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FOOTBALL

Real's Mbappe fit for Intercontinental Cup final in Doha

'Mbappe did some work with the rest of the squad and some on his own'

Agencies
Madrid

Real Madrid forward Kylian Mbappe has returned after a thigh injury and will travel to Doha for this week's Intercontinental Cup final, the Spanish club said yesterday.

Mbappe pulled up with a left thigh problem after scoring in last week's 3-2 Champions League win at Atalanta and missed Saturday's 3-3 league draw at Rayo Vallecano.

But the 25-year-old will be in the squad for Wednesday's Intercontinental Cup final against Mexican club Pachuca at the Lusail Stadium.

"Mbappe did some work with the rest of the squad and some on his own," Real said of their final training session ahead of the Doha trip.

Real are third in La Liga, one point behind leaders Barcelona and Atletico Madrid with a game in hand, and host Sevilla next Sunday.

In a season plagued by injuries and long-term absentees, Real Madrid head coach Carlo Ancelotti will be looking to add to his and his club's trophy collection on Wednesday.

With the likes of Dani Carvajal, Eder Militao, David Alaba and Ferland Mendy all sidelined with injuries, the Italian coach has had to turn to some of his lesser-used players or change some of their positions around on the pitch.

Undoubtedly, Mbappe came to Real Madrid to play his part in these types of clashes that decide titles. He already made a name for himself at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, bagging eight goals, so the former PSG man will be hoping to pick up where he left off.

He will play alongside Vinicius, who has scored more goals than Mbappe this season and has tallied at least 22 goals in his last three seasons for the club. The Brazilian is on track to continue his record in the 2024/25 campaign, and



Real Madrid forward Kylian Mbappe (left) in action during a training session in Madrid yesterday, ahead of the Intercontinental Cup final.

he does not turn 25 until the day before the final of the FIFA Club World Cup 2025.

Real goal-keeper Thibaut Courtois, who is returning from a lengthy injury at the end of last season, will be Real Madrid's saviour in goal.

In Qatar, he will be aiming to win another crown with his side, being the last line of defence for a team that, despite a number of notable absentees, will continue to

fight tooth and nail for every title.

With Courtois back to full fitness, Antonio Rudiger is the only other regular defender that will feature in the final. The German continues to flourish for Los Blancos, with his dominance, speed and power embodying this season's team.

Now in his third season at Real Madrid, Rudiger remains a key player in Ancelotti's squad. After making 39 appearances in his first

season, 44 last season and more than 20 in the current campaign, the 31-year-old is enjoying the best moment of his career.

Pachuca beat Al Ahly of Egypt on penalties in Doha on Saturday to seal their place in the final.

The Intercontinental Cup brings together the winners of continental tournaments with Real qualifying directly for the final as the 2024 UEFA Champions League winners.

SPOTLIGHT

The Best FIFA Football Awards winners to be revealed at Aspire Academy today

On the eve of the FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024 final between Real Madrid CF and CF Pachuca, and the second anniversary of the greatest-ever FIFA World Cup final, the world's best players, coaches and fans for 2024 – as well as the best goals – will be revealed during a gala dinner at the renowned Aspire Academy.

The dinner, which is taking place to celebrate Aspire's 20-year anniversary, will be attended by dignitaries including the FIFA President, FIFA Council members, FIFA Legends and other local and regional ambassadors and trailblazers of the beautiful game.

THE NOMINEES

Women's Player: Aitana Bonmati Barbra Banda, Pride Caroline Graham Hansen, Keira Walsh, Khadija Shaw, Lauren Hemp, Lindsey Horan, Lucy Bronze, Mallory Swanson, Mariona Caldentey, Naomi Girma, Ona Batlle, Salma Paralluelo, Sophia Smith, Tabitha Chawinga, Trinity Rodman.

Men's Player: Dani Carvajal, Erling Haaland, Federico Valverde, Florian Wirtz, Jude Bellingham, Kylian Mbappe, Lamine Yamal, Lionel Messi, Rodri, Toni Kroos, Vinicius Jr.

