



Babar, Shaheen dropped as Pakistan make three changes



England beat Finland 3-1 in UEFA Nations Cup clash



Monday, October 14, 2024 Rabia II 11, 1446 AH

GULF®TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Sabalenka outlasts local hero Zheng to win third Wuhan Open title

Page 3

PREVIEW / FIFA 2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Qatar prepare for Iran clash as Australia eye win in Japan

QATAR, THE TWO-TIME ASIAN CHAMPIONS, SET TO TAKE ON THE CONTINENTAL GIANTS IN DUBAI

atar will hope they have turned the corner after Thursday's 3-1 win over Kyrgyzstan when they face Asian giants Iran in a 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifier tomor-

Qatar, the two-time AFC Asian Cup champions, entered last Thursday's tie with just a point to their name and another negative result would have had drastic implications on their qualification hopes.

However, the Marquez Lopezcoached side lifted the home gloom with a fighting 3-1 win over Kyrgyzstan on Thursday at Al Thumama Stadium where the home side totally dominated the first half and did enough in the second to secure a welcome win.

Lopez welcomed back Abdelkarim Hassan to the side after more than two years in the wilderness and the Al Wakrah defender delivered with threatening runs and astute defence. Al Duhail striker Almoez Ali, who opened the scoring in the 39th minute against Kyrgyzstan, kept the visitors backline busy on Thursday.

Mercurial Akram Afif – shortlisted for this year's AFC Player of the Year award – and his teammates will be aiming for a win against Iran and a victory tomorrow will complete their turnaround and Qatar can then optimistically look forward to the rest of their campaign.

In other Group A games tomor-



Qatar's playing XI that beat Kyrgyzstan 3-1 during their 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match at AI Thumama Stadium in Doha last Thursday. Qatar face Iran in their next qualifier to be played in Dubai tomorrow.

row, points leaders Uzbekistan will host the United Arab Emirates looking to return to winning ways after drawing 0-0 with Iran last week. Kyrgyzstan, who were beaten by Qatar, tomorrow face North Korea in the group's other game

The first two finishers in each group qualify automatically for the World Cup with the third and fourth-placed finishers advancing to another round of preliminaries.

Meanwhile Australia coach Tony Popovic will look to continue the Socceroos' World Cup qualifying renaissance against a familiar foe tomorrow as he takes his team to Saitama Stadium to face ex-teammate Hajime Moriyasu and his rampant Japan team.

Popovic led Australia to a 3-1 win over China on Thursday in his first game since replacing Graham Arnold, reinvigorating the team's

hopes of an automatic berth at the 2026 World Cup. Australia picked up one point from their opening two matches but victory over the Chinese has moved them up to second in Group C as the Japanese defeated Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were held to a 2-2 draw by Indonesia. The Samurai Blue lead the standings by five points having won all three of their games so far, scoring 14 times without conced-



Australian players celebrate during their 3-1 win over China last Thursday. Australia, coached by Tony Popovic, take on hosts Japan at Saitama Stadium tomorrow. (@Socceroos)

ing to go into the clash as favourites with the Australians having never won in Japan. Despite the odds being heavily in the home side's favour, the journey will hold few concerns for Popovic, who spent four years playing alongside Moriyasu at J-League outfit San-

"I know the coach very well, he was my captain when I played in Japan, a wonderful person that's been there several years now," the former defender said. "You can see

the evolution of Japanese football and how he's changed, bringing players in and out, how they've improved their style of play.

"Obviously, it's a big challenge but also a big opportunity as well to win in Japan," Popovic said.

While Japan and Australia meet in their top-of-the-table encounter, Saudi Arabia host Bahrain in Jeddah aiming to bounce back from their loss to Japan while Indonesia travel to face pointless China looking to pick up a win after three draws.

FOCUS

Al Rayyan crowned champions of Qatar 3x3 Basketball League



Mohammed bin Saad al-Mughaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation (QBF), Yassin Ismail, General Supervisor of the 3x3 competitions, and Essam Lotfi, Technical Expert at QBF, with the Qatar 3x3 Basketball League champions Al Rayyan. **Below:** Runners-up Al Wakrah.

he 2024-2025 Qatar 3x3 Basketball League concluded with Al Rayyan Club emerging as the new season's champions. Al Rayyan dominated the league, amassing an impressive 430 points to secure the title, ahead of fierce competition. Al Wakrah secured second place with 410 points, while Qatar Club completed the podium in third

place, earning 335 points.

The remaining teams ranked as follows: Al Gharafa Club finished fourth with 295 points, Al Khor Club came fifth with 250 points, and Al Sadd Club placed sixth with 235 points. Al Ahli Club followed in seventh with 205 points, Al Shamal Club in eighth with 185 points, and Al Arabi Club finished in ninth and last place with 140 points.

The championship's crowning moment came during an official ceremony attended by Mohammed bin Saad al-Mughaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation, Yassin Ismail, General Supervisor of the 3x3 competitions, and Essam Lotfi, Technical Expert at the Federation.



The winners were honoured with their respective awards, with Al Rayyan receiving gold medals and a cash prize of QR50,000. Al Wakrah's players were awarded silver medals and QR30,000, while Qatar SC received bronze medals and a third-place cash prize of OR20,000.

