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WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Coach Lopez optimistic despite Qatar's loss to Iran

By Sports Reporter
Dubai

Qatar head coach Marquez Lopez was left to count the cost of missed chances after the two-time Asian champions slumped to a disappointing 1-4 loss to Iran in the 2026 World Cup Qualifiers in Dubai on Tuesday.

The loss leaves Qatar on four points from four games, six adrift of Iran and Uzbekistan, who currently occupy the two automatic qualifying spots in Group A, and at risk of missing out once again on a place at the finals.

Despite a six-point gap between Qatar and the top two, Lopez is confident that his side can still reach the FIFA World Cup and called on his players to fight tooth and nail in the remaining matches to achieve their target.

"We congratulate the Iranian team on the victory, especially since they performed better than us," said Lopez. "We started well and succeeded in scoring first, and had another opportunity to increase the lead. On the other hand, Iran had many chances, including one that hit the post, then they scored two goals."

On Tuesday, a brace apiece for Sardar Azmoun and Mohammed Mohebbi cancelled out Almoez Ali's early strike to give Iran a comprehensive win.

Qatar have never qualified for the World Cup, only securing their place at the 2022 tournament as hosts, and the closest the

nation has come to progressing through the preliminaries was ahead of France 1998 when they lost out to Saudi Arabia.

The top two finishers in each of Asia's three qualifying groups advance to the World Cup while the third and fourth-placed nations progress to a further round of preliminaries.

"Our goal has not changed, which is to qualify for the World Cup," Lopez said. "The opportunity is still there, although the group includes good teams such as Uzbekistan and Iran."

"The mission is not easy, but the opportunity to qualify is available and we have to fight for our chances until the last breath. There are still matches and many points that we must work hard to get."

Qatar are fourth in Group A, level on four points with the third-placed United Arab Emirates and one point ahead of Kyrgyzstan who are fifth. They next host Uzbekistan on Nov 14.

Meanwhile, Qatar defender Lucas Mendes has called on his teammates to make rapid improvements to revive their challenge for a place at the 2026 World Cup. "It was a tough game but we know the Iranians are very strong, they have very good players (who are) at a high level," said Brazil-born defender. "It's a bad start for us but still we have six games left. We need to change our level. Many mistakes, we need to improve."

Iran's coach Amir Ghalenoee said he will always fondly remember Iran's over Qatar. "I think it was one of our good days," said Ghalenoee. "We scored four goals and had



Marquez Lopez is confident Qatar can still qualify for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

several other opportunities. Overall, it was a very good game. It was one of the best games of the group that Asia enjoyed. This win will help us further. We can rejoice

for a day or two and then we have to think about the next games with Kyrgyzstan and North Korea. I hope we can make Iranian people happy with more good games."

Striker Azmoun said: "It was a really important three points. It was a really easy game for us. We didn't expect that the game would go like that."

FOOTBALL

Tuchel targets World Cup glory with England

The German will start his new job from January 1, 2025 on an 18-month deal



England's newly-appointed football coach Thomas Tuchel speaks during a press conference at Wembley stadium in London yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
London

Thomas Tuchel said he must rise to the challenge of ending England's wait for a first major trophy since 1966 as the German was unveiled as the new manager of the Three Lions yesterday. Former Chelsea boss Tuchel will start his new job from January 1, 2025 on an 18-month deal to the conclusion of the 2026 World Cup.

The 51-year-old, who has been out of work since leaving Bayern Munich at the end of last season, succeeds Gareth Southgate as permanent coach and becomes the third foreign England manager after Sven-Goran Eriksson and Fabio Capello.

"I know that there are some trophies missing in the federation and, of course, I want to help to make it happen," he told a press conference at Wembley.

He borrowed a quote from Brazilian great Pele to describe his excitement at becoming England coach. "I just had the chance to read a quote from Pele in the building who said that Wembley is the heart, the capital and the cathedral of football and I think he was absolutely right."

Tuchel, who has also coached Borussia Dortmund and Paris Saint-Germain, has the trophy-winning pedigree that the FA is seeking to help end a 58-year wait to win a major tournament since the 1966 World Cup on home soil.

The highlight of the German's career to date came during his spell in English football when he won the Champions League with Chelsea in 2021.

However, the FA's move has drawn criticism over their unwillingness to trust an Englishman with its top job, overseeing a richly-talented generation of players including Jude Bellingham who will be among the favourites for the 2026 World Cup.

"There are some serious questions for the FA to answer in respect of English coaching," said former Manchester United captain and England defender Gary Neville.

Southgate resigned shortly after losing the Euro 2024 final to Spain in July, following an eight-year reign that made England a force again on the international stage. "We

will build on everything that Gareth and the FA built and hopefully we can add a little bit of extra to get it over the line," added Tuchel. "We will try to install values and principles and rules as quickly as possible to make the dream come true."

Tuchel will be assisted by English coach Anthony Barry, who worked alongside him at Bayern. FA CEO Mark Bullingham said English candidates were among 10 interviewees but that Tuchel represented the best chance of delivering success.

