 teams, the top six finishers in South American qualifying will win a berth to the finals. The seventh placed team in qualifying goes into an inter-confederation playoff, with the bottom three teams eliminated.

Five-time world champions Brazil meanwhile continued their unconvincing qualifying campaign with a 1-0 defeat against Paraguay in Asuncion. Inter Miami midfielder Diego Gomez - who is reportedly due to join Premier League side Brighton at the end of the season - scored the game's only goal, crashing a long-range shot in off the post in the 20th minute.

The defeat leaves Brazil in fifth place in the standings on 10 points, leading by goal difference from Venezuela, who drew 0-0 at home to Uruguay on Tuesday.

Paraguay meanwhile moved into seventh

place on nine points after just their second win of the qualifying campaign.

Elsewhere on Tuesday, Chile's hopes of qualifying suffered another body blow after they slumped to a 2-1 loss at home to Bolivia. After winning back-to-back Copa Americas in 2015 and 2016, the Chileans failed to qualify for both the 2018 and 2022 World Cups.

The prospect of missing out on a third straight tournament loomed closer after goals from Carmelo Algaranz and Miguel Terceros handed Bolivia a 2-1 win. The victory left Chile languishing in ninth place in the standings with just five points from eight games as Bolivia climbed into eighth, trailing seventh-placed Paraguay on goal difference.

Ecuador meanwhile boosted their qualification hopes with a 1-0 win over Peru in Quito thanks to a goal from veteran striker Enner Valencia. Ecuador sit in fourth place in the standings with 11 points from eight games. Peru remain bottom of the table with just three points from 10 games.

FOCUS

Tearful South Korea star denies China match-fixing claims

AFP
Suwon, South Korea

South Korean World Cup player **Son Jun-ho** broke down in tears yesterday as he denied match-fixing and accused China of blackmail after they banned him for life. Son, who played for Shandong Taishan in the Chinese Super League, was accused by the Chinese Football Association (CFA) of participating in match-fixing and bribery, and was detained in May last year.

The midfielder, who appeared in three of South Korea's four matches at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, returned to South Korea in March. But he was one of 43 people banned for life this week by Chinese authorities over alleged gambling and match-fixing in the domestic game. A weeping and visibly emotional Son told reporters that his arrest had been an "overwhelming shock".

He said he was threatened by Chinese police and his family, including his children, were used as bargaining chips to force him to confess. "The Chinese police presented ridiculous charges," he said. "They threatened that if I didn't admit to the charges, my wife would be arrested through the foreign ministry and brought to the same detention centre to be investigated with me," he said.

He said he was not given adequate Korean translations or access to a lawyer, and when he realised Chinese police were accusing him of bribery, he was "dumbfounded".

"I said I hadn't done anything like that," the 32-year-old said, constantly having to stop talking to wipe away tears.

Son was held on "suspicion of accepting bribes by non-state employees", without being given details and he said his family were used to extract a confession. "While showing me pictures of my daughter and son on my phone, they pressured me, saying: 'What did the children do to deserve this?'" Son told reporters.

He said police told him: "If your wife comes here too, how will the kids manage? Don't you think your children want to see their father? So admit it quickly!"

Son added that he was offered



a deal by Chinese police, who told him if he admitted his guilt he would be released quickly. "Overwhelmed with fear and concern for my family, I had no choice but to admit to charges I didn't even understand, just to return to my family quickly," he said.

He said Chinese police should release the audio files of his interrogation to show "how they coerced a confession from me." "I want to clear my name with absolute transparency. The only evidence they had was my false confession, obtained through the intense pressure of their early interrogation tactics."

Son's agent Park Dae-yeon said he believed the player was unlikely to face sanctions from global body FIFA because China had not provided any evidence of wrongdoing. FIFA did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Under President Xi Jinping, Beijing has deepened a crackdown on corruption in Chinese sports in recent years, especially football, and jailed numerous top officials. Xi is a self-confessed football fanatic who has said he dreams of China hosting and winning the World Cup.

But that ambition appears further away than ever after repeated corruption scandals and years of disappointing results on the pitch. The banned 43 were mostly players who were among a total of 128 people implicated in a two-year probe into illegal gambling and match-fixing in the domestic game, according to state media.

Following his return home earlier this year, Son joined a team in South Korea's fifth tier before switching to Suwon in the K League top division. Son was not selected for the national squad for the 2026 World Cup qualifiers over the past week.

Arsenal's Odegaard set to miss key matches

Oslo: Martin Odegaard looks likely to miss Arsenal's Premier League matches against Tottenham and Manchester City as well as the start of the Champions League after injuring his ankle, according to Norway's team doctor. The Gunners captain had an MRI scan after sustaining the injury in a challenge by Austria's Christoph Baumgartner in Norway's 2-1 Nations League victory against Austria in Oslo on Monday. "This type of ankle injury often takes at least three weeks to heal. Anything less is just a bonus. And it may take longer," national team doctor Ola Sand said. Arsenal, last year's Premier League runners-up, travel to Tottenham for the north London derby on Sunday before their Champions League match against Atalanta next week.

NATIONS LEAGUE

Centurion Kane 'hungry' to prove doubters wrong

AFP
London

Harry Kane admitted he is fuelled by a burning desire to silence his critics after the England captain marked his 100th cap with a double in Tuesday's 2-0 win against Finland.

Kane produced two typically lethal finishes in the second half of the Nations League Group B2 tie at Wembley. It was the perfect way for the Bayern Munich striker to celebrate becoming the 10th man to make 100 appearances for England.

The 31-year-old is England's all-time leading scorer with 68 and also set Tottenham's record goal-tally before joining Bayern. But, despite all the plaudits thrown his way on the night he reached his England century, Kane still carries the hurt from a disappointing personal campaign at Euro 2024.

He scored three times in Germany but rarely impressed as England laboured



through the tournament before losing to Spain in the final, leading to questions about whether he still deserved his place in the team.

Using that frustration as motivation, Kane was delighted to celebrate his 100th

cap in style. "It was a big night for me, really proud. I want to score goals and help the team. Whenever you are doubted, it makes you more hungry to prove people wrong," he said. "We spoke about being ruthless but in these games you have to keep knocking on the door and you will get your reward. I always back myself to score goals and I'm excited for the future."

Kane was presented with a commemorative golden cap before kick-off, wore gold boots during the game and had his family in attendance to share in the latest highlight in his remarkable career. The striker's success is a tribute to his perseverance, dating back to the start of his career when Tottenham sent him on loan to Millwall, Leyton Orient, Norwich and Leicester amid doubts about his ability to make it at the highest level.

Kane eventually proved his worth but even he conceded he would not have dared to dream about winning 100 caps at that time. "I don't think I was even thinking of 100 caps when I was on loan at Millwall, Norwich and Leicester," he said. "At that

time it was about getting back into the Spurs team. I have always had a good self belief. I would for sure have been proud if I knew I was going to get 100 caps."

Saluting the influence of Mauricio Pochettino, the manager who gave him his chance at Tottenham, Kane said: "I have learned a lot over the years with Mauricio when he was at Spurs. The game is evolving a bit and it is great for me to keep learning."

England interim boss Lee Carsley has worked with Kane for only a week in his first matches since replacing Gareth Southgate on a temporary basis. But the 50-year-old has already begun to understand the ferocious drive that makes Kane such a prolific goal-scorer.

"Harry took his goals really well, a big occasion for him. Kids being here, an emotional night, but really happy for Harry. He fully deserves all the plaudits," he said. "What I have noticed this week is he is highly motivated to play for England and score goals and to have a centre forward like that, hopefully it continues."