This victory solidifies Al Rayyan's standing as a dominant force in Qatari basketball, setting the stage for an exciting season ahead.

MOTORSPORT

Belleli wins 2024 FIM MiniGP Qatar Championship title



oung riding sensation Marton Belleli secured the 2024 FIM MiniGP Qatar Championship title despite finishing fifth in both races in the fifth and final round at the Lusail International Circuit.

Heading into the final round with a slender lead over his closest rival Jake Franklin, Belleli had to avoid a major upset in the last two races, but finishing within the top five on both occasions made sure he remained on top with a total of 147 points.

Franklin, after finishing third in Race 1 and fourth in Race 2, came second with 144 points. Riley Robinson secured third place in the standings with 121 points.

in the standings with 121 points.
Franklin's second-place finish also secured his place in the starting line-up of the FIM Mini GP World Final which will be held at the Circuit Ricardo Tor-

mo in Valencia from November

10-14 during the Valencia MotoGP weekend. He will be joined by one other MiniGP Qatar Championship rider after Belleli's age made him ineligible for this year's World Final which will feature riders from 22 countries in the 160cc class.

On Saturday, at the 1.124-kilometre Lusail track, Nolann Macary secured victories in both races in the final round. His back-to-back wins took his points tally to 100, securing him the sixth place in the championship standings.

In Race 1, Macary completed the 15-lap race in 15:34.366, while setting the fastest lap time of the event – 1:01.738. Makar Novichkov followed in second place, finishing 21.403 seconds behind the winner, while Franklin came third. Petr Mayorov finished in fourth place, while Bellei rounded up the top five.

The second race was another

thriller, but again, Macary was in dominant form. Macary clocked an even faster best lap time of 1:01.322 and finished the race in 15:28.662. Novichkov was second again, trailing by 22.532 seconds, while Mayorov and Franklin came third and fourth, respectively. Belleli finished fifth again, adding 11 more points to his account to secure the title

Final Championship Standings:

1: Marton Belleli - 147 points 2: Jake Franklin - 144 points 3: Riley Robinson - 121 points 4: Andrea Giacchero - 114 points 5: Mohammed Al Mutawa - 108 points

6: Nolann Macary - 100 points 7: Makar Novichkov - 73 points 8: Petr Mayorov - 54 points 9: Mahmoud ElBanna - 40 10: Aaron Robinson - 24 11: Carlsen Solis - 22 12: Ivan Maiorov - 20

SPOTLIGHT

Pakistan's placid pitches under fresh fire

Multan, Pakistan

ustralia pace legend Dennis Lillee denounced a pitch in Pakistan as a "graveyard for bowlers" in 1980, but more than 40 years later little has changed.

Lillee vented his anger after toiling for 21 wicketless overs in Faisalabad in a turgid draw.

All 11 Australians players, even wicketkeeper Rod Marsh, had a turn bowling in Pakistan's second innings of 382-2 in reply to Australia's 617 all out as the game petered out into near farce.

Last week, on a wicket described as "a road" by former captain Michael Vaughan, England rewrote the record books as they piled up 823-7 declared in reply to Pakistan's 556 in the first Test in

The total was the fourth highest single innings in Test history.

Harry Brook plundered 317 at almost a run a ball and Ioe Root became England's highest Test run

scorer during his career-best 262 on day four.

Their stand of 454 for the fourth wicket was an England record, the fourth highest in history and the

most by any pair playing overseas. Despite the lifeless pitch, England's bowlers pulled off an innings and 47 run victory after Pakistan crumbled to 220 all out in their second innings.

It gave Pakistan an unwanted record - the first team to score 500 or more and lose a Test by an in-

Perennial problem

England batting great Kevin Pietersen said on X that the lack of help for bowlers in Multan, where the second Test begins tomorrow, was "helping destroy Test cricket."

former Pakistan captain Wasim Akram told AFP. "For years it has been the same old story. Very rarely we used to

It is a "perennial problem,"

get green and lively pitches in the 1990s and had to bowl long spell for wickets."

Rashid Latif, a former Pakistan

captain who has studied pitch preparation, said there was no need for the pitches to be curated so overwhelmingly in the batsmen's favour.

"We can prepare good pitches but our mindset is negative," Latif told AFP.

"There was good grass on the Multan pitch but it was shaved off, I don't know on whose wishes."

Former spinner and ex-selector Tauseef Ahmed, a member of Pakistan team who played in the infamous 1980 Faisalabad Test, said: "Our batters want a flat pitch to score runs.

"Even in domestic matches we have such pitches so that players score big and get prominence."

The last two years has seen Pakistan pitches get even more docile. Each Test wicket there now costs an average of 42.13 runs, the highest anywhere in the world.

Pitch preparation is a science, with experts saying the ideal soil mix is around 60 per cent clay with less sand, such as that found in Australia.

It produces firm and bouncy



England spinner Shoaib Bashir (right) chats with Pakistan players Mir Hamza (centre) and Shaheen Afridi at the Multan International Stadium yesterday. (@TheRealPCB)

tracks which begin to take more spin over five days, providing a balance between ball and bat.