"We wanted the very best person for the job and we feel like we owe it to the players and the country to give them that support, that leadership in tournaments that will help to get them over the line," said Bullingham. "Thomas gives us the best chance of winning a trophy in the men's World Cup, so we feel we've done that."

Tuchel won league titles at PSG and Bayern and the German Cup with Dortmund, but his greatest success came during his time at Chelsea. On top of leading the Blues to Champions League glory just months after taking charge, he also won the UEFA Super Cup and Club World Cup with the London club.

But he was sacked in September 2022 in a bold early move by Chelsea's new ownership group that did not pay off. Just six months later he was appointed Bayern boss and led them to an 11th consecutive Bundesliga title.

However, Tuchel also oversaw the demise of Bayern's dominance of German football in a first trophyless campaign for 12 years last season. England captain Harry Kane was signed by Tuchel for Bayern last year and scored 44 goals in 45 matches under his tutelage. "I think it's a really great appointment. I worked closely with him last season and think he's a really top, top coach and also a great person," said Kane.

Lee Carsley was put in temporary charge of England in August following Southgate's resignation and will remain in place for Nations League fixtures against the Republic of Ireland and Greece next month.

However, the FA were keen to stress a shock 2-1 defeat by Greece last week played no part in their decision as Tuchel signed his contract on October 8, two days before that match.

Tuchel 'has to' win World Cup for England, says Shearer

London: Thomas Tuchel must win the 2026 World Cup to justify his appointment as England's new manager, according to the Three Lions' former captain Alan Shearer. England have not won a major tournament since the 1966 World Cup, but came close to ending that drought several times under Tuchel's predecessor Gareth Southgate.

Tuchel will inherit an abundance of talented players to work with, including Bayern Munich striker Harry Kane and Real Madrid's Jude Bellingham. The German has an impressive track record of winning major trophies. Tuchel led Chelsea to Champions League glory in 2021 and won league titles at Bayern and PSG. "We need a trophy - it's as simple as that. We need a manager who can deliver that," Shearer said.

"There's no doubt (Tuchel) has an incredible CV, but this is going to be a very different test for him. It's a bold move from the FA (Football Association), there's no doubt about it. You have to win the tournament, that's what he's been hired for. They (the FA) have seen the bunch of players are the best England have had for a long, long time."

Tuchel's appointment has been met with some criticism over the decision not to hire an English coach. Lee Carsley stepped up from his role in charge of England's under-21 side to take interim charge for the last four matches.

"Tuchel will have looked at this squad and thought there is so much talent in there, this is an unbelievable opportunity of winning the greatest trophy of all," said former England striker Gary Lineker. "I would have given the job to Carsley. I have seen enough to suggest the players really trust him, that he's imaginative enough to produce something that is a joy to watch - entertaining front-footed football."

However, there were a lack of outstanding English candidates for the role. The last homegrown manager to win the English top-flight division was Howard Wilkinson as Leeds boss in 1992, prior to the formation of the Premier League.

MATCH REPORT

Sajid sparkles for Pakistan after Duckett century

The seasoned off-spinner picks up 4 key wickets in Multan

Reuters
Multan

England opener Ben Duckett smashed a belligerent hundred but Pakistan off-spinner Sajid Khan struck three late blows to leave the second test evenly poised on an enthralling second day yesterday.

Replying to Pakistan's first-innings 366, England cruised to 211-2 with Duckett and Joe Root looking well set before Sajid (4-86) triggered a spectacular collapse.

England limped to 239-6 at stumps having lost five wickets in the final session including three in eight deliveries.

They are still 127 behind with Jamie Smith (12) and Brydon Carse (two) to the crease.

It was a far cry from their swashbuckling batting earlier in the day when England scored at almost seven-an-over in the first 10.

Duckett (114) led the way, forging 50-plus partnerships with Zak Crawley, Ollie Pope and Joe Root.

The feisty left-hander combined in a breezy 73-run opening stand with Zak Crawley, who led a charmed life before falling for 27.

Crawley survived a run-out after a mix-up with Duckett only because bowler Sajid Khan had broken the stumps before he could collect the ball.

Sajid suffered more disappointment when Crawley was adjudged lbw in his next over but the decision was reversed after replays confirmed the ball would have missed the stumps.

Crawley could not make the most of the reprieves, though, and fell to Noman Ali.

After a caught-behind appeal against Crawley had been turned down, left-arm spinner Noman cajoled his captain Shan Masood to review the decision and replays confirmed an edge.

Ollie Pope (29) made a start too before he was bowled through the gate by Sajid.



Pakistan's Sajid Khan (second left) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of England's Harry Brook (left) during the second day of the second Test at the Multan Cricket Stadium yesterday. (AFP)



England's Ben Duckett celebrates after reaching his century in Multan yesterday. (Reuters)

With Pakistan unleashing spin from both ends, Duckett found the sweep shot – both traditional and reverse – particularly productive and brought up his hundred with one such shot against Salman Agha.

