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SPORT



TENNIS

Spain's Alcaraz eyeing triumphant Davis Cup farewell for Nadal after ATP Finals exit

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WORLD CUP QUALIFIER

Late win showcases Qatar's resilience: Coach Lopez

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Head coach **Marquez Lopez** said a stronger performance in the latter stages was the key to Qatar's dramatic 3-2 win over Uzbekistan in their World Cup Qualifiers at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium on Thursday. Almoez Ali had given two-time AFC Asian Cup winners Qatar a 2-0 lead going into the break but their hard work was undone by Abbosbek Fayzullaev's brace, which left Al Annabi facing the possibility of an early end to their hopes of automatic qualification.

Lucas Mendes, however, stepped up to net the winner in the 12th minute of time added on as Qatar moved to seven points, three behind second-placed Uzbekistan.

"We earned three very important points and showcased a positive image of the Qatari team by controlling much of the match and creating numerous scoring opportunities and scored two goals in the first half," said Lopez.

"However, after the break, we retreated

under pressure from the opponents, which allowed the Uzbek team to take the initiative and mount attacks. They were able to score twice and equalise, as they have some very talented players. The most important thing is the victory, even if it came late. Securing three crucial points in the qualifiers was our key takeaway," added Marquez, whose side face the United Arab Emirates away on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Ali admitted Qatar made it tough for themselves against Uzbekistan. "The match was intense and we made it difficult for ourselves, especially after going two goals ahead in the first half," said Ali. "Our mentality and performance were not up to the mark in the second half but we showed resilience, came back strongly, and scored the winning goal in the dying moments to secure three crucial points.

"We did not perform as required, and it is natural for any team trailing in the first half to come out strongly after the break. Our team made some mistakes, but I hope these mistakes will serve as valuable lessons for the upcoming matches."

Uzbekistan head coach Srecko Katanec expressed disappointment at the last-

minute defeat but praised his team's resilience. "Our team was unlucky, losing in the final minute," said Katanec.

"As expected, the match was difficult and we did not perform as required in the first half, which resulted in a two-goal deficit. However, our players recovered in the second half.

"We changed our style of play in the second half and equalised. Unfortunately, we conceded a third, decisive goal, marking a great success for the opponent. Losing in the last minute was tough, but that is the nature of football!"

Uzbekistan face North Korea in Vientiane on Tuesday.

YOUSSEF REPLACES INJURED AL-YAZIDI

Meanwhile, Lopez has called up Abdullah Youssef to replace injured Abdullah al-Yazidi for Tuesday's match against the UAE. Right back al-Yazidi suffered an ankle injury during the closing stage of the match against Uzbekistan.

Al-Yazidi underwent tests and it was confirmed he will be out for a period ranging between 5 to 6 weeks.



QSL CUP

Duhail beat Al Khor to set up semi-final against Wakrah

Wakrah secure their last four berth after 3-1 victory over Al Ahli



Al Duhail's Mohammed Emad Aiash (centre) celebrates after scoring against Al Khor in the QSL Cup quarter-finals yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Duhail booked their place in the semi-finals of the QSL Cup after defeating Al Khor 2-1 at the Thani Bin Jassim Stadium yesterday. The Red Knights will face Al Wakrah, who secured their last four berth after beating Al Ahli 3-1 at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

Al Duhail's goals were scored by Ibrahim Diallo (18th minute) and Mohammed Emad Aiash (65th minute), while Al Khor's lone was scored brilliant's by Adil Rhailli in the 80th minute. Duhail, the top-placed team from Group A, were expectedly the dominant side from the start and unsurprisingly drew first blood. Diallo, whose powerful angle shot, after some sublime interchange between the trio of Benjamin Bourigeaud, Abdullah al-Ahrak and the goal scorer caught Al Khor goalkeeper Ali Nader Mahmoud somewhat by surprise as he could only watch the blazing shot sailing past him into the net.

Al Khor almost got their equalizer in the 43rd minute after some splendid moves by Sofiane Hanni, who got past four of Al Duhail's defence before setting up Salmin Atiq to finish off, but the Qatari player disappointedly blasted wide. Al Duhail started the second half from where they stopped, with goalkeeper

Ali Nader having to come off his line to make a daring save in the 52nd minute with Al Duhail's Under-17 player Mohammad Jamil Babli in a good stead to fire home a goal.

With Al Duhail's relentless bombardment of Al Khor's goal, it was soon a matter of time before another goal was scored and this came about in the 65th minute with Aiash nodding home from close range a cross from Bourigeaud as Al Duhail went two goals up.

Atiq wasted arguably Al Khor's best chance of the night in the 79th minute when he found himself one-on-one with goalkeeper Bautista Burke only for him to waste the sitter, shooting straight into the goalkeeper's arms.

One minute later, Rhailli scored an undisputed goal-of-the-tournament contender with his superb long-range shot from the centreline that caught Burke offguard. Despite a late rally from Al Khor, Al Duhail maintained their stand as they advanced into the semi-finals with their 2-1 victory.