One local groundsman said pitches were a big problem in Pa-

"There are multiple factors from weather to interference from the

team management who want it to suit them," said the curator, who did not want to be named.

"That makes the process complex. A good pitch needs sun to bake it but in some weather we do not get that," he said.

"A Test pitch needed to be cared

for six months or a year but our pitches are over-used so they become flat?

Latif said serious work was needed to lift the standard of pitches.

"There should be a research department under a good geologist to ascertain how a good pitch can be prepared," said Latif.

He also wanted to see Australian Kookaburra balls used in Pakistan ditched for those with a more prominent seam to help bowlers.

"We need to have Grays, Duke or SG balls for our type of clay, which are hand-stitched," said Latif.

Two years ago, Pakistan and Australia scored 1,187 runs with just 14 wickets taken in a soporific draw in Rawalpindi.

The then Pakistan cricket chief Ramiz Raja blasted the playing surface: "We live in the dark ages of pitches in Pakistan. This is not a good advert for Test cricket."

With the second Test starting in Multan tomorrow and the third in Rawalpindi next week, it seems unlikely the bowlers will get any respite soon.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Babar, Shaheen axed as Pakistan make changes

The stylish batsman has not scored a fifty in his last 18 Test innings

AFP Multan, Pakistan

ut-of-form batsman Babar Azam was dropped yesterday as Pakistan shook up their squad for the second Test against England, following their innings and 47-run defeat in the first.

"We've made the decision to rest Babar Azam and a few other players," said selector Aaqib in a Pakistan Cricket Board release, after a 16-player squad with three uncapped players was named for the match which begins in Multan tomorrow. Babar has not scored a fifty in

his last 18 Test innings and managed just 30 and five in the first Test which England won by an innings and 47 runs on Friday after piling up 823-7 declared. Also dropped are pace duo

Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah, while spinner Abrar Ahmed has been left out after being taken Abrar was hospitalised after a

high fever which forced him to miss the fourth and fifth day of the first Test. Javed hoped Babar would come

back refreshed after a break.

"We are confident that this break from international cricket will help these players, especially Babar, regain their confidence," said Javed. "They remain some of our fin-

est talents with much more to contribute to Pakistan cricket," he said.

The uncapped Kamran Ghu-



Pakistan's Babar Azam at a practice session at the Multan Cricket Stadium. (AFP)

lam, 29, should get the nod to replace Babar at number four in the batting line-up. Two other potential debutants

were called up in the shape of wicketkeeper-batsman Haseebullah and left-arm spinner Mehran Mumtaz.

Fast bowler Mohammad Ali and off-spinner Sajid Khan were also included.

Since making his Test debut against the West Indies in Dubai in 2016, Babar has missed only five Tests, two in his first series, one against England at Leeds in 2018 and two in New Zealand in

The axe fell on Babar, Shaheen and Naseem two days after the PCB reconstituted their selection panel bringing in former pace bowler Javed and Azhar Ali along with the incumbent Asad Shafiq.

In a rare move the PCB also included former elite panel umpire Aleem Dar.

After Pakistan's defeat, skipper Shan Masood and head coach Jason Gillespie backed Babar, saying he just needed time to regain his form. Babar was once the International Cricket Council's top-ranked batsman in all three formats, and is still number one in the one-day international rankings. Since the start of 2023 his form has nose dived. He averages under 21 in his last nine Tests, scoring just 126 in six innings in Australia and 64 in the two home Tests against Bangladesh last

Pakistan (from): Shan Masood (captain), Saud Shakeel, Aamer Jamal, Abdullah Shafique, Haseebullah, Kamran Ghulam, Mehran Mumtaz, Mir Hamza, Mohammad Ali, Mohammad Hurraira, Mohammad Rizwan, Noman Ali, Saim Avub, Saiid Khan, Salman Agha, Zahid Mehmood.

King and Lewis propel West Indies to T20 triumph over Sri Lanka

Dambulla Sri Lanka

breathtaking display of power-hitting from Brandon King and Evin Lewis propelled the West Indies to a commanding five-wicket victory in the first T20 against Sri Lanka yesterday.

The West Indies smashed the target of 180 with five balls in hand, taking a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

"It's always important when you come to Sri Lanka to take an early lead, we know that Sri Lanka is a team that play excellent cricket at home," said West Indies skipper Rovman Powell.

He said it was key to "throw the first punch", and then, "once you get on top, you try to stay on top for as long as possible".

The run chase began with fireworks, as the duo of King and Lewis amassed 74 runs within a six-over powerplay, putting Sri Lanka on the defensi

King was the first to reach his half-century, elegantly carving a cover drive for four off Matheesha Pathirana. His 50 came off just 25 balls, while Lewis followed shortly, needing only 27 deliveries for his half-century.

"My role was to get the team off to a good start - and it came off well", King said.

Together, King and Lewis added 107 runs in just nine overs for the opening wicket. It was the highest partnership

for West Indies against Sri Lanka in T20 cricket for any wicket. The partnership was eventually broken when Pathirana deceived

Lewis with a slower ball, the batsman edging it to Chamindu Wickramasinghe at backward point.

