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WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Stage set for thrilling clash as Qatar take on Kyrgyzstan

The two teams lock horns at Al Thumama Stadium tomorrow with kick-off set for 7pm

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The stage is set for a thrilling encounter as hosts Qatar and Kyrgyzstan face off in a pivotal 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match at Al Thumama Stadium tomorrow. Both teams will be eager to secure a victory in what is essentially a tough group.

Qatar, the reigning Asian champions and coached by Marquez Lopez, will be looking to capitalize on their home advantage and gain a winning momentum before they head to Iran for their next match on Oct 15.

The hosts have a formidable squad, boasting a blend of experienced strikers - Akram Afif and Almoez Ali - and promising young talent. Their attacking prowess, coupled with a solid defence thanks to the recall of experienced Abdelkarim Hassan, has made them a force to be reckoned with on the international stage.

Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, have shown significant improvement in recent years and will be determined to prove their worth against the defending champions.

The match is expected to be a closely contested affair, with both teams possessing the ability to score goals. Qatar's home support could be a decisive factor, but Kyrgyzstan's resilience and fighting spirit should not be underestimated. Ultimately, the outcome of this clash will likely hinge on which team can execute their game plan more effectively and capitalize on their scoring opportunities.

Former Qatar national team player Rodrigo Tabata yesterday said in a TV interview: "We didn't start well in this phase. Those were tough games (against the UAE and DPR Korea) but I trust the national team players to fight for points in



Qatar players Bassam al-Rawi (left) and Edmilson Jr during a training session at Al Thumama Stadium in Doha yesterday. Qatar host Kyrgyzstan in a 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match tomorrow at the same venue. The kick-off is set for 7:00pm.

the coming two matches. I wish them the best for the next game. I hope they win the next two games later this week and get the points. The Qatari players have proven to us that they have quality.

"All of us need to support the Qatar national team. Good players are there to help the team win. I am confident of that," the

43-year-old veteran - who still plays active football for QSL side Al Rayyan - added.

New men in charge

In other matches across the Asian continent, Australia and Oman will start a new chapter following the appointments of Tony Popovic and Rashid Jaber as head



coaches respectively. Popovic takes over from Graham Arnold, who stepped down after an underwhelming start which saw Australia only garner one point from their opening two matches, while Jaber - who replaced Jaroslav Silhavy - has to steady an Oman side who suffered two defeats. It will be a steep learning curve

for both with Australia hosting China PR while Oman will welcome Kuwait - two teams also in need of wins to revive their campaigns.

Can South Korea cope without Son?

A hamstring injury means Son Heung-min will be absent for the

next two matchdays, which comes as a blow to a South Korea side who face a tough challenge against Jordan tomorrow. The West Asian side stunned South Korea in the semi-finals of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 and will relish the chance of beating the East Asians again. They will be even more optimistic of their chances now that talisman Son will be absent.

Test of Japan's credentials

Japan were at their best on the opening two matchdays, plundering a total 12 goals against China and Bahrain without conceding. Up next, however, are Saudi Arabia in Jeddah with Australia to follow five days later in Saitama. Should Japan overcome both, a spot in the FIFA World Cup 2026 will be theirs to lose after only four matchdays.

Uzbekistan daring to dream

Having never qualified for the FIFA World Cup Finals, Uzbekistan have enjoyed a dream start to their AFC Asian Qualifiers - Road to 26 campaign with two wins. They face Islamic Republic of Iran in a top-of-the-table clash tomorrow and a win will have the Central Asian side believing that they can go on to book their tickets to the FIFA World Cup 2026.

Indonesia out for more

Shin Tae-yong's Indonesia were the only debutant side not to have suffered defeat in the opening two matchdays and the Southeast Asian side will be relishing their upcoming games. With two points in the bag, Indonesia will travel to Bahrain tomorrow targeting a win, with China to come five days later. Should they get six points, Indonesia will start to believe that finishing top two in the standings - which would mean automatic FIFA World Cup qualification - is within reach.

SPOTLIGHT

QFA president urges fans to rally behind Qatar team ahead of crucial World Cup Qualifier

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The President of the Qatar Football Association (QFA), Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, expressed confidence in the Qatari national team's ability to bounce back in the Asian qualifiers for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Al-Buenain urged fans to rally behind the team in their upcoming match against Kyrgyzstan, which will be played at Al Thumama Stadium tomorrow. Qatari began the third round of qualifiers with a 1-3 loss to the UAE in Doha, followed by a 2-2 draw against Northern Ireland, leaving them in fifth place with just one point. Only top two finishers from the group qualify directly for the World Cup.

"Reaching the 2026 World Cup requires everyone to work together, including the fans, who are our most important and loyal supporters. We are all striving for the same goal - qualifying for the World Cup," said al-Buenain.

"We are confident in the players' ability to recover, as the Asian champions are capable of getting back on track. We will continue our journey with the ambition of reaching the finals," he added.