Women's Coach: Arthur Elias (BRA), Elena Sadiku (SWE), Celtic Emma Hayes (ENG), Futoshi Ikedo (JPN), Gareth Taylor (ENG), Jonatan Giráldez (ESP), Sandrine Soubeyrand (FRA), Sonia Bompastor (FRA).

Men's Coach: Carlo Ancelotti (ITA), Lionel Scaloni (ARG), Luis de la Fuente (ESP), Pep Guardiola (ESP), Xabi Alonso (ESP).

Women's Goalkeeper: Alyssa Naeher, Ann-Katrin Berger, Gotham Ayaka Yamashita, Cata Coll, Mary Earps.

Men's Goalkeeper: Andriy Lunin, David Raya, Ederson, Emiliano Martínez, Gianluigi Donnarumma, Mike Maignan, Unai Simon.

Marta Award: Delphine Cascarino, Marina Hegering, Sakina Karchaoui, Paulina Krumbiegel, Marta, Nina Matejic, Beth Mead, Giuseppina Moraca, Asisat Oshoala, Mayra Pelayo, Trinity Rodman.

FIFA Puskas Award: Hassan Al Haydos (Qatar), Terry Antonis, Yassine Benzia, Walter Bou, Michael Chirinos, Federico Dimarco, Alejandro Garnacho, Mohammed Kudus, Denis Omedi, Paul Onuachu.

FIFA Fan Award: Jose Armando, Craig Ferguson, Guilherme Gandra Moura.



As ever, fans have played a key role in choosing the winners by having a say in the destiny of several awards, including The Best FIFA Men's Player, The Best FIFA Women's Player, The Best FIFA Men's Coach, The Best FIFA Women's Coach, The Best FIFA Men's Goalkeeper and The Best FIFA Women's Goalkeeper.

All of these award winners have been decided by an equally weighted voting system between fans, the current captains and coaches of all women's/men's national teams and media representatives.

In addition, this year, for the first time, fans have also participated in the vote for The Best FIFA Men's 11 and The Best FIFA Women's 11.

For each of these two selections, fans chose from a list of 77 nominated players and slotted them into one of several preset tactical formations to build their team, with the outcome weighted equally between them and an expert panel.

Voting for the new FIFA Mar-

ta Award and the FIFA Puskas Award – for the best goals in women's and men's football – has been split equally between fans and a panel of FIFA Legends, while the FIFA Fan Award has been chosen entirely by fans, and the recipient of the FIFA Fair Play Award has been selected by an expert panel. fifa.com

FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP QATAR 2024

An exhilarating evening of football and entertainment in store for fans

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Fans attending the FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024 Final on December 18 at Lusail Stadium will be treated to a wide range of cultural activities prior to kick off at 8pm. A robust fan zone will feature live performances, culinary stations and interactive activities for fans of all ages.

There will also be special activities to mark the two-year anniversary of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 final. Two years ago to the day, the iconic Lusail Stadium hosted a historic final between Argentina and France.

Since then, the 89,000 seater has also hosted the final match of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023.

The FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024 will be contested by Mexican side CF Pachuca and European giants Real Madrid.

The match is the culmination of an elite

football tournament that saw continental club champions compete for the title of being the best club in the world.

The Real Madrid squad will boast several world-class players, including FIFA World Cup winner Kylian Mbappé who will be returning to the iconic Lusail Stadium after narrowly missing out on a second title in Qatar 2022 to Argentina.

The Spanish side will also include other marquee names including Brazilian Vinicius Jr. and English star Jude Bellingham.

The Mexican side will look to make it three trophies in a row after claiming both the FIFA Derby of the Americas Qatar 2024 and the FIFA Challenger Cup Qatar 2024, with wins earlier in the week over Botafogo and Al Ahly respectively.

Tickets for the tournament can be purchased from fic24.qa

Lusail Stadium has several accessible seating options, and will offer Audio Descriptive Commentary and a sensory room during the match. Inquiries for accessible tickets can be made to accessibility-fic@sc.qa



FIFA Intercontinental Cup Qatar 2024 Final will be held on December 18 at Lusail Stadium.