Later, Al Wakrah eased past Ahli thanks to goals from Ayoub Assal (35th minute), Farid Boulaya (45+3 minute) and Ricardo Gomes (80th minute). Erik Exposito scored The Brigadiers' only goal in the 37th minute.

Al Ahli came very close to scoring the opening goal in the 12th minute when Driss Fettouhi rattled the crossbar with his powerful free-kick, while Oumar Sekou missed a great opportunity to put The Brigadiers ahead in the

19th minute after missing an obvious sitter, shooting wide, from a perfect set-up by Bahaa Ellethy.

After a series of back and forth from both sides, Assal gave Al Wakrah the lead in the 35th minute, skirting away past three Al Ahli defenders before unleashing a powerful right-footed shot that located the top right-hand corner of the goal.

The lead only lasted two minutes as Al Ahli got parity restored through Exposito, who brilliantly nodded home a corner kick. With the match appearing to head for a stalemated first half, Boulaya got Al Wakrah's lead back with the last kick of the half, riffling home from 30 yards out with a thunderous shot that goalkeeper Yazan Naim's outstretched hand could not manage to touch.

Al Ahli thought they got the equalizer in the 58th minute through Fettouhi, but the goal was ruled offside, to the disappointment of the Al Ahli players, who protested the decision but to no effect.

Gomes made it three for Al Wakrah in the 80th minute after getting on the end of a through pass by Khalid Muneer, who took advantage of a midfield error by Al Ahli to give an inch-perfect pass to the Cape Verdean international to consolidate their lead.

Despite a relentless late-minute drive from Al Ahli, the situation, however, remained the same as Al Wakrah maintained their lead.

Al-Qubaisi, Emmanuel clinch QSTK 600 and QSSP 300 victories



Abdulla al-Qubaisi won the opening race of the Qatar Superstock 600 season-opener at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday. Veterans Masha al-Naimi and Saeed al-Sulaiti finished second and third respectively as Qatar riders completed a clean sweep of the podium. In the Qatar SuperSport 300, India's Johann Reeves Emmanuel claimed an impressive victory ahead of Marton Bellelli. Mahmoud Elbanna of Egypt was third in the eight-lap race. In the QSTK 600 Trophy Class, Alexian Macary took top honours, ahead of Alexander Qabazard and Emmanuel Geoffrey.



FOCUS

England wrap up T20 series win over WI

AFP
Gros-Islet, Saint Lucia

England beat West Indies by three wickets in their T20 international in Saint Lucia on Thursday to take an insurmountable 3-0 lead in their five-match series. West Indies recovered from 37-5 to make 145-8 largely thanks to a solid 54 from skipper Rovman Powell but while England had some scares they won with four balls to spare.

Sam Curran top-scored with 41 for England, who can now enjoy the final two games of the series on the Caribbean island without any pressure. After a rain-delayed start, none of the top five batsmen for the home side managed double figures with Saqib Mahmood picking up 3-17.

Shai Hope was run out off the fourth ball and fellow opener Evan Lewis went in the next over, slashing Mahmood to Jofra Archer at third man.

Nicholas Pooran was then bowled by Barbados-born Archer in the following over and Roston

Chase edged Mahmood to Jamie Overton at slip as England dominated the powerplay.

Mahmood rounded off his excellent spell removing Shimron Hetmyer who holed out to Dan Mousely at deep mid-wicket. But skipper Powell, supported well by Romario Shepherd led the Caribbean side's recovery, the pair putting on a 73-run partnership before Overton trapped Shepherd lbw for 30.

Overton dismissed Gudakesh Motie for a duck and got rid off Powell, who had struck four sixes in his 41 ball knock, but Alzarri Joseph produce a useful 21 off 19 balls to help his team to a respectable score.

Although England found themselves 37-3 with left-arm spinner Akeal Hosein picking up the wickets of Phil Salt and skipper Jos Buttler, opener Will Jacks' 32 kept them on course and the middle order contributions of Curran and Liam Livingstone (39) saw the tourists towards the finish line.

Livingstone rode his luck somewhat, dropped three times but Buttler was delighted with his

team's series win, singling out Mahmood and Curran for their roles.

"A real collective effort to win the series, we set the tone with the ball in every game. We are in a strong place, great competition for places, and it is nice to see the growth," he said.

"We are delighted to win the series, in modern cricket it is easy not to put emphasis on bilateral series but it gives us lots of confidence to take forward. Got a hungry dressing-room," he said.

Powell felt his top-order had the main culpability for the loss.

"It is disappointing we keep losing wickets in the powerplay. Didn't come off tonight. We've got to be our natural selves but the element of being smart is missing," he said.