Al-Buenain emphasised the significance of home field advantage and encouraged fans to play a crucial role in boosting team morale. He added: "We must make the most of our home advantage, and our ambition is to win. Our loyal fans have always been a source of strength for the team, and we call on them once again to be that positive force in the Kyrgyzstan



Qatar Football Association President Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain.

match, as they have been in past tournaments."

He praised the "Our Fans Are Our Strength" initiative, noting that Qatari supporters have built a culture of unwavering support that continues until the final whistle, regardless of the result.

Al-Attiyah extends lead at Rallye du Maroc



Doha: Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah, alongside his co-driver Edouard Boulanger, extended his overall lead in the 25th edition of the Rallye du Maroc, the final leg of the 2024 FIA World Rally-Raid Championship after securing a second-place finish in Stage 2 in Zagora yesterday.

Lucas Moraes of Toyota Gazoo Racing claimed the 267-kilometre special stage victory, edging out al-Attiyah by just 13 seconds. The second-place finish stretched al-Attiyah's overall lead which now stands at 8:22 seconds over X-raid Mini JCW driver Guillaume de Mevius and his navigator Mathieu Baumel. The Brazilian



Moraes moved up to the third position in the overall podium following his victory yesterday. Al-Attiyah, a two-time world champion, is aiming for his eighth FIA World Rally-Raid title and currently leads the Championship standings by

20 points over his closest competitor, Yazeed al-Rajhi. Al-Rajhi, also driving for Toyota, started the day just 1:39 secs behind al-Attiyah, but after finishing 10th in Stage 2 - 14:38 off the pace - he has dropped to sixth overall.

In the Challenger category, Qatar's Khalifa al-Attiyah and navigator Enio Bozzano finished sixth in yesterday's stage, while Abdulaziz al-Kuwari and his co-driver Nasser Saadoon al-Kuwari took 14th position. Today's special stage will cover a distance of 325 kilometres, taking the competitors from Zagora to Mengoub.

CRICKET

England 96-1 after Salman's brave batting lifts Pakistan

'I think cracks will open on this pitch and that will help spinners, I see this as a result-oriented pitch'



Pakistan's Agha Salman plays a shot during the second day of the first Test against England at the Multan Cricket Stadium yesterday. **Right:** England's Joe Root (right) and Zak Crawley bump their fists at the end of the second day of the first Test against Pakistan. (AFP)

AFP
Multan

England finished the second day of the first Test in Multan on a solid 96-1 yesterday in reply to Pakistan's mammoth 556 that was boosted by a fiery century from Agha Salman. The tourists lost stand-in skipper Ollie Pope for a second-ball duck before Zak Crawley and Joe Root steadied the innings with 64 and 32 respectively at stumps. It was another tough day for bowlers as an unbeaten 104 from Salman and 82 by Saud Shakeel swelled Pakistan's total, which was set up by Shan Masood's 151 and Abdullah Shafique's 102 on Mon-

day. Pope, standing in for injured skipper Ben Stokes, was smartly caught by a leaping Aamer Jamal who plucked an uppish pull shot off pacer Naseem Shah with one hand at mid-wicket. He had been drafted in to open the batting after Ben Duckett injured his left thumb taking a catch at the end of the Pakistan innings. England need another 261 to avoid a follow-on - a task eminently achievable on a pitch offering no help to bowlers. Salman built on the good work of Shakeel and Naseem in the afternoon, reaching his third century with a single off spinner Jack Leach soon after the tea interval. Salman, who also completed 1,000 Test runs during this knock

when he reached 71, added a rapid 85 for the ninth wicket with Shaheen Shah Afridi, who scored 26. In all, Salman cracked 10 boundaries and three sixes in his 119-ball knock - surviving a catch by Chris Woakes when the third umpire declared the fielder's foot went beyond the rope. "It's always satisfying to hit a century and contribute to the team's total," said Salman, who hoped the pitch would take spin in the next three days. "I think cracks will open on this pitch and that will help spinners, I see this as a result-oriented pitch as both the teams will go for a result." Salman added an invaluable 57

runs for the seventh wicket with Shakeel, who was caught smartly by Root at slip off Bashir for 82. Shakeel hit eight fours. Leach was the most successful England bowler with 3-160, while Gus Atkinson finished with 2-99. Woakes, Shoaib Bashir and Root took one wicket apiece. Pace bowler Brydon Carse took 2-74 on debut after trapping Jamal for seven. His first Test wicket was Naseem, caught at leg slip by Harry Brook before lunch for 33. Carse said England's bowlers were made to toil on an unresponsive pitch. "It's been hard work and hard toil over the last two days, but I've thoroughly enjoyed the challenge,"