THIRD TEST

Weather rescues India as heavy rain plays spoilsport

AS VIRAT KOHLI WAS WALKING OFF THE RAIN STARTED FALLING AND EARLY LUNCH WAS CALLED



India's Virat Kohli (centre) walks off the field as Australia's Josh Hazlewood (second right) celebrates his wicket with teammates on day three of the third Test at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. **Right:** Australia's Mitchell Marsh and Mitchell Starc celebrate an Indian wicket yesterday. (AFP/Reuters)

AFP
Brisbane, Australia

Brisbane's weather came to India's rescue as most of yesterday's play was lost because of rain on the third day of the third Test against Australia at the Gabba.

A rattled India limped to 51-4 at stumps on a day when the Australians were only able to bowl 17 overs at the visitors and players left the field seven times due to downpours.

KL Rahul was on 33 at the end of a wet day along with skipper Rohit Sharma, who was yet to score.

Needing 245 to avoid the follow-

on, India lost three early wickets in the first session, after earlier bowling Australia out for 445.

Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill and Virat Kohli all fell to Australia's opening bowlers Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood.

They then lost Rishabh Pant just before tea, which was called early because of another downpour that then kept the players off the field for over two hours.

When they did return, bad light saw the Australians throw the ball to off-spinner Nathan Lyon and part-timer Travis Head.

But after only 2.5 overs, umpires Richard Kettleborough and Richard Illingworth decided that the light was not good enough and

called an end to play. With most of the first day also lost to rain Saturday, Head and Steve Smith's second-day centuries ensured that India cannot realistically win the Test.

More rain is forecast for today and tomorrow, raising India's hopes of salvaging a draw and heading to Melbourne with the series locked at 1-1.

However, Australian batsman Mitchell Marsh stressed there was enough time for a result.

"We know we have to take 20 wickets to try and win this Test match," he said.

"I guess all the conversations and all the planning will be how do we do that. There's two days to go

so there's still plenty of time to get a result, so let's hope the weather stays away over the next two days."

Bumrah a bright spot for India
Australia resumed the third day on 405-7 and were eventually bowled out for 445, wicketkeeper Alex Carey the last man out after an enterprising 70. Pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, who was easily India's best bowler with 6-76, said the younger bowlers of his team were on a steep learning curve.

"We as a team are going through a transition as new players are coming in and it's not the easiest place to play cricket over here," Bumrah said.

"It's my job to help the others -

I have played a bit more than them so I am trying to help them."

India's first target was to avoid the follow-on and so raise their chances of holding out for a draw.

But their reply got off to a terrible start when Jaiswal, who edged Starc's first ball for four runs through gully, chipped the next ball straight to Mitchell Marsh at square leg.

Fellow opener Rahul got a nasty hit on the wrist from a Hazlewood ball that rose sharply off a good length, but after treatment he was able to continue.

In Starc's next over, Gill edged to gully and Marsh took a brilliant catch, diving high to his left to leave India in tatters at 6-2.

Kohli was next to go, caught behind by Carey after playing at a full ball from Hazlewood that he could have left alone but instead got a faint edge through to the wicket-keeper.

To add insult to injury, as Kohli was walking off the rain started falling and early lunch was called.

There were more rain delays after lunch as Rahul and Pant tried to rescue the situation, but with the score on 44, Pant got a thin edge off Pat Cummins to Carey.

BRIEF SCORES (Third Test, Day 3)
India 51 for 4 (Rahul 33*, Starc 2-25) **trail Australia 445** (Head 152, Smith 101, Carey 70, Bumrah 6-76) **by 394 runs**

COMMENT

'Zero communication': Aussie Gillespie opens up on Pakistan exit

AFP
Brisbane, Australia

Jason Gillespie said yesterday he felt no longer wanted as Pakistan's Test coach and was left out of major decisions, having quit the post last week.

The 49-year-old Australian former fast bowler was appointed in April for two years but differences with the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) took their toll.

Gillespie said he was not informed of the decision to remove performance coach Tim Nielsen, also an Australian.