Root (34), the world's top-

ranked test batsman, added 86 runs with Duckett but fluffed a sweep shot against Sajid and dragged the ball onto his stumps.

Sajid ended Duckett's entertaining knock, which included 16 fours, when he had the opener caught in the slips.

Five balls later, the spinner clean bowled Harry Brook, who smashed a triple hundred in the opening Test. Noman returned to dismiss England captain Ben Stokes for one to turn the match on its head.

Earlier, Pakistan's lower order chipped in with useful runs after they resumed on 259-5.

Salman Agha (31), Aamer Jamal (37) and Pakistan's number 10 Noman (32) produced defiant cameos to take the hosts past the 350-mark. Jamal, the lone seamer in the Pakistan attack, suffered a hip injury while batting and has been used sparingly.

England comprehensively won the opening Test, also in Multan, to take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

BRIEF SCORES (Day 2)
England 239 for 6 (Duckett 114, Root 34, Sajid 4-86) **trail Pakistan 366** (Ghulam 118, Ayub 77, Leach 4-114) **by 127 runs**

ANNOUNCEMENT

Gabba dropped for Ashes opener for first time in 40 years

Reuters
Melbourne

The Gabba will not host an Ashes series-opener in Australia for the first time in more than four decades after Cricket Australia confirmed Perth as the venue for the first Test of the 2025-26 series yesterday.

The Brisbane ground will instead host its first day-night Ashes clash from Dec. 4-8 before the five-Test series between holders Australia and England moves to Adelaide Oval (Dec. 17-21), the Melbourne Cricket Ground (Dec. 26-30) and the Sydney Cricket Ground (Jan. 4-8).

The last time an Ashes in Australia started away from the Gabba was in 1982 when the historic foes drew at the WACA in Perth.

Australia lost the 1986 opener at the Gabba to Mike Gatting's England but have not lost another Ashes Test at the iconic ground since.

Once Australia's first choice to start a home summer of cricket, the Gabba's stocks have fallen in recent years since Perth Stadium opened in 2017 and following Adelaide Oval's redevelopment a decade ago.

The Gabba's future is up in the air, with no Test scheduled in the 2026-27 home summer and a planned redevelopment for the 2032 Brisbane Olympics scrapped over cost concerns.

Australia have won the last eight



Ashes Tests in Perth, though 2025 will be the first time the teams have played at the new stadium in Burswood.

Adelaide Oval, meanwhile, will host its first daytime Ashes Test since 2013 when fast bowler Mitchell Johnson took 7-40 in the first innings to help the hosts claim a 218-run win.

"There has already been enormous interest from fans around the world and all over Australia wanting to see Australia's and England's men's teams engage in the next instalment of the Game's oldest rivalry," Cricket Australia executive Joel Morrison said at a launch for the schedule in Perth yesterday.

Australia have won 13 and drawn two out of the 15 Ashes Tests on home soil since England's win in Sydney in 2011.

Australia won the last home series 4-0 in 2021-22 and retained the urn last year with a 2-2 draw in England.

Contingencies available if India don't travel for Champions Trophy, say ECB

Multan: England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) chiefs are confident a solution can be found if India do not travel to Pakistan for the 2025 Champions Trophy, adding that India's participation is necessary to protect the tournament's broadcast rights. Pakistan, who won the last edition of the Champions Trophy in England in 2017, will host the Feb. 19-March 9 tournament.

Due to their soured political relations, India have not visited Pakistan since 2008 and the rivals play each other only at multi-team events.

Pakistan also hosted the Asia Cup last year but eventual winners India played all their matches in Sri Lanka under what the organizers called a "hybrid model". At the time, India said they did not

get permission from their government to tour Pakistan.

"I know Pakistan are expecting India to travel," ECB chief Richard Gould told reporters yesterday. Gould and ECB chair Richard Thompson are in Pakistan for England's three-Test series and have met with Pakistan Cricket Board officials during the ongoing second Test in Multan.

"There are lots of different alternatives and contingencies available if that doesn't happen. I wouldn't have thought (it would be played without India), because if you play the Champions Trophy without India the broadcast rights aren't there, and we need to protect them.

"Hopefully, we can have the fullest possible competition in Pakistan."

FOCUS

India v New Zealand Test: Rain washes out day one in Bengaluru



India's captain Rohit Sharma inspects the field after the first day's play of the first Test against New Zealand was called-off due to rain at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Bengaluru

The opening day of the first test between India and New Zealand was called off without a ball being bowled due to incessant rain yesterday, with bad weather forecast throughout the week in the south Indian city of Bengaluru.

The umpires inspected the surface at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium shortly before tea and decided that no play would be possible.

It was another frustrating day for the touring side, whose Asian tour began with a one-off test against Afghanistan abandoned due to rain in Greater Noida last month.

The current series, which also

features matches in Pune and Mumbai, is part of the World Test Championship. India are eyeing a big win over the 2021 champions to improve their chances of making a third consecutive final next year.

New Zealand are without batting mainstay Kane Williamson for the opening match due to a groin injury sustained during the 2-0 series defeat in Sri Lanka. Pace bowler Ben Sears was ruled out of the series with a knee injury.