Carse told *Sky Sports* at the close. "Being out there with this group of lads, it's been a tough but good two days. "A couple of the guys and Stokesy (Ben Stokes) said to me when we came in after fielding, 'look, Brydon, it's not going to get as tough as this (again) over the last two days,' he said. "There were times out there when the heat was probably the biggest challenge, and obviously the wicket, but as a group of bowlers, everyone kept on coming back, with the seamers in short bursts. Yeah, it was challenging at times. "I had a conversation with Woakesy and Gus towards the end there," Carse said. "Both them boys' legs were

proper hanging on. There'll be ice baths. We're testing our hydration... I've been in the red for most of these two days, even with the constant consumption of water and fluids. "But tonight, the lads will refuel and get food down us, and try and get a good night's sleep, and hopefully have a good batting day tomorrow," Carse said. The remaining Tests are in Multan (October 15-19) and Rawalpindi (October 24-28). **BRIEF SCORES (Day 2)** England 96 for 1 (Crawley 64*, Root 32*) trail Pakistan 556 (Masood 151, Salman 104*, Shafique 102, Shakeel 82, Leach 3-160) by 460 runs

SPOTLIGHT

Bangladesh batsman Mahmudullah announces retirement from T20Is

AFP
New Delhi

Former Bangladesh captain Mahmudullah Riyad said yesterday his remaining two T20 matches in India will be his last international appearance in the format, vowing to play out with a "good show". The 38-year-old Mahmudullah, who quit Tests in 2021, is set to play his 140th T20 match for Bangladesh in the second game in New Delhi today. The tourists need to win in the Indian capital to keep the three-match series alive, after they lost the opener by seven wickets in Gwalior. "I am retiring from T20 cricket after the last game of this series," Mahmudullah told reporters. The final match of the series will be in Hyderabad on Saturday. "I was pre-decided before coming here. I had a chat with my family and with my coach and captain," Mahmudullah added. "It is the right time to move on from this format for me and the team as well and concentrate on the one-day game." Mahmudullah has been Bangladesh's warhorse after he made his international debut in 2007 in a one-day international against Sri Lanka in Colombo.



Former Bangladesh captain Mahmudullah Riyad is seen during a training session in New Delhi yesterday. Mahmudullah announced his retirement from T20I cricket. (@BCBTigers)

He has played 50 Tests, 232 ODIs and 139 T20 matches for his country with over 10,500 runs across formats as a dependable middle-order batsman and 165 wickets with his off-spin. "If we can play to our ability (in Delhi), then we could put up a good show," he said. Mahmudullah said he had "no regrets" in his 17-year career. "I have never ever regretted, at any stage at any point of my life, playing for Bangladesh," he said. "I have always been a team man." The veteran said the T20 team remains in good hands under skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto. Mahmudullah's T20 exit comes

soon after star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan announced his decision to quit the format last month during the Test series, which the tourists lost 2-0. India's left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh meanwhile said he was making the most of his opportunities in the national team without thinking much about the future. "My life mantra is to enjoy the present," Arshdeep, who made his India debut in 2022, told reporters. "I want to do my best in all the formats wherever I get the opportunity." Arshdeep, who has claimed 86 wickets in 55 T20 internationals, played in India's T20 World Cup triumph in June.

MATCH REPORT

Australia crush New Zealand in T20 Women's World Cup clash

AFP
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Australia continued their march towards a seventh Women's T20 World Cup title with a crushing 60-run win over New Zealand in their Group A match in Sharjah yesterday. After posting a tournament high 148-8 in their 20 overs with Beth Mooney top-scoring with 40, Australia stifled the New Zealand batters who folded for just 88 in 19.2 overs. Quick bowler Megan Schutt was the pick of the Australian bowlers, her return of 3-3 in 3.2 overs netting her the Player of the Match award. "We could have been smarter with the bat at the end, but we came out really well with the ball and I'm really happy with that," said Australia skipper Alyssa Healy. "Megan Schutt has been wonderful but I thought the whole attack tonight was unbelievable." Holders Australia, who have won six of the eight previous tournaments, top Group A while New Zealand slip to third, behind Pakistan but still above India on net run rate. After winning the toss and choosing to bat first, Healy gave her side the perfect start, smear-



Australia's Beth Mooney in action against New Zealand during their T20 Women's World Cup match in Sharjah, UAE, yesterday. Mooney scored 40 off 32 deliveries as Australia won by 60 runs. (@AusWomenCricket)

ing four fours in a rapid 20-ball 26 before skying a slower ball from Rosemary Mair into the covers. Ellyse Perry was dropped on four at long-on by Maddy Green and went on to add 45 with Mooney who finally fell to Amelia Kerr for 40, with Green this time clinging on at mid-off. As Australia wobbled in the middle order, Amelia Kerr used her googly to bowl Perry (30) and Grace Harris (0) with succes-

sive balls. Kerr then made a good catch to pick up Phoebe Litchfield (18) for the second time in the deep. Australia lost a flurry of wickets but still posted a daunting target for the White Ferns. The Kiwis, who beat India in their opening match, started slowly and once Kerr was dismissed for 29, the innings fell apart as nine wickets fell for 29 runs. Schutt took her tally to six wickets in the tournament while Annabel Sutherland also chipped in with 3-21. "We needed to have a good start and we let the run rate creep up too much," said Kiwi captain Sophie Devine. "We've still got two games to go." Australia play Pakistan in Dubai on Sunday while New Zealand face Sri Lanka in Sharjah on Saturday. **BRIEF SCORES** Australia 148-8 in 20 overs (Beth Mooney 40, Ellyse Perry 30, Alyssa Healy 26; Amelia Kerr 4-26, Rosemary Mair 2-22, Brooke Halliday 2-16) v New Zealand 88 all out in 19.2 overs (Amelia Kerr 29, Suzie Bates 20; Megan Schutt 3-3, Annabel Sutherland 3-21, Sophie Molineux 2-15) **Result:** Australia won by 60 runs **Player of the Match:** Megan Schutt (AUS) **Toss:** Australia