BRIEF SCORES
West Indies 145/8 in 20 overs (Rovman Powell 54, Romario Shepherd 30; Saqib Mahmood 3-17, Jamie Overton 3-20) **lost to England 149/7 in 19.2 overs** (Sam Curran 41, Liam Livingstone 39; Akeal Hosein 4-22) **by 3 wickets.**



Saqib Mahmood (left) of England celebrates the dismissal of Roston Chase of West Indies during the 3rd T20I at Darren Sammy Cricket Ground at Gros Islet in Saint Lucia. (AFP)

TWENTY20

India in record six-hitting spree to rout South Africa

SAMSON, TILAK SLAM CENTURIES TO HAND INDIA 3-1 SERIES WIN



India players celebrate with the trophy after winning the T20 series against South Africa in Johannesburg yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Johannesburg

Sanju Samson and Tilak Varma hit centuries as India thrashed South Africa by 135 runs in the fourth and final Twenty20 international at the Wanderers Stadium yesterday.

Samson made 109 not out and Varma hit an unbeaten 120 in an Indian total of 283 for one, which included 23 sixes - a record for a team in T20 internationals between Test nations.

Arshdeep Singh and Hardik Pandya reduced South Africa to 10 for four in reply, effectively ending the match as a contest. The hosts were bowled out for 148, going down to their heaviest defeat in the format. India won the series 3-1 despite fielding a youthful team, with most of their established stars preparing for a Test series in Australia.

Their squad included only four of the players who defeated South Africa in the T20 World Cup final in Barbados in June.

"This is a special win and it will stay with me forever," said India captain Suryakumar Yadav.

"Our plans were very clear and although we were 2-1 up in the



India's Tilak Varma (left) and Sanju Samson celebrate after scoring their centuries in Johannesburg yesterday.

series we wanted to continue the good habits and not think about the results."

South Africa captain Aiden Markram admitted his team were outplayed. "They put us under pressure from the very start of both innings," he said.

It was the second century of the series for both Samson and Varma, with player of the series Varma making a second successive hundred while Samson was coming off two ducks after opening the series with a hundred.

It was the second-highest T20 total between Test nations, just 14

runs short of the 297 for six that India made against Bangladesh in Hyderabad last month.

The tone was set by Samson and Abhishek Sharma (36), who put on 73 for the first wicket in 5.5 overs with Sharma hitting four sixes.

Samson hit nine sixes in his 50-ball innings, while Varma cleared the boundary on 10 occasions while facing 47 deliveries.

The start of the South Africa innings was in complete contrast to the Indian run spree with both Arshdeep and Pandya generating swing under the floodlights. Left-arm armer Arshdeep bowled

Reeza Hendricks with the third ball of the innings, Pandya had Ryan Rickelton caught behind in the second over and Arshdeep dismissed Markram and Heinrich Klaasen with successive balls in the third over.

BRIEF SCORES: India 283-1 in 20 overs (T. Varma 120 not out, S. Samson 109 not out, A. Sharma 36) **bt South Africa 148 in 18.2 overs** (T. Stubbs 43, D. Miller 36; Arshdeep Singh 3-20). **Result:** India won by 135 runs **Series:** India won the four-match series 3-1.

SPOTLIGHT

NZ's Southee to quit Test cricket after England series

AFP
Wellington

Former New Zealand captain **Tim Southee** said yesterday the team's upcoming Test series with England would be his last, with the 35-year-old set to finish up at his home ground in Hamilton.

The irrepressible seam bowler made his debut against England at Napier in 2008 and has been a mainstay since, taking 385 wickets in his 104 Tests - second only to Richard Hadlee (431) among New Zealanders. "Representing New Zealand was all I ever dreamed of growing up," Southee said.

"But the time feels right to now step away from the game that has given so much to me. Test cricket holds a special place in my heart," he added. "So to be able to play such a big series against the same opponent my Test career began against all those years ago, and on three grounds that are incredibly special to me, seems the perfect way to end my time in the black cap."

Southee captained the side to six wins, six losses and two draws after taking over from Kane Williamson in 2022 before handing over the baton last month to Tom Latham, who led them to a 3-0 Test sweep in India. Southee's all-round skills and consistency has seen him become the only player in the world to claim more than 300 Test wickets, 200 ODI wickets and 100 T20 wickets.

New Zealand Cricket chief executive Scott Weenink saluted him as one of the country's finest players. "Tim has been a constant in the improving fortunes of the Blackcaps and he'll be remembered as a giant of the modern New Zealand game," he said.

"Tim has an incredible bank of experience and knowledge of the game and while he may have called time on his playing career, I'd be surprised if we don't see him in another capacity at some stage in the future."

Southee will make a decision after the three-Test England series, which gets under way in Christchurch on November 28, on whether he has one final white-ball farewell in him. New Zealand face Sri Lanka in three ODIs and three T20s at home from December 28.

Blackcaps coach Gary Stead said Southee's record spoke for itself.

"Tim's durability and resilience has been outstanding," he said. "He's an incredibly tough competitor who gets himself up for big occasions and is rarely injured. Tim cares deeply about the team, its reputation and performances, and he will be missed within the Blackcaps environment."

Williamson back for England Test series

Prolific batsman Kane Williamson was yesterday included in New Zealand's Test squad to face England after missing their recent 3-0 sweep in India with a groin injury.