The match marks Tom Latham's first assignment as the new permanent captain of the Black Caps after he took over from Tim Southee this month.

Rohit Sharma's India, fresh from beating Bangladesh 2-0, are looking to win their 19th straight series on home soil since a 2-1 defeat by England in 2012.

PREVIEW

Shakib set for Bangladesh swan song on home soil

AFP
Dhaka

Controversial ex-skipper **Shakib Al Hasan** was expected to return home today for what he says is his swan song when Bangladesh host South Africa in a two-Test series.

The series starting October 21 in Mirpur, near the capital Dhaka, is the first international cricket fixtures in Bangladesh since a student-led revolution toppled the autocratic premier.

Sheikh Hasina fled by helicopter to India on August 5 as crowds stormed her palace in Dhaka.

More than 700 people were killed in the unrest, according to Bangladesh's health ministry.

The 37-year-old Shakib has not returned to Bangladesh since the toppling of Hasina's government, in which he served as a lawmaker.

Earlier this month he apologised for remaining silent during the revolution but defended his contentious decision to serve the regime it toppled.

Shakib was playing in a domestic Twenty20 cricket competition in Canada as the regime collapsed.

Even though he has not returned to Bangladesh since, he has toured Pakistan and India with the team, with the approval of the interim government.

Shakib announced his retirement from international cricket last month but said then that he wanted to play one last Test series at home.

He said in a Facebook post earlier this month that he wanted the opportunity to "say goodbye" to his fans, saying that he paid his "respects to all the students who sacrificed their lives".

Selector Hannan Sarkar said that Shakib was selected only after the BCB had given



them the green light. "Shakib had expressed his desire to play his final Test at home. We also know that this was a government issue and BCB issue. We sought the BCB's clearance so when they gave us the green signal that Shakib is available for selection, we picked him. We are proud to see our legend retiring from the home of cricket."

Bangladesh host South Africa for two Tests, in Mirpur from October 21 and in Chattogram from October 29. It is the first assignment under their interim coach Phil Simmons, who joined the squad yesterday, a day after the BCB removed Chandika Hathurusinghe from the position for disciplinary reasons.

Bangladesh are currently seventh on the World Test Championship points table, after a 2-0 win in Pakistan and a 2-0 defeat in India.

South Africa are fifth on the WTC standings, having most recently won a two-Test series 1-0 in the West Indies in August.

Bangladesh, led by Najmul Hossain Shanto, have cut fast bowler Khaled Ahmed from the squad for the visit of South Africa.

Otherwise they keep faith with the squad that celebrated a landmark 2-0 series sweep in Pakistan but also suffered a 2-0 defeat in India.

Bangladesh squad: Najmul Hossain Shanto (capt), Shadman Islam, Mahmudul Hasan Joy, Zakir Hasan, Mominul Haque, Mushfiqur Rahim, Shakib Al Hasan, Litton Das (wk), Jaker Ali, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Taijul Islam, Nayeem Hasan, Taskin Ahmed, Hasan Mahmud, Nahid Rana.

CRICKET

Root could break 16,000-Test run barrier, says Cook

FORMER ENGLAND CAPTAIN COOK INDUCTED INTO ICC HALL OF FAME

AFP
London

Alastair Cook says “generational talent” Joe Root could become the first batter to reach 16,000 Test runs as the retired England captain was named in the ICC’s Hall of Fame.

Root, 33, overtook Cook’s record England tally of 12,472 runs in the first Test of the ongoing series in Pakistan, in which the Yorkshireman scored a mammoth 262.

He is now fifth on the all-time list of runscoreers behind Sachin Tendulkar, who leads the way with 15,921, Ricky Ponting, Jacques Kallis and Rahul Dravid, all of whom have retired. “I think Joe Root could set a mark, certainly on the English side, which will be very hard to beat,” said Cook, who retired from Test cricket in 2018 with a century in his final innings.

“But you just never know. I hope he can get very close, if not be the first person to score 16,000 Test runs. It would be a great achievement but it’s a fair way off yet.”

Cook, 39, said even in a fast-changing landscape, with Test cricket competing for calendar space alongside the white-ball game, it was difficult to say records would stand forever.

“Everyone looked to that Tendulkar record of 200 Test matches and I think quite a few people said, ‘Well, that’s never going to be done.’

“And you’ve got a fast bowler who has played 188 Test matches and taken more than 700 wickets (retired England quick James Anderson).

“So I know the game is changing, the landscape is changing. But something always crops up, someone always does.”

Cook said it was difficult to separate the so-called “Big Four” of Root, India’s Virat Kohli, Steve



England’s Alastair Cook (left) is embraced by England’s Joe Root as he celebrates his century during play on the fourth day of the fifth Test against India at The Oval in London on September 10, 2018. Alastair Cook says “generational talent” Joe Root could become the first batter to reach 16,000 Test runs as the retired England captain was named in the ICC’s Hall of Fame. (AFP)

Smith of Australia and New Zealand’s Kane Williamson.