SPORT MUST PUNCH ITS WEIGHT IN FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE: BOARDMAN

London: Sports clubs and organisations must raise their game and become leaders in the battle to prevent catastrophic climate change, Sport England chairman Chris Boardman said yesterday. Opening the Sport Positive summit at the Oval cricket ground in London, former Olympic cycling gold medalist Boardman praised work being done by grassroots

and professional clubs in Britain, but said sport was still not punching its weight. "If climate change is a 'threat multiplier', sport can be a 'solution multiplier'. And as a sector, we can choose to help society use this unique gift," Boardman told delegates from across the world of sport. "But despite some passionate pioneers, as a sector, we

aren't yet punching our weight. So, my call to action today is for a mindset shift, and a lifting of our ambition... We must leverage the unique platform of sport and physical activity to win hearts and minds." The global sports industry has a huge carbon footprint and also finds itself on the frontline of climate change with rising tem-

peratures, flooding and droughts already having damaging impacts across multiple events. "Sport's carbon footprint and contribution to waste is massive," said the 56-year-old Boardman, who in July cycled from Manchester to the Paris Olympics to highlight environmental sustainability work being done by sports clubs. "We need to re-wire the system

so there are suitable incentives to do the right thing, and more consequences for doing the wrong thing." Boardman praised the progress being made by some professional soccer clubs in England but said expanded UEFA and FIFA competitions and money-spinning pre-season tours were forcing teams and fans to fly huge distances.

"I don't believe in outright bans on flying, but we all need to strike a much better balance. "It is time for all of our top football clubs to step up, and put themselves on the right side of history," he said. British rower Imogen Grant said athletes were often placed in an awkward position by the demands of their chosen sport.

TENNIS



Serbia's Novak Djokovic in action during his round of 32 match against Italy's Flavio Cobolli at the Shanghai Masters at Qizhong Forest Sports City Arena yesterday. (Reuters)

Djokovic rolls Cobolli to make Shanghai last 16

Shanghai: Novak Djokovic powered through to the last 16 of the Shanghai Masters yesterday, steamrolling Italian Flavio Cobolli 6-1, 6-2 in just over an hour. The four-time Shanghai champion completely dominated 30th-ranked Cobolli, breaking him in the second and sixth games of the first set. "I can't complain about anything in the game, I was able to play aggressively," Djokovic said. "I'm glad to be progressing through a tournament that has meant a lot to me in my career." Fans waved Serbian flags and screamed in delight when the former world number one wrote part of his name in Chinese characters on a camera lens at the end of the match. Djokovic will next play Russian Roman Safiullin, who upset American Frances Tiafoe in three tight sets. "I'm glad to finally play a match after three days of rain, it's been a hassle for a lot of players," Djokovic said.

SINNER-SHELTON REMATCH

The last 16 has almost fallen into place after days of schedule disruption due to rain. Ben Shelton dispatched Spain's Roberto Carballes Baena 6-3, 6-4 to set up a Shanghai rematch with world number one Jannik Sinner of Italy. The American knocked Sinner out of the tournament at the same stage last year. "(I have) great memories from that match last year, I probably watched the tape of that a couple times so far this year, but, yeah, I'm really looking forward to it, that will be fun," Shelton said. Sinner's chief rival Carlos Alcaraz, who beat him in the China Open final last week, will face veteran Gael Monfils. The 38-year-old Frenchman defeated his younger and higher-ranked compatriot Ugo Humbert 7-6 (9/7), 2-6, 6-1. Stefanos Tsitsipas recovered from a lapse in concentra-

tion in the second set to beat France's Alexandre Muller 6-3, 7-5. The 26-year-old will meet world number five Daniil Medvedev in the next round. "(Medvedev) likes courts like this. I feel like I'm getting better with time... What is missing is trying to get a good win under my belt," said the Greek, acknowledging his uneven recent form. "In the past, I might have said some mean stuff about (Medvedev's) game, but... I think I was completely wrong in that. There's a lot of interesting things in his game that he brings that are very different from other players." World number 10 Grigor Dimitrov is through after beating Australia's Alexei Popyrin 7-6 (7/5), 6-2. The Bulgarian will play Czech teenager Jakub Mensik, who already ended one top 10 player's hopes when he sent Russia's Andrey Rublev home last week.