King went on to top-score with a blazing 63 off 33 balls, including 11 fours and a six.

With the openers setting up the chase, the middle order merely had to rotate the strike, picking singles and taking calculated risks to seal the win. Sri Lanka attempted to claw

back by picking up a few wickets,



West Indies' Evin Lewis (left) and Brandon King run between the wickets during the first Twenty20 international against Sri Lanka in Dambulla yesterday. (AFP)

but the damage inflicted by the opening pair left the hosts in a nossible position

Earlier, half-centuries by Kamindu Mendis and Charith Asalanka had lifted Sri Lanka to a seemingly competitive 179, with the pair sharing an 82-run stand off 54 balls for the fourth wicket.

However, it proved insufficient against the explosive West Indian openers, who dismantled Sri Lanka's bowling attack.

"Whatever we did today it didn't work out for us, but we will come back after addressing a few issues," skipper Asalanka said. "The plus point for us is that we are playing good cricket."

The West Indies are third in the global T20 rankings, while Sri Lanka languishes in eighth.

The remaining two T20s of the series, also at Dambulla, will be played on October 15 and 17, before the teams head to Pallekele for a three-match ODI series.

BRIEF SCORES

West Indies 180 for 5 (King 63, Lewis 50, Pathirana 2-27) beat Sri Lanka 179 for 7 (Asalanka 59, Kamindu 51, Shepherd 2-39) by five wickets

BOTTOMLINE

Dominant England crush Scotland, Australia edge India to reach semi-finals



Maia Bouchier

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

peners Maia Bouchier and Danni Wyatt-Hodge put on an unbeaten century partnership as England hammered debutants Scotland by 10 wickets at the Women's T20 World Cup yesterday.

England restricted Scotland to 109-6 in 20 overs after left-arm spinner Sophie Ecclestone returned figures of 2-13 in a disciplined bowling attack in Sharjah.

England romped home with 10 overs to spare as Bouchier hit 62 off 34 deliveries, earning herself player of the match honours as her team closed in on a semi-final

A third successive win sent England top of Group B ahead of South Africa, who have three wins out of four, and the West

England face the West Indies tomorrow in Dubai to decide the two semi-finalists from the group. "Just try and win, exactly the same way we have approached (the tournament so far)," skipper Heather Knight said of their last group game against the West Indies.

"You want to keep winning, keep that momentum and we want to go again, get some momentum and make it to the

Scotland, who ended winless after qualifying for the tournament for the first time, and Bangladesh had already bowed out of the 10-team competition.

"Pretty tough tournament in general but a massive honour to be here and to be leading the team out in a tournament like this," skipper Kathryn Bryce said. "Only learnings to be taken from here."

Australia beat India to reach T20 World Cup last-four

Holders Australia overcame the absence of skipper Alyssa Healy to edge India in a tense nine-run win yesterday that locked up a semi-final spot in the Women's T20

World Cup. Tahila McGrath led six-time winners Australia in Sharjah after Healy dropped out with a foot injury suffered batting in a victory over Pakistan on Fri-

Healy's replacement Grace Harris topscored with 40 and McGrath hit 32 as Australia posted 151-8 after electing to bat first.

In reply, India finished on 142-9 with skipper Harmanpreet Kaur hitting an unbeaten 54 as she put on a fourth-wicket stand of 63 with Deepti Sharma, who made 29, and took the fight to the final over.

India needed 14 off the last six balls, but lost four wickets as Australian bowler Annabel Sutherland gave away four runs.

The victory extended Australia's winning streak to 15 in the tournament.

They officially qualified for their ninth straight semi-final of the tournament when India were 74-3 in 10.4 overs of their chase. India need arch-rivals Pakistan to win their final group match against New Zealand. If New Zealand win, they will

take second place in Group A and reach the semis. A Pakistan win would leave them, India and the Kiwis all on four points and net run-rate would decide who advances.

BRIEF SCORES

Scotland 109-6 in 20 overs (Kathryn Bryce 33, Sarah Bryce 27: Sophie Ecclestone 2-13) v England 113-0 in 10 overs (Maia Bouchier 62 not out, Danni Wyatt-Hodge 51 not out)

Result: England won by 10 wickets Player of the Match: Maia Bouchier (ENG) Toss: Scotland

BRIEF SCORES

Australia 151-8 in 20 overs (Grace Harris 40, Tahlia McGrath 32; Ellyse Perry 32; Renuka Singh 2-24, Deepti Sharma 2-28) v India 142-9 in 20 overs (Harmanpreet Kaur 54 not out. Deepti Sharma 29: Annabel Sutherland 2-22, Sophie Molineux

Result: Australia won by nine runs Toss: Australia



SPOTLIGHT

Chepngetich shatters women's marathon world record as Korir wins in Chicago



Ruth Chepngetich of Kenya celebrates after crossing the finish line to win the 2024 Chicago Marathon and set a new world record with a time of 2:09:56 at Grant Park in Chicago, Illinois, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP Chicago

uth Chepngetich of Kenya obliterated the women's world record by almost two minutes yesterday as she won the Chicago Marathon in 2:09:56, taking inspiration from the late Kelvin Kiptum.