"Nielsen was told his services were no longer required and I had zero communication from anyone and that was the moment I thought: well, I'm not really sure they actually want me to do this job," Gillespie told Australian broadcaster ABC in Brisbane.

He added: "For a decision to then be made (about Nielsen) and the head coach doesn't get a text message, phone call or e-mail about a decision that's a pretty big decision."

"It just left me thinking well I'm really not sure if the PCB wants me."

The PCB accepted Gillespie's resignation, the second in two months after former South Africa opener Gary Kirsten quit as white-

ball coach over differences with selectors.

Gillespie had the worst possible start to his coaching stint when Pakistan were whitewashed 2-0 by Bangladesh.

That was followed by an innings defeat against England in the first Test in Multan.

The defeat prompted the PCB to make sweeping changes, removing Gillespie from the selection panel and dropping star players Babar Azam, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Naseem Shah.

Pakistan won the remaining two Tests to seal the series 2-1.

Gillespie refused to join the team for the two-Test series in South Africa starting in Centurion from December 26.

Gillespie said he was upset over the reduction of his role with the Pakistan side.

"In essence I was basically hitting catches and that was about it on the morning of a game," he told ABC.

"You want to be able to have clear communication with all stakeholders, including selectors and knowing what the team is as head coach at least a day before the game so you can help plan and prepare the players."

The exits of Gillespie and Kirsten - within a period of just 5-6 weeks - means Pakistan have now had seven different coaches across formats in the last three years.

SPOTLIGHT

New Zealand eye win after Williamson's super century

Reuters
Hamilton, New Zealand

Kane Williamson scored a magisterial 156 at his most productive venue to drive New Zealand to the brink of a consolation victory over England at the end of the third day of the third Test in Hamilton yesterday.

After the opening session was lost to wet weather, Williamson led the way under the Seddon Park lights as the Black Caps took their lead from 340 to 657 before England finally bowled them out for 453 in the final hour.

England, who have secured series honours after big wins in Christchurch and Wellington, reached 18 for two at the close of play with Jacob Bethell, on nine not out, and scoreless Joe Root at the crease still 640 runs from their unlikely target.

England could also be a man short in their chase as captain Ben Stokes left the contest with a hamstring injury and is not certain to bat.

Tim Southee, playing on his home ground in his final Test, got one of the biggest cheers of the day when he came out to bat in the New Zealand tail but holed out for two chasing his 99th six in Tests.

The crowd erupted again soon



New Zealand's Kane Williamson celebrates a century on day three of the third Test match against England at Seddon Park in Hamilton yesterday. (AFP)

afterwards when he fired a delivery down the off side at Ben Duckett and the England opener got a thick inside edge onto his stumps for four.

"Any moment you take a wicket for New Zealand, it's always a special time... it's a feeling that I'll certainly miss," said Southee.

"The next couple of days will hopefully be a good couple of days, but I'm sure an emotional couple of days as well."

Duckett's opening partner Zak Crawley followed for five when Matt Henry trapped him in front in the penultimate over of the day

to further drive home New Zealand's advantage.

On a day spent waiting for a declaration that never came, Daryl Mitchell (60), Mitchell Santner (49), Rachin Ravindra (44) and Tom Blundell (44 not out) all made valuable contributions with the bat but Williamson was a class above.

The 34-year-old resumed on 50 with New Zealand 136-3 and had a couple of nervy moments, not least an lbw appeal from Brydon Carse when he was on 73 that was turned down but judged an umpire's call on review.

He shared a 107-run fourth-wicket partnership with Ravindra as he patiently moved towards his 33rd Test century and seventh in 12 matches at Seddon Park.

Williamson threw off the shackles as he approached the century mark for the fifth test in a row in Hamilton, smashing Bethell's occasional spin straight down the ground for a six to reach the mark from 137 balls.

Another partnership of 92 with Mitchell put the lead well beyond the record successful fourth-innings run chase of 418 achieved by West Indies against Australia at St John's in 2003.

Williamson glided through to 150 before finally departing attempting a sweep off young England spinner Shoaib Bashir but only finding the substitute fielder in the deep.