“They’re all wonderful, wonderful players, all very different actually in terms of their methods and ways of playing,” he said.

“But one thing which kind of unites them is that hunger and desire to keep improving and keep churning out the runs.

“They are generational players who will always be spoken about, and the fact that you can add Joe Root, whether you put him first, second, third, fourth, all personal opinion, it doesn’t really matter.

“But they are great, great players and make the game, the kind of one which we all started playing, look a lot easier than it is.”

Cook yesterday became the 113th player to be inducted into the International Cricket Council’s Hall of Fame, joining alongside retired India spinner Neetu David, a star of the women’s game, and South African multi-format great AB de Villiers.

“It was a surprise,” said the former England skipper. “When you read the list of people that you’re joining, it’s a great list to

have joined. So I feel very privileged.”

Cook paid a warm tribute to former England captain Graham Gooch, a predecessor at his county side, Essex. “A lot of people know about my relationship with Graham Gooch, Essex and England opener and kind of mentor, friend, coach, you name it,” he said.

“He’s kind of done everything for me. So it’s just we never played on the same team. I thank God, probably. Thank goodness, because he was obviously a far better player than me.”

PREVIEW

Windies dreaming of T20 glory, Australia remain hot favourites

AFP
Dubai

The West Indies have proven their doubters wrong by reaching tomorrow’s Women’s T20 World Cup semi-final against New Zealand, but have their sights set on repeating their 2016 triumph.

The Caribbean side have been knocked out in the group stage in the past two editions and they may have feared a repeat after losing their opener in the United Arab Emirates to South Africa by 10 wickets. But a magnificent victory against England, their first over the world’s second-ranked team since 2018, has left them one win from the final, with only an unfancied New Zealand standing in their way.

“I think a lot of people wrote us off coming into this tournament,” captain Hayley Matthews said.

“The way we’ve been able to go about our cricket, especially after the start we had against South Africa, we’ve just bounced back against Scotland, against Bangladesh.

“We haven’t beat England in about six years. As far as I can remember, the last time we beat them was back in 2018, but everyone still came here with a belief and a fight and it just shows what we can do as a West Indian team.”

For many years the West Indies have relied heavily on Matthews, Stafanie Taylor and Deandra Dottin. The return of Dottin from international retirement for this tournament has been key to their success, but other players have also stepped up.

Leg-spinner Afy Fletcher

took 3-21 against England, while opening batter Qiana Joseph clubbed a crucial 52.

The Windies have struck more sixes than any other country in the event so far, and Joseph and Matthews plundered a tournament-high 67 from the England bowlers in the powerplay.

Their ultimately comfortable chase ensured they finished top of Group B, avoiding a last-four meeting with red-hot favourites Australia.

New Zealand themselves have exceeded expectations by making the semis, largely courtesy of a victory over India, who were tipped to be title contenders.

Australia, bidding for a fourth consecutive T20 World Cup title, have cruised into the knockout phase, taking their winning streak in the tournament to 15 matches along the way.

The six-time champions face South Africa in Dubai today in a repeat of the 2023 final.

They have been hit by injuries, though, with bowler Tayla Vlaeminck leaving the squad after suffering a shoulder injury.

Australia’s main worry is the fitness of captain and opener Alyssa Healy, who missed the crucial group win over India earlier this week with a foot injury and whose participation in the knockouts remains in doubt.

“We’ve been really trying to get around each other as a group, whether it be the injured girls, the girls playing slightly different roles, and just really sticking together as a group and focusing on the job at hand,” said stand-in skipper Tahlia McGrath.

South Africa are playing in the semi-finals for a third successive T20 World Cup and will be confident of pushing Australia after a narrow defeat on home soil in the final last year.

LIV seeking to replace Norman as CEO

The Saudi Public Investment Firm is reportedly interested in moving Greg Norman out of the position of LIV Golf CEO, though not out of the golf league’s offices entirely. The PIF has contracted a London-based search firm to find a new CEO to succeed Norman in the role, *Sports Business Journal* reported. PIF has previously utilised the firm, Odgers Berndtson, to hire a sporting director for Newcastle United, the English soccer club it controls. Norman’s tenure as the first CEO and figurehead of the controversial golf league has been a rocky one, and there were points in 2022 and 2023 that reports indicated he was on the verge of being dismissed. But the *Sports Business Journal* report said Norman “has continued to maintain support from those within LIV,” and he’s expected to remain in a leadership role of some kind after vacating the CEO post.

RUGBY

Springboks to host Italy in 2025, Moerat to miss November tour

AFP
Johannesburg

World champions South Africa will host Italy in a two-Test series next year, a South Africa Rugby official confirmed to AFP yesterday.

“The Azzurri are coming here next July for two Tests,” the official said, ahead of an announcement by the country’s governing body. No match dates have been set, nor venues chosen. The Springboks played in Pretoria, Durban, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Mbombela this year.

South Africa will also host a second-tier rugby union nation – most likely Georgia – during July. Italy had their most successful Six Nations campaign this year – beating Scotland and Wales, drawing with France and losing to England and Ireland.