The 30-year-old Chepngetich, who became the first three-time women's winner of the Chicago race, broke the previous world record of 2:11:53 set by Ethiopia's Tigst Assefa last year in Berlin.

"I feel so great, I'm proud of myself. This is my dream that has come true," said Chepngetich, the 2019 world marathon champion.

"I've fought a lot, thinking about the world record and I have fulfilled it."

Chepngetich, who also won in Chicago in 2021 and 2022, dedicated her latest victory to Kiptum, who set the men's world record at last year's race just four months before he died in a car accident at the age of 24.

"The world record has come back to Kenya, and I dedicate this world record to Kelvin Kiptum," said Chepngetich.

Runners observed a moment's silence on the start line in honour of Kiptum. Organisers

also handed out stickers displaying Kiptum's record-breaking time of 2:00:35 for the 50,000 participants to put on their race bibs.

In the absence of Olympic champion Sifan Hassan, the 2023 Chicago winner, Chepngetich set a blazing early pace and reached the halfway point in 1:04:16, the fifth-quickest time in history for a half marathon by a woman.

"The weather was perfect and I was well prepared. The world record was in my mind," said Chepngetich.

Ethiopian Sutume Kebede, a former training partner of Kiptum's, battled valiantly to stay within sight of Chepngetich but gradually lost ground on the leader.

At one point, Chepngetich was on track to shave more than three minutes off the world record. She slowed slightly in the closing kilometres but still had plenty in the tank and beat her own personal best five-plus minutes.

Kebede came second yesterday in 2:17:32, with Kenyan Irine Cheptai third in 2:17:51.

Korir triumphs in men's race

John Korir of Kenya won his first major marathon title after running a personal best of 2:02:44 in the men's race.

The 27-year-old Korir finished ahead of Ethiopia's Mohamed Esa (2:04:39) and another

Kenyan, Amos Kipruto (2:04:50). Korir was part of a seven-man group at the head of the course 30 kilometres in before he hit the accelerator and shed his rivals following a relatively conservative start. Four of the top five were Kenyans, with Vincent Ngetich and Daniel Ebenyo finishing off the podium.

"It was really nice to run my PB and win in Chicago," said Korir, adding that he too used the memory of Kiptum as a source of motivation. "Today I was thinking about Kiptum and I said 'last year if he could run under 2:01, why not me?' So I had to believe in myself and try to do my best." Korir's time was the second-fastest ever run in Chicago.

2024 Chicago Marathon

Men's results John Korir (KEN), 2:02:43 Mohamed Huseydin Esa (ETH), 2:04:39 Amos Kipruto (KEN), 2:04:50 Vincent Ngetich (KEN), 2:05:15 Daniel Ebenyo (KEN), 2:06:04 Women's results

Ruth Chepngetich (KEN), 2:09:56 Sutume Asefa Kebede (ETH), 2:17:32 Irine Cheptai (KEN), 2:17:52 Buze Diriba Kejela (ETH), 2:20:22 Joyciline Jepkosgei (KEN), 2:20:51

TENNIS

Sabalenka beats Zheng to lift third Wuhan trophy

THE 26-YEAR-OLD COULD END THE YEAR AS THE WORLD NO. 1

AFP Wuhan, China

ryna Sabalenka became the first player to win the Wuhan Open three times by defeating local hero Zheng Qinwen 6-3, 5-7, 6-3 in the final yesterday.

The top seed, who also triumphed at the event in 2018 and 2019, kept her undefeated record in Wuhan intact, improving to a perfect 17-0.

Sabalenka was put to the test by a gritty Zheng in a rematch of the 2024 Australian Open final before she captured an Open era record fifth title on Chinese soil.

With two Grand Slam titles and a WTA 1000 success in Cincinnati under her belt already in 2024, Sabalenka picked up her fourth trophy of the season from seven finals reached.

The 26-year-old strengthened her chances of ending the year as the world number one ahead of Iga Swiatek, a battle likely to come down to the wire at the WTA Finals in Riyadh next month.

"That's a really tight ranking right now. Really nice to see," said Sabalenka, who trails Swiatek in the world rankings by less than 100 points. "We'll see after the Finals if I was good enough this season to become world number one."

Zheng had never taken a set off of Sabalenka in any of their previous three meetings, which have all come on the Grand Slam stage and in the past 13 months. However, yesterday's final was a different story, with Zheng, the reigning Olympic gold medallist, competing in front of her home fans in the city where she grew up.

Sabalenka broke for a 4-2 advantage on a Zheng double-fault



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka (right) poses with the winner's trophy after her victory against China's Zheng Qinwen (left) in their singles final at the Wuhan Open, China's Hubei province, yesterday. (AFP)

in front of a capacity crowd of 13,000.

The Belarusian wrapped up the 38-minute opening set with her second ace of the match, dropping just five points on serve along the way. Sabalenka looked on course for another routine win when she broke in the third game of the second set but Zheng had other ideas.

The world number seven retaliated immediately and claimed her first break of serve in all four showdowns with Sabalenka to get the set back on level terms.

The contest became a tug of war, with Zheng inching ahead 5-3 and Sabalenka pegging her back.