ZVEREV SCRAPES THROUGH

Second seed Alexander Zverev scraped through to the last 16 of the Shanghai Masters yesterday, winning two tiebreaks against the Netherlands' Tallon Griekspoor in an ill-tempered match that ended 7-6 (8/6), 2-6, 7-6 (7/5). Zverev's first set against 40th-ranked Griekspoor was overshadowed by the German's prolonged, expletive-laden exchange with the umpire when he disagreed with a call. "I cannot be bothered to go to China in October, for you to screw up this... I cannot, this is not possible," Zverev ranted before tossing his racket across the court. The world number three claimed the first set, but proceeded to fall apart in the second, with the Dutchman breaking him in the first, third and fifth game. Zverev squandered an early lead in the third set tiebreak but an unforced error on Griekspoor's part saw him crowned winner. "Every time I play him it's the most difficult match," said Zverev, saying there had been "not much difference" between them.

COMMENT

World No. 4 Gauff answers her critics, says 'it's hard to win all the time'

AFP
Wuhan, China

World number four **Coco Gauff** said yesterday that everyone should accept the roller-coaster nature of tennis, as she responded to criticism of her results this season.

Gauff claimed what she described as an "unexpected" title at the China Open in Beijing last week and is on the cusp of securing her qualification for the season-ending WTA Finals for a third consecutive year.

Despite reaching two Grand Slam semi-finals and winning two titles this year, the 20-year-old Gauff has been under scrutiny, especially after her unsuccessful US Open defence last month.

"People don't realise people have great moments in sports and



bad moments," Gauff told reporters at the Wuhan Open, where she faces Viktoriya Tomova in the second round today.

"It doesn't mean anything. I took inspiration from A'ja Wilson," she said, referring to the Las Vegas Aces back-to-back basketball WNBA champion.

"She's kind of like, 'It's hard to stay winning all the time. You need to go through losses to realise what

you need to do to evolve! Tennis fans need to be more accepting of that," said Gauff.

Meanwhile, China's Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen said yesterday she was "feeling the responsibility" as the new face of Chinese tennis and admitted she needed to find a way to handle the pressure. Zheng shot to superstar status in her home country after reaching the Australian Open final and winning Paris gold this year.

"There is a lot of activity for me, but I enjoy it. Especially I saw there are pictures of me everywhere. I mean, yes, that's insane," said Zheng, who turned 22 yesterday.

"People have big expectations of me here. I hope I could stay here longer. But tennis is always tough to predict. Of course, there is pressure. I'm also feeling the responsibility as a leader of the new generation, meaning what you are saying is under public scrutiny."

FOCUS

Tiafoe swears at umpire in furious rant after loss in Shanghai Masters

Reuters
Shanghai

Frances **Tiafoe** launched into a foul-mouthed tirade directed at a chair umpire after the American received a time violation and then lost to Roman Safiullin in the third round of the Shanghai Masters yesterday.

Unseeded Safiullin beat 13th seed Tiafoe 5-7 7-5 7-6(5) in a three-hour contest where the American initially lost his cool when he received a time violation while serving with the score tied at 5-5 during the final set tiebreak.

"No, no, I tossed the ball up... I was ready to serve. Dude, that's the rule," Tiafoe said repeatedly as he walked towards the net while trying to convince the Ecuadorian chair umpire Jimmy Pinoargote.

"I'm not buying it, it's the second serve," the umpire said in response, putting an end to the discussion by announcing "second serve" on the microphone. Tiafoe went on to lose the point and eventually the match.

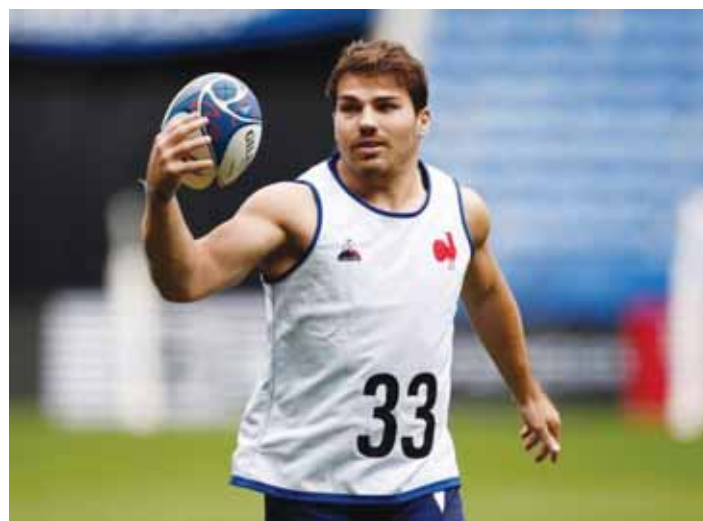
After shaking Safiullin's hand at the net, Tiafoe directed his anger at Pinoargote, repeatedly hurling expletives at the umpire as he walked back to



his seat, as the small crowd of fans who had stayed behind laughed at his antics. The ATP did not immediately comment on the incident but the rulebook says the 26-year-old can expect to be fined, with the amount going up to \$60,000 for each violation at Masters 1000 tournaments. Tiafoe, who is ranked number 17 in the world, had enjoyed some late-season form where he reached the finals of the Citi Open and the Cincinnati Open while he also advanced to the semi-finals of the US Open.