South Africa have beaten Italy 15 times and lost once since first meeting in Rome in 1995, the year the Springboks won the first of a record four Rugby World Cup titles.

The last Test between the countries was two years ago in Genoa, where the visitors triumphed 63-21.

Meanwhile, a knee operation has ruled lock forward Salmaan Moerat out of South Africa’s upcoming November tour to Britain.

The Springboks face Scotland in Edinburgh on November 10, England in London six days later and Wales in Cardiff on November 23.

Scotland and England were among six countries defending champions South Africa beat in

France last year to win the Rugby World Cup a record fourth time.

Moerat plays for the Cape Town-based Stormers and assistant coach Dawie Snyman told the South Africa media that “Salmaan will be available (only) at the end of November”.

The 26-year-old made seven appearances for the Springboks this year, captaining the team on three occasions when regular skipper Siya Kolisi was rested.

Coach Rassie Erasmus is likely to choose his two locks from Eben Etzebeth, who last month became the most capped Springbok with 128 Test appearances, Ruan Nortje, RG Snyman and Jean Kleyn.

Government intervenes over SA Rugby equity proposal

Government intervention yesterday led to the postponement of a South African Rugby meeting that would have voted on a controversial equity proposal.

An SA Rugby statement said the meeting today in Cape Town would be rescheduled at the request of sports minister Gayton McKenzie.

A proposed 1.3bn rand (\$744mn/688mn euro) deal with the Ackerley Sports Group would give the Seattle-based company a 20 percent stake in the commercial arm of SA Rugby.

But a senior provincial rugby official told AFP opinion was sharply divided over the proposal, which requires 75 percent backing from the 13 provinces eligible to vote for it to be passed.

SA Rugby say the deal will strengthen the organisation financially while opponents argue that there are many unanswered questions.

BRITAIN’S CAPEWELL, NETHERLANDS’ WIEBES SHINE



Britain’s Sophie Capewell (left) and Netherlands’ Lorena Wiebes celebrate after winning the women’s team sprint gold and women’s scratch race of the UCI Track Cycling World Championships respectively in Ballerup, Denmark, yesterday. (AFP)

TOUR GREAT CAVENDISH TO SWAP BIKE FOR RUNNING SHOES

Tour de France great Mark Cavendish will return to Paris next year in running shoes rather than cycling cleats after signing up for the Paris Marathon.

The 39-year-old Cavendish, who this year claimed a record 35th stage win on the Tour de France, is expected to retire from professional cycling at the end of the year.

“I will always ride my bike, but I want to run now,” Britain’s Cavendish, who won the Tour de France sprint on the Champs Elysees in 2012, said in an interview with *Men’s Health*.

“It’s pure – get your shoes on and off you go!

I’ve already agreed to do the Paris Marathon with my brother. He started cycling before I did, and he was better than I was.

“(In the) past four years, he’s started to get fit. He’s riding and started running. For the first time since we were kids, he’s lighter than me.” Cavendish said he has not “entirely committed” to what he will do next but is focussed on completing his year with the Tour of Saitama and the Singapore Criterium.

“I’m still racing this year, I’m contracted until December. I’ve got races in the Far East in October,” said Cavendish, who rides for the Astana

Qazaqstan Team.

“What is guaranteed is that I’m never doing the Tour de France again. That’s a dead cert.” Cavendish hinted at a management role in cycling.

“I will always ride a bike, but the past few years I’ve known what I want to do after,” he said.

“I’ve set the wheels in motion for that. I want to stay in management in the sport. I still love it. “I brought a lot of people to this team (Astana Qazaqstan) over the past two years, and I know what it takes to be successful. I’ve been building up to the moment I’m not racing.”

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Messi nets hat-trick as Argentina rout Bolivia

Argentina are top of the table with 22 points - three clear of Colombia

AFP

Montevideo

Lionel Messi struck a vintage hat-trick as world champions Argentina romped to a 6-0 win over Bolivia in CONMEBOL World Cup qualifying on Tuesday. The 37-year-old provided an emphatic reminder of his enduring quality with three clinical finishes, two assists and some of his trademark creativity throughout the game as Lionel Scaloni's side dominated.

The eight-time Ballon d'Or winner opened the scoring in the 19th minute when Bolivian defender Marcelo Suarez was robbed by Lautaro Martinez, who sent Messi clear and he cleverly slotted into the bottom corner. The home crowd at Buenos Aires' Monumental Stadium were on their feet again in the 43rd minute when Julian Alvarez threaded a brilliant pass through to Messi, who unselfishly squared the ball to Martinez to finish.

Three minutes later, Alvarez was on target himself when Bolivia were caught sleeping at a free-kick, Messi chipping the ball over the top and the Atletico Madrid forward slotted home. After the break, Nicolas Otamendi had a header ruled out for offside but the home fans didn't have long to wait for the fourth when Thiago Almada side-footed home after a superb pull-back from Nahuel Molina.