Bethell was England's best bowler with figures of three for 72 after removing Mitchell for his maiden Test wicket and sending back Southee and Henry with the last two deliveries of the New Zealand innings.

BRIEF SCORES (Third Test, Day 3)
England 143 and 18 for 2 (Bethell 9*, Root 0*, Southee 1-4, Henry 1-14) **need another 640 runs to beat New Zealand 347 and 453** (Williamson 156, Young 60, Mitchell 60, Bethell 3-72)

FOCUS

Gutsy Bangladesh secure 7-run win over West Indies in T20 series opener



Mahedi Hasan of Bangladesh receives the Man of the Match award after his team beat the West Indies by 7 runs in their T20I. (@BCBTigers)

AFP
Kingstown, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Hasan Mahmud delivered a superb final over as Bangladesh snatched a seven-run win over the West Indies in the first T20 International of a three-match series at the Arnos Vale Stadium in St Vincent on Sunday.

Defending a total of 146 for seven, the visitors seemed destined to fall to the mighty hitting of Rovman Powell as the home skipper blazed 60 off 35 balls with five fours and four sixes to lift his side from the depths of 61 for seven in the 12th over to within touching distance of a sensational victory.

His eighth-wicket partnership of 68 off 38 balls with fellow all-rounder Romario Shep-

herd (22) looked to have swung the match decisively his team's way as, despite the loss of Shepherd in the 19th over, Powell was still at the crease in partnership with Alzarri Joseph with nine runs needed for victory when Mahmud started the final over.

However, the seamer responded to the challenge magnificently, having Powell caught behind by Bangladesh captain Litton Das off the third ball of the over and then uprooting Joseph's middle-stump two balls later to leave local hero Obed McCoy a helpless spectator at the other end.

McCoy had earlier claimed his 50th wicket in T20 Internationals on his return to the West Indies team, finishing with figures of two for 30. Left-arm spinner Akeal Hosein was again at his miserly best in taking two for 13 off his four overs but Bangladesh were able to gain late

impetus from 96 for five in the 15th over courtesy of Jaker Ali, Shamim Hossain and Mahedi Hasan.

Opener Soumya Sarkar held the early part of the innings together with a topscore of 43.

Hasan then followed his unbeaten 26 with an outstanding bowling effort, his spin varieties earning him four for 13, and subsequently the "Man of the Match" award, as the West Indies middle-order caved in for what looked like an inevitable massive defeat.

Powell and Shepherd nearly completed a memorable rescue act, though, before they were thwarted by the excellent Mahmud.

BRIEF SCORES
Bangladesh 147 for 6 (Soumya 43, Hosein 2-13, McCoy 2-30) **beat West Indies 140** (Powell 60, Mahedi 4-13) **by seven runs**

FOOTBALL

Kuwait set to host Arabian Gulf Cup at two venues

QATAR AND SAUDI ARABIA HAVE WON THE POPULAR TOURNAMENT THREE TIMES EACH

QNA
Doha

The organising committee of the 26th edition of the Arabian Gulf Cup – to be held in Kuwait for a fifth time – confirmed full readiness of the host country for the tournament and revealed that two stadiums – Jaber International Stadium in Kuwait City and the newly-built Jaber Al Mubarak Al Sabah Stadium in Sulaibikhat – will stage the matches for the tournament.



The Gulf Cup “26” is scheduled to be held from December 21 to January 3, 2025, with the participation of eight teams divided into two groups.

Group A includes the hosts Kuwait, along with Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman while Group B comprises defending champions Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Yemen.

The Jaber International Stadium will stage the opening match between Kuwait and Omani on December 21.

The final match, scheduled for January 3, 2025, will also be held at the same venue. The stadium will host a total of eight matches

during the tournament. Jaber International Stadium was officially opened on December 18, 2015, with an exhibition match between world stars and the Kuwaiti national team.

The stadium's capacity is 60,000 and it is the largest stadium in Kuwait. It previously hosted some matches of the 23rd Gulf Cup in 2017, including the final which was won by Oman for their second title in defeating UAE 5-4 on penalties following a goalless draw in regular and extra time.