RUGBY

Olympics star Dupont gets set for Toulouse return after post-Games holiday



AFP
Toulouse, France

French Olympic rugby sevens gold medallist **Antoine Dupont** returned to club training on Monday with an eye on playing his first game of the season for Toulouse this weekend.

Scrum-half Dupont, 27, has made sporadic appearances at the French Top 14 club's training base since winning gold in Paris in late-July but is in line to face Clermont on Saturday.

"The players present are all available," Toulouse said on Monday. Since taking Les Bleus to Olym-

pic success on home soil, Dupont has been named the Top 14's player of the season for 2023/24 and has made the most of his global fame while on a post-Olympic break.

He spent more than a week in the United States meeting Argentina football icon Lionel Messi in Miami as well as NBA legend LeBron James in California and visiting the Los Angeles Chargers' NFL set-up.

In Dupont's absence, record 23-time French champions Toulouse have started the new season sluggishly and are fifth in the Top 14 table with three wins from their opening five games of the campaign.

The six-time Champions Cup winners have lost two straight

games including Sunday's game at local rivals Castres and in the previous round to Bordeaux-Begles, their first home loss since February 2022.

Dupont's return comes a month before France's 15-a-side team open their November Test series against Japan on November 9, before facing New Zealand a week later and Argentina on November 22.

Dupont will not return to sevens this season but has refused to rule out an appearance the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028.

France's Olympic men's sevens success overshadowed off-field events that marred France's 15-a-side July tour of South America. Lock Hugo Auradou and flanker

Oscar Jegou were arrested on allegations of raping a woman in Mendoza, hours after making their Test debuts. The pair deny rape and were allowed to return home in September. On Friday, the prosecutor's office in Mendoza recommended that the charges of aggravated rape against Auradou and Jegou be dismissed at a hearing set for October 18.

Following the same game, experienced full-back Melvyn Jaminet was sent home from Argentina for making racist comments on social media. On August 7, France under-18 Medhi Narjissi was reported missing after going swimming in the sea in South Africa, where the team were preparing for a youth tournament.

French rugby bosses tighten discipline after nightmare Argentina tour

Paris: French rugby federation president Florian Grill announced an overhaul of the system of discipline in the France teams after a summer tour of Argentina overshadowed by claims of attempted rape and racism. "The historical pattern that existed for years, based on empowerment, accountability does not work," Grill told AFP in an interview, revealing that "a plan, in which there will be controls and sanctions" will be unveiled in the coming days. "The framework was not clear and a form of flexible structure was even admitted," he explained of the approach until now. "We are setting a clear framework which will then allow sanctions to be imposed. And we will not have a hand that trembles." In July, France players Hugo Auradou and

Oscar Jegou, both aged 21, were charged with aggravated rape after winning their first international caps against Argentina. The pair were arrested after a 39-year-old woman alleged they viciously assaulted her in a hotel room hours after winning against the Pumas in Mendoza. On the same night in July, full-back Melvyn Jaminet made racist remarks on social media. He was sent home from the three-match tour and received a 34-week suspension by the FFR. On Friday, the prosecutor's office in Mendoza recommended that the charges of aggravated rape against Auradou and Jegou be dismissed at a hearing set for October 18. Grill said he "completely respects" the Argentine justice system and would not comment

on the Jegou-Auradou affair. But the FFR boss said that he wanted to put an end to "the fourth and fifth half" post match celebrations which had preceded these cases. "There will be financial or sporting sanctions" in the future, he continued regretting in previous years "a form of acceptance of these excesses which could sometimes even be organised". "We can't imagine that we're doing ultra-elaborate nutrition, personalised hydration for each player, data you don't want to know, and that at the same time, we can, in the middle of a tour, do a fourth or fifth half," he explained. The details of this plan, which notably includes an overhaul of the international players' charter, should be announced in the coming days.

ROYALS VS YANKEES IN NEW YORK



Maikel Garcia (right) of the Kansas City Royals steals second base in the seventh inning against the New York Yankees during Game Two of the Division Series at Yankee Stadium in New York City. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Tickets on sale for 2025 MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar at LIC

Lusail International Circuit (LIC) has announced that tickets are now available for the thrilling 2025 MotoGP Qatar Airways Grand Prix of Qatar. Set to take place from April 11-13, 2025, MotoGP promises to deliver an unforgettable experience for motorsport enthusiasts in Qatar.

Since 2008, the Qatar Grand Prix has established itself as one of the most visually appealing events on the MotoGP calendar with its unique night-time racing format. The combination of cutting-edge facilities and the dazzling lights of Lusail creates an unparalleled spectacle that has become a hallmark.

The 2025 season brings thrilling changes to the MotoGP grid, headlined by the sensational move of eight-time World Champion Marc Marquez to the factory Ducati team. This switch has sent shockwaves through the paddock and promises to shake up the competitive landscape. Fans will be eager to see how Marquez adapts to the formidable Desmosedici and whether he can challenge his new teammate, reigning double World Champion, Francesco Bagnaia.