The former skipper will once again team up with veteran seamer Tim Southee, who will retire from Test cricket after the three match-series starting in Christchurch on November 28.

Williamson is New Zealand's greatest Test run-scorer with 8,881 runs from 102 matches at an average of 54.48. The Black Caps called up bowling all-rounder Nathan Smith for the first time while uncapped quick Jacob Duffy was also included in the squad.

But Ajaz Patel, who claimed 15 wickets against India, was surprisingly overlooked with Mitchell Santner the spin option, backed up by Glenn Phillips. Ben Sears (knee) and Kyle Jamieson (back) were not considered.

The triumph in India propelled New Zealand back into contention for next year's World Test Championship final, but even a whitewash of England would not guarantee it.

Ben Stokes' England suffered a 2-1 defeat in Pakistan last month. The Black Caps are again led by Tom Latham, who took over from Southee last month and led them to what he called one of New Zealand's "greatest series wins" in India.

Following the Christchurch Test, the series moves to Wellington and then Hamilton for Southee's last hurrah.

TEST SQUAD

Tom Latham (capt), Tom Blundell, Devon Conway, Jacob Duffy, Matt Henry, Daryl Mitchell, Will O'Rourke, Glenn Phillips, Rachin Ravindra, Mitchell Santner, Nathan Smith, Tim Southee, Kane Williamson, Will Young.



Tim Southee's final Test will be at his home ground in Hamilton.

Cricket at 2028 Olympics could be held outside Los Angeles

Los Angeles: Cricket might be forced to make its Olympic return outside Los Angeles, 2028 Games organisers said yesterday, following reports the sport could be staged thousands of miles away in New York.

Casey Wasserman, the chairman of LA28, told a news conference that officials were still searching for a venue for cricket, which has been included in the Olympic program for 2028 more than a century after its only other appearance at the 1900 Games.

Wasserman said, however, that if a suitable site in Los Angeles could not be found, organisers would seek the best possible venue outside the city.

"We don't have a cricket venue in Los Angeles," Wasserman said following a visit by the International Olympic Committee's coordination commission.

"It's a big footprint, and so we want to find the right place for cricket that has the greatest chance for success," he added. "If we can find a place for cricket

in Los Angeles, in the region, we will. If not, it's incumbent upon us to find the best place to produce the best cricket."

Recent reports in Britain and the United States have indicated that Olympic organisers are considering staging cricket - a Twenty20 tournament - at a venue in New York. New York successfully hosted games during this year's T20 Cricket World Cup and Olympic officials were reportedly impressed by the venue at Nassau County Stadium on Long Island,

New York. Staging cricket on the other side of North America would also boost the commercial appeal of the sport from a broadcasting standpoint, with daytime matches taking place in prime time in Asian markets such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. LA28 officials have already taken the decision to move some sports outside of California, with softball and canoe slalom being staged 1,300 miles away in Oklahoma.

(AFP)

FOCUS

Alcaraz eyes triumphant Davis Cup farewell for Nadal

World number three Alcaraz fell 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 to Zverev and has been eliminated from ATP Finals

AFP
Turin, Italy

Carlos Alcaraz said he was hoping to make Rafael Nadal's tennis farewell at the Davis Cup Finals a victorious one after he was dumped out of the ATP Finals at the group stage with a straight-sets defeat to Alexander Zverev yesterday.

World number three Alcaraz fell 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 to Zverev in Turin and has been eliminated as there is no combination of results between Andrey Rublev and Casper Ruud later in the day which can save him. Rublev, who has lost his last six Finals matches, can still progress with a straight sets win over Ruud despite having lost his first two matches.

Alcaraz won Wimbledon and the French Open this season but struggled for form in Turin and will end his year alongside tennis icon and fellow Spaniard Nadal in Malaga next week.

Earlier in November, Davis Cup tournament director Feliciano Lopez said that a special ceremony would be organised for the 22-time Grand Slam winner, who will bow out on home soil. "Probably one of the most special tournaments that

I'm going to play. Last tournament of Rafa, I'll be able to be next to him in the last moments on a tennis court for him," said Alcaraz.

"I think it's most important for Rafa, for his last tournament. I really want him to retire with a title. It's going to be really, really emotional and a really special tournament for me."

Alcaraz leaves Turin having never performed to his full potential and at one point looking like he might even have to withdraw. He played his final two matches in the John Newcombe Group wearing brim pink nasal tape after having problems breathing during a training session on Tuesday.

"It has been a difficult week, I guess, for me struggling with some physical problems, but at the same time it has been a really beautiful tournament," added Alcaraz. "Today I faced one of the best players in the world, without a doubt, playing really solid and great tennis."

Zverev ensured he would advance when he took the first set after more than an hour of battle in northern Italy, before then sweeping through the second to complete a perfect group campaign.

German Zverev will face Taylor Fritz in the next round after gaining some form of revenge for

defeat to Alcaraz in this year's French Open final. The 27-year-old has a bittersweet relationship with Roland Garros as in the 2022 semi-finals he suffered an awful ankle injury and was forced to quit, allowing Nadal to reach the final and win his last Grand Slam.