A classic Messi goal made it 5-0 in the 84th - the Inter Miami forward dribbling centrally before switching from his left foot to his right and burying the ball into the bottom corner. Two minutes later and some fans were in tears after Messi cut in from the right, played a smart wall pass off substitute Nico Paz and again put the ball beyond the reach of goalkeeper Guillermo Viscarra. Argentina are top of the 10-team table with 22 points from ten games - three points clear of second-place Colombia, who crushed Chile 4-0 in Barranquilla.

There was a different look to the team, wearing a special retro white kit, marking the Colombian Football Federation's centenary, featuring the national flag's colours in a hoop. It was a dazzling design and the performance of Nestor Lorenzo's team was equally stylish taking apart a woeful Chile side that remain rooted last in the ten-team qualifying group.



Argentina's forward Lionel Messi (third right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Bolivia during the 2026 FIFA World Cup South American qualifiers at the Mas Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires on Tuesday. (AFP)

Defender Davinson Sanchez opened the scoring in the 34th minute, nodding home after Jhon Lucumi had headed a James Rodriguez corner goalwards. Jhon Cordoba slotted home a Diaz cross in the 45th minute but the effort was ruled out for offside against Diaz.

Chile gifted the Colombians a second, seven minutes after the interval, when Benjamin Kusevic gave the ball away to Rodriguez, who squared to Liverpool winger Luis Diaz to convert. Substitute Jhon Duran made it 3-0 in the 82nd minute after another giveaway, this time in midfield, allowed Sinisterra to break and then feed the Aston Villa forward, who made no mistake and Sinisterra then wrapped up the win in stoppage time.

Brazil continued to ease any concerns about their qualification chances with a comfortable 4-0 win over Peru in Brasilia. A pair of penalties converted by Barcelona winger Raphinha put the record five-time World Cup winners on their way - the first coming in the 38th minute when Carlos Zambrano handled in the box and the second in the 54th minute after the same defender brought down Savinho.

But there was more to appreciate in the third goal, in the 71st minute, with Andreas Pereira producing a superb scissor-kick volley from a Luiz Henrique cross from the right. Luiz Henrique completed the rout in spectacular style with a brilliant left-foot drive from outside the box to make it 4-0 and leave Brazil in fourth.

Paraguay boosted their chances of grabbing one of the six automatic qualification spots after substitute Antonio Sanabria scored twice in a 2-1 win over Venezuela.

Full-back Jon Aramburu put Venezuela ahead in the 25th minute, bursting down the right and collecting a pass from Yeferson Soteldo that he buried in the bottom corner.

Torino striker Sanabria was introduced at the interval and he brought sixth-placed Paraguay level when he slid in to meet a low cross from Junior Alonso. Sanabria then grabbed the winner in the 74th minute, leading a counter-attack before getting into the box to finish off the move with a header from close range. Uruguay and Ecuador played out a goalless draw.

Real back Mbatpe amid Swedish rape investigation reports



Madrid: Real Madrid have, for the moment at least, given their support to star forward **Kylian Mbappe** since the Swedish media reported that he is being investigated for an alleged rape during a visit to Stockholm.

The reigning European champions, who have not commented publicly on the reports, do not appear to be overly concerned about the reports about the player who joined this summer from Paris Saint-Germain. An internal club source, who spoke to AFP on condition of their identity not being revealed, described the accusations as "the biggest fake in the history of sport".

On Tuesday, Real were accused of deleting 25-year-old Mbappe from photos it published in a promotional campaign with its jersey manufacturer Adidas. Real told journalists the reason was simply because Mbappe's boot sponsor is Adidas's bitter rivals Nike.

That explanation was questioned on social media though, with many people pointing out that several players in the photos are also under contract with Nike, like Mbappe's French international teammate Eduardo Camavinga. In the midst of the media storm - and on the day his lawyer spoke to insist her client was "shocked" to be linked to a rape investigation - Mbappe trained with his teammates in Madrid on Tuesday.

This time, the club had no hesitation in posting photos and videos of the Frenchman, who should be available for selection on Saturday for the visit of Celta Vigo to the Bernabeu as he is said to have recovered from discomfort in his left thigh that kept him out of France's squad for Nations League games.

With a rare free day on his hands, Mbappe chose to go to Stockholm with a group of friends, arriving on October 9 and departing on October 11. Reports in several Swedish media say they visited a restaurant and a nightclub. Once the group had left Sweden, a woman went to police to allege she was the victim of a rape.

On Monday, after Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* became the first media outlet to reveal that a rape probe had been opened, Mbappe slammed the report as "fake news" on his social media.

A Swedish prosecutor has only confirmed that an investigation has been opened, without naming Mbappe. His lawyer Marie-Alix Canu-Bernard said on Tuesday the 2018 World Cup winner was "at ease" because "he has done nothing wrong".

Canu-Bernard said Mbappe had "asked my office not to leave things as they are because it is impossible to allow yourself to be slandered and defamed in this way. This is why we are going to file a complaint for libel."