Other notable moves include Jorge Martin and Marco Bezzecchi joining Aprilia



Racing, while Enea Bastianini and Maverick Vinales make the switch to Red Bull KTM Tech3. With these significant changes, the 2025 Qatar Grand Prix is set to be an unmissable event as riders acclimate to their new machines and teams under the dazzling Lusail lights.

TICKET INFORMATION

Fans can purchase tickets through LIC's official website. For just QR200, a 3-day ticket grants access to:

Free seating within the Main Grandstand and General Admission zone - Lusail Hill, a dedicated elevated viewing area at the end of Turn 1.

Fan Zone with entertainment and activities for all ages.

MotoGP merchandising and other retail outlets.

Complimentary return shuttles between Lusail Metro Station and the circuit. Easy access to free parking and taxi pick-up and drop-off zone.

Children under 12 years of age can attend for free, but tickets must be booked in advance through the official website.

The Qatar Grand Prix will showcase the world's top riders competing on the 5.4-kilometer LIC track. This world-class venue features a flowing layout with a mix of medium and high-speed corners, a main straight over one kilometre in length, artificial grass surroundings that prevent sand intrusion, ensuring optimal racing conditions and permanent outdoor lighting for spectacular night racing.

For corporate and group requests, please



The MotoGP Qatar Grand Prix will showcase the world's top riders competing on the 5.4-kilometre Lusail International Circuit track.

contact corporatesales@lisc.qa

EVENT SCHEDULE

Friday, April 11, 2025: Free practice.

Saturday, April 12, 2025: Qualifying for all teams and Sprint race.

Sunday, April 13, 2025: Thrilling race day finale.

FOOTBALL

Ex-Barcelona and Spain great Iniesta retires aged 40

'I'd like to return to Barca at some point. I'd be delighted'

AFP

Barcelona

Former Barcelona midfielder Andres Iniesta, who won two European Championships and the 2010 World Cup with an all-conquering Spain team, announced his retirement from football yesterday at the age of 40.

"Being on the pitch is over," a visibly emotional Iniesta told reporters at a news conference in Barcelona while reflecting on a professional career that began with the Catalan giants in 2002.

"I can't stay away from football, it's my life and will continue to be my life. Now I need to continue educating myself, I'm in the process of doing my coaching diploma and that's the next step.

"I will try to come back and do a great job. However it won't be running after the ball, but from another place," he added.

Iniesta came up through Barcelona's famed La Masia academy and made his first-team debut aged just 18, becoming a mainstay in the midfield before his departure 16 years later after 674 appearances.

He won nine La Liga titles and the Champions League four times with Barcelona, also lifting six Copas del Rey in a haul of 32 trophies during his time at Camp Nou.

Iniesta formed a devastating midfield with Xavi Hernandez and Sergio Busquets, becoming the standard-bearers of the "tiki-



Spanish footballer Andres Iniesta gestures as he announces his retirement aged 40 during an event to celebrate his career at the America's Cup Experience venue in Barcelona yesterday. (AFP)

taka" style of football that catapulted both club and country to new heights.

He played alongside the likes of Lionel Messi, Neymar, Samuel Eto'o and Luis Suarez for Barcelona, who captured the treble in 2009 under Pep Guardiola and again six years later with Luis Enrique in charge.

Messi paid tribute to Iniesta on social media and called him "one of the most magical team-mates", while Spain coach Luis de la

Fuente said he had given "society an example of what a professional athlete is".

His greatest moment came in the 2010 World Cup final in Johannesburg when he scored the winning goal for Spain against the Netherlands in extra time.

He won 131 caps for Spain before calling time on his international career after the 2018 World Cup. After leaving Barcelona in 2018, Iniesta spent five years with Japanese club Vissel Kobe be-

fore playing one final season with Emirates of the UAE.

"I'd like to return to Barca at some point. Not just to say it, but because those who had so much influence, in one way or another, have to be there," said Iniesta.

"When I can do what I did as a player in another role at the club... I'd be delighted."

Barcelona praised the retiring Iniesta in a post on the club's X account. "Iniesta, your football will live on forever."

Former USMNT coach Berhalter hired to lead Fire

Chicago: The Chicago Fire announced the hiring of former US men's national team coach Gregg Berhalter as the club's new director of football and head coach yesterday.

Berhalter, 51, becomes the MLS club's 10th full-time manager and will oversee all of the Fire's sporting operations, reporting directly to owner and chairman Joe Mansueto.

"After a thorough and detailed search that included a number of exceptional candidates, it became clear that Gregg Berhalter was the right choice to lead our sporting operations," Mansueto said. "His previous success in MLS, where he thrived in a dual role, and his experience leading the US men's National Team over the last six years make him an ideal fit for our vision for the club moving forward."