Zverev has fought back from that injury to rise to number two in the world rankings and win two Master 1000 events this season, in Rome and Paris.

Those results that have given him confidence that he can win his first Grand Slam next year, with the Parisian clay his big target. "Roland Garros is always marked in my calendar since the injury. I've been saying that the last few years," said Zverev.

"But for me, it's no secret, I'm searching for that Grand Slam title. I'm searching for world No. 1. I'm searching for the Grand Slams. If it's not Roland Garros, but it's Australia, I'll sign the paper right now, to be honest. Of course, it would be special if it's Paris. If it's anywhere else, I would be just as happy."

Zverev's qualification means that three of the four semi-final spots at the ATP Finals have been filled, with world number one Jannik Sinner and Fritz through from the Ilie Nastase Group.



Germany's Alexander Zverev (left) and Spain's Carlos Alcaraz embrace after their ATP Finals match in Turin.

GOLF

Rozner overtakes McIlroy and Hatton for Dubai lead



France's Antoine Rozner putts on the 18th green during the second round of the World Tour Championship in Dubai. (AFP)

AFP
Dubai

Antoine Rozner hit a flawless seven-under-par 65 to overtake Rory McIlroy and Tyrrell Hatton to top the leaderboard after the second round of the World Tour Championship in Dubai yesterday.

Northern Ireland's McIlroy, bidding to equal Seve Ballesteros' mark of six European Tour Order of Merit crowns, and England's Hatton had led overnight in the season-ending tournament. Frenchman Rozner finished with four straight birdies and had no bogeys as he took a one-shot lead over McIlroy and Hatton, who both hit 69.

"It's one of those days where everything goes in and I had a ton of fun out there," said world number 154 Rozner, who carded 70 in the first round. "I just think the confidence clicked and everything is going the right way."

McIlroy only needs a top-10 finish to secure a sixth Race to Dubai title of his career, matching Ballesteros. McIlroy made a fast start with three birdies in his first four holes.

Another followed at the seventh as he climbed to nine-under, only to bogey the eighth and 10th to gift the lead to Rozner.

McIlroy parred his way to the par-five last, where he produced

a stellar second shot inside 15 feet and brushed the left edge of the cup with the eagle putt which would have seen him reclaim the lead.

"A little disappointed that I didn't kick on after such a great start, four under through seven," McIlroy said.

"At this point, I'm just trying to win the golf tournament and if I win the golf tournament then everything else that happens alongside that is nice. Right now, my focus is, you know, I'd love to get my third title here at the Earth course, and if I can do that, then yeah, everything else will be great. It was nice to finish with a birdie and at least shoot something in the 60s after the start that I had."

McIlroy is searching for his first title since May after a frustrating year punctuated by several near-misses, including in agonising fashion at the US Open. Hatton had to grind his way into contention after bogeying the fourth, hitting back with a birdie putt at the sixth before adding another at the eighth.

The world number 18 holed from eight feet at the 10th to pick up a shot and when he holed a clutch putt from eight feet for birdie at the 15th, he was one adrift of Rozner. Chile's Joaquin Niemann carded an eagle, five birdies and two bogeys in his 67 to sit at seven-under in sole fourth.

TENNIS

Swiatek, Linette take Poland into BJK Cup quarters

AFP
Malaga, Spain

World number two Iga Swiatek defeated Paula Badosa 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 6-1 to take Poland into the Billie Jean King Cup quarter-finals with a 2-0 victory over hosts Spain.

Magda Linette put Poland ahead in the tie with a hard-fought 7-6 (8/6), 2-6, 6-4 marathon victory in three hours 51 minutes against Sara Sorribes Tormo. Poland matched their best ever BJK Cup result by reaching the last eight for the first time since 2015, where they will face 11-time champions Czech Republic.

Friday's tie had been postponed on Wednesday after a severe weather alert in the region, following devastating floods in the east of Spain. Five-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek, appearing in the BJK Cup finals for the first time, was given a stern test by world number 12 Badosa, but eventually triumphed by converting her fourth match point. "Magda played an amazing match in the morning, we both did it... I'm happy we finally won a match in the Billie Jean King Cup finals, it's a huge step for sure," said Swiatek. "For sure (Badosa) pushed me and there was a lot of pressure."

The first match was even closer with Linette emerging triumphant after a gruelling scrap against world number 106 Sorribes Tormo at the Martin Carpena arena. The Pole defeated her opponent for the first time in five meetings with their tussle finishing nine minutes short of the longest ever BJK Cup match. "I hate playing Sara... I knew it was going to take me four hours and it did," said Linette, ranked 38th. "I'm so happy, I've never beaten her before and it took everything that I had today."

Late last night, Great Britain was facing Germany for the first time since 1985. On Thursday



Poland's Iga Swiatek (top centre) celebrates with teammates after winning her match against Spain's Paula Badosa at the Billie Jean King Cup Finals in Malaga, Spain. (AFP)

Slovakia upset the United States and finals debutants Japan squeezed past Romania to reach the quarter-finals.