The Jaber Al Mubarak Al Hamad Al Sabah Stadium was built in Sulaibikhat and was officially opened

on December 11, before being inaugurated with a match between Kuwait SC, the league champions, and Sulaibikhat on Sunday.

The stadium is scheduled to host the first match at the international level when it hosts Qatar and UAE in the first round of “Gulf 26” championship on December 21.

A total of 7 matches are scheduled to be held at Jaber Al Mubarak Al Sabah Stadium throughout the tournament including one semi-final on December 31.

Jaber Al Mubarak Al Sabah Stadium, the newest stadium in Kuwait, has been designed to provide the best possible viewing experi-



ence for fans with seats close to the playing field.

The stadium's capacity is 15,000 and it features a sea view and a unique design inspired by international football stadiums.

The stadium's exterior is shaped like a seashell and is covered with multi-coloured exterior lighting.

The two tournament stadiums have been specially prepared to host the matches, and the stadiums' readiness was confirmed during the inspection tours carried out by the Inspection Committee of the Arabian Gulf Cup Federation which thoroughly checked the playing field grass, lighting,

screens, training grounds, and providing all the necessary facilities for work teams and media.

The 26th Gulf Cup is expected to be a great success, given the good preparations made by Kuwait, as a large number of fans are expected to witness one of the most prominent sporting events in the region.

The Gulf Cup will be staged in Kuwait for a fifth time after hosting the third edition in 1974, the tenth edition in 1990, in addition to the 16th tournament held in 2003, and then the 23rd edition in 2017.

The Arabian Gulf Cup Football has enjoyed a lot of interest and special status among Gulf fans

since its launch nearly 55 years ago, specifically in 1970 when the first edition was held in Bahrain.

Kuwait are the most successful team having won the Cup ten times, the last of which was in the 20th Gulf Cup held in Yemen in 2010, while Iraq have won the title four times, the last of which was “Gulf 25”, held in Basra in 2023.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia have won the title three times each, followed by UAE and Oman (twice), and Bahrain, who won the 24th Gulf Cup held in Doha in 2019.

Meanwhile, Qatar former international player Raed Yaqoub has called on Al Annabi to make the most of the Gulf Cup in Kuwait to iron out flaws and to achieve top form with the presence of stars like Akram Afif and Almoez Ali.

The Gulf Cup will help Qatar build a fighting unit ahead of their remaining 2026 World Cup qualifiers, he said.

“The Gulf Cup is often not subject to prior expectations, and its matches are accompanied with matches played with great competitive spirit and decided by small details and individual abilities. The games at the Gulf Cup are more intense than other tournaments,” said Yaqoub.

SPOTLIGHT

Indian chess king Gukesh returns to hero's welcome

AFP
Chennai, India

India's chess star Gukesh Dommaraju returned to a hero's welcome in his home city yesterday after becoming the youngest world champion aged only 18.

Hundreds of fans crowded the arrivals area of Chennai airport, cheering alongside banks of television cameras as Gukesh made his way out of the airport after victory in taking the World Chess Championship title.

“It means a lot to bring back the trophy to India,” Gukesh told reporters, with garlands of flowers draped around his neck, brandishing the glittering trophy in his hand. “I can see the support and what it means to India, I am glad to be here,” he added, as celebratory petals thrown into the air smothered his hair.

Gukesh downed China's Ding Liren in a dramatic endgame in Singapore last week – becoming a sudden superstar in a nation where sporting fans are usually only obsessed with cricket.

The scenes in the south Indian city of Chennai were reminiscent – albeit on a smaller scale – of this year's triumphant homecoming of the country's cricket stars with the T20 World Cup trophy.

Young fans, mainly from Gukesh's school, held placards and photos of their new hero – whose victory has given a boost to dreams of pursuing chess as a professional sport.

When he won in Singapore – after nearly three weeks and 14 games of intense battle against the 32-year-old Ding – Gukesh burst into tears.