Berhalter, who previously coached in the league with the Columbus Crew (2013-18), replaces current head coach Frank Klopas. Klopas, 58, will step down after the Fire's regular season finale on Oct. 19 and will transition into a new role as vice president of football. The Fire (7-17-9, 30 points) currently are in last place in the 15-team Eastern Conference.

"I'm honoured to be named director of football and head coach of the Chicago Fire, and I would like to thank Joe Mansueto for



his trust," Berhalter said. "Chicago is an incredible city, built on communities of hard-working and passionate people who truly love soccer. I look forward to working alongside our staff and players to transform the Fire into a world-class organization that all our fans and the city can be proud of and will support." Columbus made the playoffs four times under Berhalter, reaching the MLS Cup final in 2015 but losing 2-1 to the Portland Timbers. The USMNT won three major trophies with Berhalter - CONCACAF Nations League (2019-20, 2023-24) and the 2021 Concacaf Gold Cup - and competed in the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The team finished 44-17-13 under his direction. Berhalter was relieved of his duties by USA Soccer in July 2024 after an early exit in the Copa America group stage.

FOCUS

Rooney charged after red card in win

Reuters

London

Plymouth Argyle boss Wayne Rooney was charged by the Football Association yesterday for his behaviour in an eventful win over Blackburn Rovers where he was sent off for allegedly insulting the fourth official and returning to the pitch after his dismissal.

In Saturday's game, Plymouth were leading 1-0 when Blackburn scored an equaliser in the 86th minute which Rooney and his players felt should not have stood, with the former Manchester United and England forward seen fuming at the fourth official.

Referee James Linington showed Rooney the red card and the 38-year-old walked down the tunnel at Home Park Stadium, but he was back on the pitch to celebrate a 97th-minute winner from Morgan Whitaker as Plymouth won 2-1.

"The manager's conduct around the 87th minute was allegedly improper and/or he used abusive and/or insulting words towards a match official, which led to his dismissal," the FA said in a statement. "It's further alleged that his conduct after being dismissed was improper and/or violent. It's also alleged that by returning to the field of play after being dismissed his behaviour was improper."

The FA said Rooney has until today to respond to the charges but the former England skipper said on Monday that he deserved the red card.

"It's my first time as manager receiving a red," Rooney told *TalkSport*. "We worked extremely hard to win the game and to have that taken away by a mistake by the of-



ficials I felt was really harsh. I reacted in a manner which I probably shouldn't have and the red card was deserved from that point of view." Rooney took over Plymouth prior to this season and the second-tier Championship club are 14th in the standings.

Maguire sidelined for a few weeks after injury at Villa

Manchester United will be without England international Harry Maguire for a few weeks after the centre back said yesterday that he picked up an injury in Sunday's draw at Aston Villa.

Maguire went down clutching his calf late in the first half and the 31-year-old was withdrawn at the break. The defender, who was left out of the England squad for the upcoming internationals, is the latest player to join United's growing injury list.

The other injured players include Luke Shaw, Tyrell Malacia, Mason Mount, Leny Yoro, Alejandro Garnacho, Noussair Mazraoui and Kobbie Mainoo.

United are 14th in the standings with eight points after seven games with the club suffering their worst start to a season in the Premier League era.

COMMENT

Solanke hungry for second England cap

AFP

London

Dominic Solanke said yesterday that he never gave up hope that he would play for England again as he prepares for a possible second cap seven years after his international debut.

The forward's sole England appearance came as a substitute against Brazil in 2017 but the 27-year-old has caught the eye of interim manager Lee Carsley after a fine start to the season.

England take on Greece at Wembley in the Nations League tomorrow before heading to Helsinki to face Finland three days later.

Solanke, who joined Tottenham from Bournemouth in August, said his sole international appearance as a substitute against Brazil was one of the "greatest achievements of my career".

"From when you're young and



England's Dominic Solanke, Cole Palmer and Bukayo Saka during training at George's Park, Burton upon Trent, yesterday. (Reuters)

you're just playing football you obviously just want to make it but representing your country is a whole other level," he told a pre-match press conference.

"I worked very hard to get back to this moment," he added. "Obviously I made my debut a long time ago now. It's been quite a

journey to get back here, it's a great feeling."

The former Liverpool player said he always believed his time would come again.

"I didn't think it wouldn't come around," he said. "It was a fact of keep doing what I'm doing and just keep playing well and

scoring goals. I always believed I would get back here so that was my mindset and that was one of the things I was working towards. I'm grateful to be back here now and hopefully I can stay here."

The striker, who has scored three goals in eight games this season, said he was not frustrated that other players had had more opportunities for England.

"I think everything happens at the right time for you," he said. "Everyone's journey is different. I wouldn't have it any other way. I feel like this is the way it had to be for me and I feel my game's clicking now and I feel good in myself."

Solanke is one of three centre-forwards in the squad alongside captain Harry Kane and Aston Villa's Ollie Watkins. Kane has been given the green light to play following an injury scare but Ezri Konsa, Kobbie Mainoo and Morgan Gibbs-White have been ruled out, with Carsley opting against drafting in replacements.