SINNER HAILS EX-TRAINER AS 'EXCELLENT' DESPITE DOPE TEST CONTROVERSY

World number one Jannik Sinner on Thursday hailed his former physical trainer, who he sacked after becoming embroiled in a doping test controversy, as "excellent".

Trainer Umberto Ferrara has now joined fellow Italian tennis player Matteo Berrettini, who is ranked number 35 and was the 2021 Wimbledon runner-up.

"Umberto is really a great trainer, that's all I can say. He will surely do a very good job with Matteo who has had so many physical problems in the past," said Sinner after his victory against

Daniil Medvedev at the ATP Tour Finals. Australian Open and US Open champion Sinner, 23, parted ways with Ferrara and physiotherapist Giacomo Naldi in March for their role in his two positive doping tests for an anabolic steroid.

The Italian explained to the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) that small quantities of clostebol found in his system were due to "contamination by a member of his staff (Naldi) who had applied an over-the-counter spray containing clostebol on his own hand to treat a small wound".

Ferrara had supplied Naldi with the spray. The ITIA accepted Sinner's claim and he escaped a lengthy ban. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has appealed the ITIA's decision and is demanding a suspension of one to two years.

MOTOGP

Bagnaia strikes late in Barcelona practice

AFP
Barcelona

Francesco Bagnaia struck the first psychological blow when he put up the fastest practice time yesterday at the start of the final weekend of his MotoGP title showdown with Jorge Martin.

After a cautious morning session in Barcelona, when Takaaki Nakagami recorded the fastest lap for Honda in one minute and 40.912 seconds, the times tumbled in the afternoon when all but one of the 23 riders were faster. Spaniard Martin, who goes into the weekend with a 24-point lead over two-time defending champion Bagnaia, set a fastest lap with 15 minutes to go in the one-hour afternoon session.

Another Spaniard Maverick Vinales, on an Aprilia, went faster before Martin regained top spot with 10 minutes left. French veteran Johann Zarco took over on his Honda LCR but with time expiring Italy's Bagnaia made his move on the factory Ducati.

The Italian clocked 1:38.918 to edge out two other late attacks. Italian Marco Bezzecchi was next, 0.08 seconds back, with Spaniard Aleix Espargaro third, 0.107sec adrift.

"I'm very happy with today because the track conditions are very different from the last race here in May," said Bagnaia, who won the main race in Barcelona in the spring. "We've adapted well. I've got no choice but to be very strong all



Ducati's Italian rider Francesco Bagnaia rides during the practice session in Barcelona. (AFP)

weekend if I'm to have any hope."

Martin had one last chance but made a mistake on a corner and slowed up. Zarco held on to fourth with Martin fifth, 0.296sec slower than Bagnaia but sure of direct progress to the second qualifying session on Saturday when the grid positions for the sprint, when the Spaniard could seal the title, and main race will be settled.

Martin, last season's runner-up, seemed a little on edge, spending a long spell in the pits and then returning to the lane later for an animated discussion with his Pramac Ducati crew.

"It was a complicated day, even though my pace seemed good," Martin said. "My feeling was strange and I lacked grip on the rear tyre. But I'm going to stay calm and focus on the positive because I know what direction to go in for qualifying on Saturday."

Marc Marquez was eighth while Italian Enea Bastianini, one point behind the Spaniard in the battle for third overall, was 10th.

The race was due to take place in Valencia but had to be moved after the region suffered its worst floods in a generation which have killed more than 220 people.

WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Argentina stunned by Paraguay, Brazil held

Argentina remain top of the table while Paraguay move into the sixth place

AFP

Montevideo

World champions Argentina suffered a 2-1 defeat to Paraguay while rivals Brazil were held to a 1-1 draw at Venezuela as South America's big guns struggled in CONMEBOL World Cup qualifying on Thursday.

It started well for Lionel Scaloni's team, also reigning Copa America champions, as they grabbed an early lead through Inter Milan striker Lautaro Martinez. Enzo Fernandez lofted a lovely ball over the Paraguay defence into the path of Martinez who drove in a low finish only for his celebration to be cut short by the linesman's flag.

But a VAR review found that Martinez had been just onside and over-ruled the on-field decision giving Argentina an 11th-minute lead. It was an advantage that was to last just eight minutes though as the home side drew level in spectacular fashion.

Gustavo Velazquez whipped in a cross and Antonio Sanabria leapt in the air and fired past Emiliano Martinez with a brilliantly executed bicycle kick. Filled with belief and roared on by the crowd in Asuncion, Paraguay battled hard in what was a scrappy encounter. Two minutes after the interval Omar Alderete grabbed what proved to be the winner, rising at the back post to head home a cross from Inter Miami midfielder Diego Gomez.