The moment of truth for Zheng came in the 12th game as she cap-

italised on a Sabalenka error to break and secure a set against her opponent for the first time to take the final into a decider.

Sabalenka raced to a doublebreak 3-0 lead in the final set. Zheng almost erased the deficit but couldn't convert her chances

Zheng almost erased the deficit but couldn't convert her chances as Sabalenka closed out the win after 2hr 40min.

"I felt like I just lost a little bit of focus and I let her come back in the match," Sabalenka said. "I would say I just played kind

of against myself. But I'm really happy I was able to put everything together in the third set and get this win."

Zheng, 22, can still take positives from her week in Wuhan, where she is the first Chinese finalist in tournament history.

She has made a crucial jump in the Race to the WTA Finals, from number nine to number seven, increasing her chances of becoming the first Chinese player to qualify for the season-ending championships since Li Na in 2013.

That could come down to the WTA 500 tournament in Ningbo next week but Zheng said she has not decided yet whether she'll play after being troubled by a fever over the past two weeks.

"I'm feeling a little bit weak in my health," Zheng said.

"I will need to be really cautious," Zheng said.

"Competing in Ningbo is important, but my health is also important.

"I need to find the balance between the two."

GOLF

Rattanon ends 7-year wait with Macau win



Rattanon Wannasrichan of Thailand posing with the trophy after winning in the Macau Open at the Macau Golf and Country Club. (AFP)

AFP

hailand's Rattanon Wannasrichan swept to a brilliant wire-to-wire victory at the Macau Open yesterday for his first Asian Tour title in seven years.

The 29-year-old fired a fourunder-par 66 at the Macau Golf and Country Club to finish on 20-under, two strokes clear of fellow Thai Gunn Charoenkul (67).

Poosit Supupramai (64) made it a Thai clean sweep of the top three on 16-under par.

One stroke back in a share of fourth on 15-under was Asian Tour Order of Merit leader John Catlin (65), who won the International Series Macau on the same course in March.

Filipino Miguel Tabuena was on the same mark as he celebrated his 30th birthday yesterday by making an eagle three at the final hole for a spectacular round of seven-under

"I'm so happy," said Rattanon, whose only previous Asian Tour win came at the Thailand Open in 2017.

"I didn't think I could win again, because I had a very tough year in 2019.

"I played really badly that year but I told myself to not give up, that's why I could improve my game and win again."

It was another near miss for Gunn, who recorded his fourth second-place finish on the Asian Tour.

"This is great. It's another second place, not a win but I am fine with it," said the 32-year-old.

Defending champion Min Woo Lee from Australia signed off with a 66 to tie for ninth on 11-under par, while 2023 British Open champion Brian Harman, from the United States, was a stroke further back in a share of 13th.

Leading scores after final round of the Macau Open (par 70):

260 - Rattanon Wannasrichan (THA) 61-66-67-66 **262** - Gunn Charoenkul (THA) 65-

64-66-67 **264 -** Poosit Supupramai (THA)

66-67-67-64 **265 -** Miguel Tabuena (PHI) 64-68-70-63, John Catlin (USA) 67-65-

68-65 **266** - Pavit Tangkamolprasert (THA) 66-66-67-67 268 - Chanat Sakulpolphaisan

268 - Chanat Sakulpolphaisan (THA) 70-65-65-68, Liu Yung-hua (TPE) 64-67-68-69 **269 -** Chanchai Nirat (THA) 69-67

269 - Chapchai Nirat (THA) 69-67-69-64, David Boriboonsub (THA) 69-65-69-66, Min Woo Lee (AUS) 68-68-67-66, Bjorn Hellgren (SWE) 64-70-68-67

270 - Yuvraj Singh Sandhu (IND) 71-67-64-68, Brian Harman (USA) 67-66-68-69, Lee Seung-taek

Djokovic sees silver lining in Shanghai Masters defeat to Sinner

Shanghai: Former world number one Novak Djokovic will take plenty of positives from his performance at the Shanghai Masters despite his defeat by Jannik Sinner yesterday, as the Serb rediscovered his form after a disappointing US Open campaign. Djokovic looked in fine nick in Shanghai, playing with consistency throughout the tournament to reach his fifth final at the ATP Masters 1000 event, where he was beaten 7-6(4) 6-3 by world number one Sinner.

"I think there's quite a few positives that I can take. I think the level of my tennis was really good this tournament, probably best after the Olympics in terms of how I played, how I performed, how I fought," Djokovic told reporters. "I did my best tonight. Under the circumstances, I felt maybe not a 100% fresh, but big credit to Jannik for playing the big points better than me, and that's what made the difference. He deserved to win, he was just too strong in important moments. "I still think that in the final today

I played pretty good, which gives

still play with these guys that are

me reason to believe that I can

the best in the world. Hopefully

I can maintain that level in the

upcoming months, and also for the future."
Djokovic's defeat to Sinner also dashed his bid to add a 100th singles title to his trophy cabinet, which would have seen him become only the third man to achieve the feat after Jimmy Connors (109) and rival Roger Federer

The 37-year-old played down the significance of that particular milestone, adding: "That's a bonus, if that can happen. I definitely wished for it to happen today, but it wasn't meant to be. I've got to keep striving to make it happen somewhere in the near future."