India's Gukesh Dommaraju holds his World Chess Championship trophy during a press conference in Chennai yesterday. Gukesh on Thursday won the FIDE World Chess Championship Singapore 2024 as he stunned China's Ding Liren. (AFP)

Gukesh, who is usually reserved and more used to quiet and cerebral tournaments than wild celebrations, looked almost overwhelmed by the rock star welcome yesterday.

“You guys are amazing,” he told fans, before he was swiftly ushered into a car smothered in posters of him, alongside his father. “You gave me so much energy.” Gukesh's father, a doctor, has

WORLD CHAMPIONS

- 2024: Gukesh Dommaraju
- 2023: Ding Liren
- 2021: Magnus Carlsen
- 2018: Magnus Carlsen
- 2016: Magnus Carlsen
- 2014: Magnus Carlsen
- 2013: Magnus Carlsen
- 2012: Vishwanathan Anand
- 2010: Vishwanathan Anand
- 2008: Vishwanathan Anand
- 2007: Vishwanathan Anand
- 2006: Vladimir Kramnik

been by his son's side in a roller-coaster ride that took off when he became India's youngest grandmaster aged 12 years, seven months and 17 days – among the youngest in the history of the game. In April, he became the youngest-ever winner of the prestigious Candidates Tournament, clinching his entry into the world championship.

Gukesh surpassed a record held by Russia's Garry Kasparov, who won the title at age 22, after Ding, 32, faltered at the final hurdle of his title defence.

He is the second Indian to hold the title after five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand, who also hails from Chennai.

Gukesh will be honoured by the government of his home state Tamil Nadu, and is expected to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the capital New Delhi later this month.

Modi has already praised his “remarkable accomplishment”, saying in a statement that “his triumph has not only etched his name in the annals of chess history but has also inspired millions of young minds to dream big and pursue excellence.”

FOCUS

Newly-retired MotoGP rider Espargaro to join pro cycling team Lidl-Trek

AFP
Paris

Former MotoGP rider **Aleix Espargaro** will join cycling outfit Lidl-Trek next year having only retired from motorcycling last month, the team announced yesterday.

Spaniard Espargaro clinched three MotoGP race wins during a 15-year career on the motorbike.

The 35-year-old begins his Lidl-Trek contract on January 1 and will join the side as an ambassador for unspecified “prestigious” cycling races.

“I'm thrilled to join the Lidl-Trek family, which is home to some of the world's best cyclists,” Espargaro said.

“After a back injury forced me to give up running I turned to cycling for recovery and training.

“Over time, it became more

than just preparation – it became my passion. “Living in Andorra, I made friendships with many pro cyclists, which inspired me to train at a higher level.”

His new teammates include former Giro d'Italia winner Tao Geoghegan Hart, Belgian veteran Tim Declercq and 2019 road race world champion Mads Pedersen.

“Working with Aleix will be incredibly rewarding for us, and especially for our young riders,” said Lidl-Trek general manager Luca Guercilena.

“We know he is a strong, passionate cyclist, but he also brings different experiences and perspectives to the Team. He can help our younger athletes understand and handle the pressures that come with top level competition.”

The first major race of the 2025 cycling season is the Tour Down Under in Australia from January 21-26.



FOCUS

Jordan's Prince Feisal champions member input in IOC presidential bid

AFP
London

The promise of a more democratic International Olympic Committee with greater input from members is key to Prince Feisal al-Hussein of Jordan's bid for the top Olympic job, the IOC presidential candidate has told Reuters.

One of seven candidates running for the prestigious post being vacated by German Thomas Bach after 12 years in charge, the 61-year-old also says a more flexible approach to hosting the Games

is another vital element that needs to be addressed as the movement enters a new phase.

Prince Feisal, a member of the Executive Board, is up against World Athletics chief Sebastian Coe, Zimbabwe's Sports Minister Kirsty Coventry, Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr, international cycling head David Lappartient, Japanese gymnastics leader Morinari Watanabe, and Swedish Olympic newcomer Johan Eliasch in the March 2025 election.

Prince Feisal's campaign focuses on three pillars: imagination, integrity, and inclusion.