Argentina struggled to create openings with Lionel Messi largely neutralised although the eight-times Ballon d'Or winner did provide a cross for Valentin Castellanos but the substitute could not keep his header down. Despite the loss, Argentina remain top of the standings on 22 points while Paraguay move into the sixth automatic qualification spot.

Vinicius Junior missed a penalty as Brazil had to settle for a point after a superb Raphinha free-kick was cancelled out by a second half strike from Telasco Segovia. The result leaves the five-times World Cup winners in third place on 17 points – the top six South American teams qualify automatically for the 2026 World Cup.

Brazil had struggled for form early in



Paraguay's Omar Alderete celebrates after scoring against Argentina during the World Cup qualifiers in Asuncion. (AFP)

their campaign but showed signs of their old swagger returning as they took the game to Venezuela at the Monumental Stadium. Vinicius, fresh from a hat-trick for Real Madrid in La Liga on Saturday, was at the heart of much of Brazil's attacking play and almost created an early opening.

The winger broke free and was forced wide as he rounded home keeper Rafael Romo but he pulled the ball back to Raphinha in a promising central position only for the Barcelona forward's shot to go well off target. Gerson then threatened with a chest down and volley from the edge of the box which flashed over the bar as the Selecao pushed for the opener.

Vinicius then hit the post from close

range after good work from Savinho. Romo was forced into a full stretch save to keep out a low drive from Gerson but, two minutes before the interval, Brazil finally broke through with Raphinha's bending free-kick flying in off in the inside of the far post.

Venezuela drew level within a minute of the break - Segovia, just seconds after being brought off the bench, blasting in from the edge of the box after a smart lay off from Jefferson Savarino.

Vinicius then had a great chance to restore Brazil's advantage in the 62nd after he was brought down in the box by Romo, but the keeper made amends diving low to keep out the spot kick.

Brazil, third in the standings, searched

desperately for a winner but Venezuela's back-line held firm as the 'Vinotinto' picked up a potentially precious point. Venezuela are in seventh place on 12 points and the seventh-place team will enter an Inter-confederation playoff for a spot in the tournament, which will be co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Ecuador are in fifth spot after Gonzalo Plata scored twice in a 4-0 win over Bolivia in Guayaquil.

Veteran striker Enner Valencia opened the scoring with a 26th-minute penalty before Plata's brace either side of half-time. Alan Minda wrapped up the win with a shot from outside the box. Uruguay face Colombia and Peru host Chile in other matches.

Juventus terminates Pogba's contract

Milan: Paul Pogba's Juventus career is over after the Serie A club announced yesterday that the France midfielder's contract had been terminated even though his doping ban was cut to 18 months on appeal. Pogba will be able to return to competitive football in March after the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) chopped last month an initial four-year suspension handed down by the Italian anti-doping authority NADO.

But Juventus have decided to cut ties with the 31-year-old, whose return to Turin from Manchester United was ruined by a string of problems on and off the pitch. In a statement, Juve said that they and Pogba "have reached a mutual agreement for the termination of their contract as of 30 November, 2024".

His contract had been due to expire in 2026. Pogba had said in October that he was "willing to give up money to be able to play again with Juve", an appeal which fell on defeat ears.

Juve's announcement is no surprise as both coach Thiago Motta and sporting director Cristiano Giuntoli have both repeatedly referred to Pogba in the past tense, saying that "he was a great player".

Pogba, a World Cup winner with France in 2018, started just one match after rejoining Juve - with whom he won four Serie A titles between 2012 and 2016 - in the summer of 2022. He last played for Juve at Empoli in September last year, not long before he was provisionally suspended for testing positive for testosterone.

That test came following Juve's opening Serie A fixture of last season the previous month, a 3-0 win at Udinese in which he didn't even play. He was then banned for four years by NADO in February, a sanction which put his career at risk before CAS reduced his punishment.

In Pogba's absence Juve switched manager from Massimiliano Allegri to Motta and brought in a host of new players as part of a rebuild. Juve, who finished third last term without Pogba, splashed out over 120m euros on midfielders Teun Koopmeiners, Douglas Luiz and Khephren Thuram.

SPOTLIGHT

Japan hammer Indonesia to edge closer to World Cup spot



Japan's Daichi Kamada (right) passes the ball to teammate Koki Ogawa who went on to score during the 2026 World Cup qualification match against Indonesia in Jakarta yesterday. (AFP)

AFP

Jakarta

Japan hammered a hapless Indonesia side 4-0 yesterday, extending their lead at the top of qualifying for the 2026 World Cup and edging them closer to an eighth consecutive spot at football's premier spectacle. Despite several early scares in front of more than 70,000 fans in Jakarta, the Blue Samurai eventually carved open a home team filled with Europe-born players before teaching them a footballing lesson. Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu said he was glad for the latest win but would not be satisfied until they qualified.

"I am happy that we are top of the group but we haven't gained anything yet until we manage to secure the World Cup place," he said of the team's seven-point gap at the top of Asian Group C. "We just have to keep on winning. I set a very high goal to become world champions, but before this we have to play each game one-by-

one, step-by-step. So I would just like to focus on the next game."