YIN RUONING WINS HOME EVENT IN SHANGHAI



Yin Ruoning of China poses with the trophy after winning the Shanghai LPGA yesterday. Yin Ruoning capped a scintillating week in her hometown, shooting a 64 to win the Buick LPGA Shanghai title and set the tournament scoring record. Yin made the Qizhong Garden Golf Club course her personal playground with rounds of 70-66-63-64 for a 25-under 263. (AFP)

TENNIS

Sinner wins in Shanghai to deny Djokovic 100th title

'THIS YEAR HAS BEEN VERY. VERY TOUGH FOR ME. AT POINTS I LOST A LITTLE BIT OF SMILE'

AFP Shangha

orld number one Jannik Sinner defeated 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 yesterday to win the Shanghai Masters.

Sinner took a crucial break in the fourth game of the second set to defeat the Serb in 1hr 37min and deny him a 100th career singles title.

"He was just too good today, too strong, too fast," Djokovic said after the match.

Sinner said it was a "very special day", saluting his opponent as a "legend" who kept playing "incredible tennis... year after year".

In a nod to former Djokovic rival Roger Federer, who was watching from the stands, the 23-year-old joked: "There are legends everywhere, I just try to keep up a little bit."

Facing off before an impassioned crowd, neither player blinked in the first set, unable to break the other's serve.

Sinner quickly took control in the tiebreak, breaking Djokovic's serve on the first point and going 5-1 up.

The Serb steaded himself but then netted a volley to bring up set

Sinner failed to convert initially but didn't miss the second time



Italy's Jannik Sinner (right) is greeted by Serbia's Novak Djokovic after Sinner won their singles final match at the Shanghai Masters yesterday. (AFP)

behind serve. The next key moment came in the fourth game of the second set when Sinner was up 40-15 on Djokovic's serve.

Djokovic saved one break point with a fiery ace but couldn't stop a superb forehand down the line from Sinner that saw him pull

All that remained was for the Italian to hold his nerve, hitting an

ace to finish the match and claim the title.

'Tough year'

Sinner's victory is the latest triumph in a formidable season, in which he has won two Grand Slams and retained the top spot in the rankings since June.

But it is also a year that has seen him embroiled in controversy af-

ter he twice tested positive for a banned steroid in March.

In August, the International Tennis Integrity Agency accepted Sinner's explanation that the drug entered his system unintentionally when his physiotherapist used a spray containing it to treat a cut, then provided massage and sports therapy to the player.

However, the World Anti-



Former tennis player Roger Federer (second left) of Switzerland and Spain's Carlos Alcaraz (right) watch Serbia's Novak Djokovic and Italy's Jannik Sinner play during their singles final at the Shanghai Masters yesterday. (AFP)

Doping Agency said last month it would appeal against the decision to clear him of wrongdoing and was seeking a ban of up to two

That news came as Sinner was contesting the China Open, where he lost in the final to Spain's Carlos Alcaraz, who was also watching from the stands yesterday.

"This year has been very, very tough for me. At points I lost a little bit of smile," Sinner said yesterday.

"It's never easy to play in these kind of circumstances," he added.
"I feel like I'm strong when I go on the court trying to not think about it... When I wake up I try to focus on every single (match or practice) I do, but then of course I have moments when I think about it which

is not comfortable." Djokovic said Sinner played "the big points better" and "deserved to win".

The 37-year-old said that getting a 100th title was "not a live-or-die type of goal", but he would keep trying.

Djokovic became the last man standing from tennis' golden era after Rafael Nadal announced his retirement this week and said that, despite the loss, he was pleased with his performance in Shanghai.

"I played pretty good, which gives me, I guess, a reason to believe that I can still play with these guys that are the best in the world at this level," he said.

"As long as that's the case, I guess I'll still feel the need to keep on competing and the motivation to be out there."

FOOTBALL

England beat Finland 3-1 to get back on track



AFP Helsinki

ngland avoided fresh embarrassment after their Greek tragedy as Trent Alexander-Arnold's superb free-kick inspired a 3-1 win against Finland in the Nations League vesterday.

Four days after Greece earned their first ever win over England at Wembley, Lee Carsley's side were again far from convincing for long periods in Helsinki. But they mustered just enough quality in the final third to spare their interim manager more misery.

Jack Grealish's composed finish put England ahead in the first half, but Finland wasted several chances before Alexander-Arnold and Declan Rice sealed the win in the second half.

Although Finland's Arttu Hoskonen netted in the closing stages, England's third victory in four games since Carsley replaced Gareth Southgate kept them in contention for promotion from Nations League Group B2.

However, in the 'land of a thousand lakes', it was far from plain sailing for Carsley, who is in the spotlight as the Football Association ponder who should succeed Southgate on a permanent basis.

After winning his first two games against Ireland and Finland in September, Carsley's tactical gamble – changing his formation to play with five attacking midfielders and no recognised striker – backfired badly in the Greece defeat and raised doubts about his suitability for the role.