SPOTLIGHT

New US boss Pochettino asks for time after Mexico loss

Reuters

Guadalajara, Mexico

New United States head coach Mauricio Pochettino asked for time to evaluate his players and settle into his new surroundings after his side slumped to a 2-0 loss against Mexico in a friendly match on Tuesday.

The United States had been unbeaten in seven games against their North American rivals - a run going back to 2019 - but goals from Raul Jimenez and Cesar Huerta ended that streak. While the former Chelsea boss started off his stint with the US with a 2-0 home win over Panama in a friendly last weekend, his side was short on firepower, with Christian Pulisic, Ricardo Pepi and Weston McKennie among those who did not make the trip to Mexico and instead re-

turned to their club sides. The Argentine, who left Chelsea in May after one season in charge, has been tasked with leading the US at the 2026 World Cup on home soil, co-hosted by Mexico and Canada. "We all feel disappointed because I think we didn't have all the players that we wanted to have when we started," Pochettino said.

"We lost some players for different reasons, and we arrived a little bit short here. I say thank you to the players (who were here) because they were amazing, professional and the behaviour was amazing... We wanted to win. I think we need to be positive about this type of game.

"We need to play more games like this to improve the knowledge that we have. Give us time, let us evaluate all the players, have them, know them, and from there I will give you a better opinion about what is much more fundamental than what I see."



NATIONS LEAGUE

Spain reach quarters, Ronaldo's Portugal held by Scotland

AFP

Paris

European champions Spain sealed their place in the UEFA Nations League quarter-finals with a comprehensive 3-0 win over Serbia on Tuesday, while Cristiano Ronaldo and Portugal were frustrated in a 0-0 draw with Scotland.

Spain, who are also the reigning Nations League champions, became the second team to clinch a quarter-final spot as they followed in the footsteps of Germany by moving to 10 points from a possible 12 in Group A4. Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams, the two wing stars of Spain's triumphant Euro 2024 campaign, were not involved against Serbia on a rainy night in the Andalusian city of Cordoba.

Yet that didn't matter as La Roja went ahead through Americ Laporte's early header and then shook off Alvaro Morata's penalty miss at the start of the second half. Captain Morata made it 2-0 with a lovely finish on 65 minutes and Alex Baena, who featured at the Euros before starring in the Spain team that won Olympic gold, made it 3-0 from a free-kick. Serbia finished with 10 men after defender Strahinja Pavlovic



Spain's Alex Baena (second right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Serbia in the UEFA Nations League match in Cordoba, Spain. (Reuters)

was sent off. "We're in another final phase, which is the important thing - it might seem easy but we're in all of these final phases in recent years, and that deserves credit," Morata said.

Denmark are best placed to go through with Spain after they drew 2-2 away to

Switzerland, who prop up the group. The Danes twice came behind, with Remo Freuler's opener cancelled out almost immediately by Gustav Isaksen, only for Zeki Amdouni to put the Swiss back ahead with a penalty in first-half stoppage time.

However, Christian Eriksen struck on

69 minutes to ensure Denmark left St Gallen with a point. Portugal dropped points for the first time in Group A1 as they were forced to settle for a share of the spoils with Scotland at Hampden.

On his 216th international appearance, Ronaldo made his 200th start for his country, more than 21 years on from his first. However, the 39-year-old failed to add to his 133 Portugal goals and stormed off the field at full-time ranting at the officials. The home side needed a wonder save from goalkeeper Craig Gordon to deny Bruno Fernandes a winner for Portugal in the closing stages, but held out to secure their first point in the top tier of the Nations League.

That allowed them to end a run of four straight competitive defeats, but they have now won just once - in a friendly against Gibraltar - in their last 16 matches. "Their goalkeeper was incredible. We couldn't get a goal, but the performance was positive," Portugal coach Roberto Martinez said. "Results are a consequence of performances and, tonight, we deserved to win."

Croatia are second in the group behind Portugal after playing out a thrilling 3-3 draw with Poland in Warsaw, in a match which featured five first-half goals. Piotr Zielinski of Inter Milan, wearing the cap-

tain's armband as Robert Lewandowski started on the bench, gave Poland an early lead.

However, Borna Sosa equalised and further goals by Petar Susic and Martin Baturina put Croatia 3-1 up after 26 minutes. Nicola Zalewski pulled one back in first-half stoppage time and Sebastian Szymanski secured a draw for Poland with a terrific strike midway through the second half.

Croatia ended the game with 10 men after goalkeeper Dominik Livakovic was shown a red card for catching Lewandowski outside the area. In the third-tier League C, Northern Ireland went top of Group 3 with a 5-0 win over Bulgaria in Belfast.

Isaac Price of Standard Liege in Belgium was the hero with a hat-trick, as the 21-year-old became the country's youngest ever scorer of three goals in a game. Northern Ireland's last hat-trick scorer was David Healy in 2007.

An own goal by goalkeeper Dimitar Mitov and a late Josh Magennis effort completed the scoring, while captain Kiril Despodov missed a penalty for Bulgaria. Belarus and Luxembourg drew 1-1 in the same group, while there were wins for Romania and Kosovo against Lithuania and Cyprus respectively in Group C2.