Japan remain unbeaten in the third round of qualifying at the halfway stage after four wins and a draw, all but guaranteeing them a World Cup berth but an astonishing collapse. Crystal Palace's Daichi Kamada cut past a defender in the 35th minute and squared the ball across goal, with Indonesia's Justin Hubner being credited with an own goal as he tried to stop striker Koki Ogawa from tapping in.

That broke more than half an hour of stubborn Indonesian resistance in heavy rain before Japan took their foot off the brakes, doubling their lead just five minutes later when Monaco's Takumi Minamino smashed in a low shot off the left upright. Sporting Lisbon's Hidemasa Morita capitalised on a mistake by Indonesian goalkeeper Maarten Paes before substitute Yukinari Sugawara smashed in a fourth to seal the thumping.

Japan will go away to China on Tuesday knowing that another win would almost cement their

World Cup place, while Indonesia face Saudi Arabia, who are fighting for second joint on six points with Australia and China. Just the top two seal their place at the 2026 World Cup in North America, with third and fourth forced into another round of Asian qualifying.

Defeat consigned Indonesia to the bottom spot in the group of six, and three points off a coveted top-four spot. It was the hosts who missed the most glaring chances in the first half. The best came when striker Ragnar Oratmangoen was put through on goal in the ninth minute, but he delayed his strike and fired it straight at Japan's goalkeeper, Zion Suzuki.

The misses proved costly as Japan showed their class, cruising to an easy win in the second half as Indonesia tried in vain to nick a consolation goal. Indonesia's South Korean coach Shin Tae-yong rued those scuppered chances but said he was still hopeful about his team's future. "I'm still looking forward. I still hope that we will finish third or fourth place in our table," he said.

FOCUS

Italy, France lock up Nations League quarter-final spots

AFP

Paris

Italy ensured qualification for the Nations League quarter-finals with a victory over Belgium on Thursday that also guaranteed France a place in the last-eight despite a lacklustre display in a scoreless draw with Israel under tight security in Paris. Lee Carsley, whose brief reign as England coach ends on Sunday, enjoyed an emphatic victory in Athens that put his team top of their pool on goal difference. In Brussels, Italy were economical as they beat Belgium 1-0 in Group A2.

The visitors dominated the early stages and scored after 11 minutes. A cross from fullback Giovanni Di Lorenzo deflected into the path of Sandro Tonali for a tap in. Belgian centre back Wout Faes hit a post with a second-half header. "We showed again that we give it a go and don't just sit back in matches, that's the big change," Tonali said.

At the Stade de France in Paris, tentative France struggled to create and take chances as they drew 0-0 with Israel before a crowd of just under 17,000 in a stadium that holds up to 80,000. Around 4,000 police and members of the security forces patrolled inside and outside the ground to prevent a repetition of the attacks on fans of Israeli club Maccabi Tel Aviv in Amsterdam last week.

Stewards had to intervene at one point to stop fans of both nations from clashing in the stands. Around 100 Israeli fans attended the match despite calls from Israeli authorities to stay away. On the pitch, it took until the 20th minute for captain N'Golo Kante, jinking into the six-yard box, to force a first save from goalkeeper Daniel Peretz.

France managed 25 attempts on goal but Peretz had to make only two diving saves in the second half, first from Warren Zaire-Emery and then in added time from Christopher Nkunku.



Belgium's Timothy Castagne (right) fights for the ball with Italy's Sandro Tonali during the UEFA Nations League match. (AFP)

Italy lead the group by three points but France could still take first when the teams meet in Milan tomorrow.

In Athens, Carsley, forced into a string of changes by a flurry of withdrawals from his last England squad, sprung a surprise by dropping Harry Kane. Ollie Watkins replaced the England captain and took seven minutes to justify Carsley's decision. Noni Madueke raced onto a Jude Bellingham pass and crossed for Watkins to stab home.

As in their win at Wembley in October, the Greeks caused England's inexperienced defence problems in the Group B2 clash. After 30 minutes, right back Kostas Tsimikas ran into space in the box. Everton's Jordan Pickford hurled himself to his right to turn away a piledriver from the Liverpool man.

England started the second half in control. Rico Lewis forced a save from Odysseas Vlachodimos and Bellingham hit a post

with a header before Fotis Ioannidis drew another diving save from Pickford.

Kane came on but another England talisman, Bellingham, forced the goal that put England top of the group after 78 minutes. His shot struck the post, rebounded into the back of airborne Vlachodimos and flew in.

Curtis Jones, on his debut, added the third five minutes later. England and Greece both have 12 points with one game to go but England's goal difference is three better.

The top two in B3 are also separated on goal difference as leaders Austria and pursuers Norway both won. Austria's Christoph Baumgartner and Michael Gregoritsch scored in the first 25 minutes in Almaty by which time Kazakhstan were down to ten men. Austria saw out a 2-0 win and lead the pool on goal difference from Norway who won 4-1 in Slovenia with Erling Haaland scoring once.