Reports yesterday claimed former Bayern Munich and Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel is in talks with the Football Association, who have also been linked with Newcastle manager Eddie Howe. Carsley is expected to remain in charge for England's trip to Greece on November 14 followed by Ireland's visit to Wembley three days later.

Calling for a "reaction" to the Greece debacle, Carsley made six changes as he went back to a more

"conventional" line-up.

Dean Henderson replaced Jordan Pickford in goal for his first

England start, while Harry Kane's return from injury saw Carsley ditch his striker-less experiment.

Grealish Kyle Walker Marc

Grealish, Kyle Walker, Marc Guehi and Angel Gomes also came into a team that found it hard going at times against a Finland side 60 places below them in FIFA's world rankings.

Gomes' sloppy pass deep inside his own half left England exposed in the opening moments, but Topi Keskinen wasted the chance as he scuffed wide from 10 yards.

That escape stirred England into action and they took the lead with a well-crafted 17-pass move in the 18th minute.

Alexander-Arnold rifled a pass

into Gomes and the Lille midfielder turned nimbly to play a clever ball through the heart of the Finland defence. Grealish timed his run perfectly

to apply the finishing touch from close range for his fourth England goal.

He celebrated by sucking his thumb like a baby in tribute to his daughter Mila, who was born two weeks ago.

Grealish, back after missing the

Greece game due to injury, has been a bright spot under Carsley after being left out of the Euro 2024 squad.

England were still vulnerable at the back and Keskinen should have done better than shoot straight at Henderson after the visitors carelessly conceded possession. Carsley deployed Alexander-

Arnold at left-back instead of his usual right-back berth and the Liverpool star was caught out of position when Fredrik Jensen fired just over. Jensen squandered a golden

opportunity to equalise, smashing over from just six yards after England once again let the hosts prise them open far too easily.

Carsley sent on Ollie Watkins and Noni Madueke for Palmer and Kane, who has now been replaced in each of his last seven England appearances.

The changes gave England a spark and Alexander-Arnold doubled their lead with a brilliant free-kick that whistled past Lukas Hradecky from 25 yards in the 74th minute.

COMMENT

Dutch strikers expect more space in clash against Germany

Reuters Munich

etherlands striker Cody Gakpo believes there will be more space for his team to attack in today's Nations League clash away to Germany after a difficult game with Hungary on Friday when the Dutch met stubborn resistance from the home defence.

The Netherlands take on Germany three days after they drew 1-1 with Hungary in their Group A3 game in Budapest, coming from behind to snatch a late equaliser through Denzel Dumfries after captain Virgil van Dijk was sent off.

"I expect more space. Germany will play a bit more forward and be a bit more open, which will create spaces for us," said Gakpo at a press conference yesterday. The Netherlands drew 2-2 with

Germany last month in an open and attacking game in Amsterdam and a similar style encounter is expected for the return in Munich.

Germany lead the standings on seven points, two more than the second-placed Netherlands after three games.

"It was difficult for us because of how they played," added coach Ronald Koeman of the Hungary game. "In the second half it went better, with more deep runs. There was space on the wings but we didn't use that well."

Gakpo's Liverpool teammate Van Dijk will be missing as he sits out a one-match ban after Friday's red card. "Virgil is an exceptional player,

but now we are obliged to replace him. There are other good players who can do that," Gakpo added. Koeman said either Stefan de

Vrij or Dumfries would replace Van Dijk as captain and added that whoever got the armband had big shoes to fill.

"Virgil is someone who coaches a lot from the back. Now others have to do that. Some people are more capable of that than others and it also has to do with experience. I certainly think it will be interesting to see how that works in the team now that Virgil is not there. He has almost always been available," Koeman told the press conference.

Belgium eye France winBelgium coach Domenico Tedesco

Belgium coach Domenico Tedesco has urged his players to be brave and clinical against France as his



side seek a first competitive victory over their neighbours in 43 years in their Nations League A Group 2 clash in Brussels today.

Belgium trail pool leaders Italy by three points and second-placed France by two at the mid-way point in the group, needing to finish in the top two to qualify for the quarter-finals.

Defeat at home and an expected win for Italy over Israel could effectively end their hopes to reach the knockout stages with two rounds left to play.

"We must be brave against France. We won't get many opportunities and we have to finish the ones we get," Tedesco said.

"We won't be able to put pressure on them for 90 minutes, so it's also important to defend well in our own box. It's going to be a big game."

Belgium, who are without Kevin De Bruyne and Romelu Lukaku after they asked not to be considered for this international window, earned a 2-2 draw in Italy on Thursday having been two goals behind inside 24 minutes.

Tedesco is hoping his side will start better against France, who won 2-0 in Lyon when the teams met last month.

"We didn't start well (against Italy)," he said.

"We wanted to be compact, but we were way too impatient. And that quick (first) goal did not help. We are just human. It is in my character to also talk about the bad things. We must not hide that.

"But the match lasted 90 minutes, not half an hour. I want to emphasise that we showed a good response. With this young group it was anything but a bad result against Italy."

Belgium have not beaten France in a competitive match since a World Cup qualifier in 1981. Their two victories since then have both beat in friendly fixtures, the last in 2015.