“I think that's a good way for-

ward and I'm hoping that... most of the members will look at the manifesto and say, ‘okay, that's somebody I can see as the President of the IOC and I like what he's thinking. I like his style,’” he told Reuters in an interview in London.

“I believe that I've always had credibility because I speak very frankly. I don't try and say things that I think people want to hear. I say what I really believe because I think you must be frank and honest if you want to build a relationship.”

He underlines his credentials of candour, saying the full potential of the IOC membership is not being utilised. Critics argue that

under Bach, decision-making has been centralised to the Executive Board. Prince Feisal says he will ensure the entire membership's voices are heard if he is elected.

The IOC generated more than \$6.7bn in revenues between 2017 and 2021, including \$4.544bn from broadcasters and \$2.295bn from top sponsors, its second-biggest income source.

“We are not fully utilising the potential of the IOC... the question is, how can we unlock that potential?” he said.

“A key part of this involves inclusivity-bringing them into the fold, ensuring their voices are

heard, and making them feel they are an integral part of the process.”

The IOC will hold the election at its Session in Greece in March 2025, with each of the 100-plus members having one vote each. Prince Feisal also advocated for flexibility in hosting dates for the Games, acknowledging the impact of climate change.

“Part of the whole principle of Olympism is universality – so you can have it in different places. My concern right now is that when you see global warming or climate change, there are going to be fewer and fewer countries that can safely host the Olympic Games (in its

traditional window). The way it's structured right now limits the number of countries that can do it. I would sit with the International Federations and others in the Olympic Movement and say, is there flexibility in the calendar so that we can open the possibility for different countries to host?”

A decision to allow different dates for staging Summer Games outside the traditional summer months would benefit countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which cannot host the Games in July or August due to their desert climates. Both have shown interest in hosting as early as 2036.

QMMF by HRT team wins Porsche GT Cup class at Gulf 12 Hours endurance race



Qatar's QMMF by HRT team, featuring Abdullah al-Khelaifi, Ghanem al-Ali, Ibrahim al-Abdulghani and German driver Julian Hanes, delivered an astonishing performance by securing the victory in the Porsche GT Cup class at the Gulf 12 Hours endurance race held at Yas Marina Circuit on December 14-15. The victory marks their fifth consecutive win in international competitions this season, highlighting team QMMF's remarkable consistency. The Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the team, with plans to involve them in more international events next season, aiming to build on their success and stamp Qatar's prominence on the global motorsport stage.

FOOTBALL

Amorim shows teeth as Man Utd boss with 'brutal' Rashford call

'What he's done is made a bold call. What he has to do is shake this club to its core'

AFP
London

Ruben Amorim is celebrating his biggest win since arriving at Manchester United – with perhaps a hint of relief after making the most “brutal” call of his brief reign so far.

The Portuguese dropped forwards Marcus Rashford and Alejandro Garnacho for “selection” reasons for Sunday's match at Manchester City and his gamble paid off with a dramatic 2-1 win, thanks to late goals from Bruno Fernandes and Amad Diallo.

Amorim has shown he is prepared to speak bluntly about the huge task facing him at a dysfunctional Old Trafford since he replaced the sacked Erik ten Hag last month.

Now he has shown he is prepared to walk the walk as well as talk the talk as he battles to force through a cultural and tactical reboot at the club, who are 13th in the Premier League table.

The former Sporting Lisbon boss has shown a willingness to rotate his men, unafraid to leave out big names.

But on Sunday Rashford and Garnacho – two of United's most potent attackers – were omitted from the squad entirely as Amorim showed his teeth.

Amorim said it was a “selection” issue ahead of the game at the Etihad, with both players training at United's training ground on Sunday morning.

Afterwards, he stressed it was not a disciplinary issue, though he did allude to standards he expects.

“For me what is important is the performance in training, the performance in game, the way you dress, the way you eat, the way you engage with teammates and push teammates,” he said.

“Everything is important in our context, the beginning of something when we want to change a lot of things, when people in our club are losing their jobs. We



Manchester United's Portuguese head coach Ruben Amorim shouts instructions to the players from the touchline during the Premier League match against Manchester City at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester. (AFP)

have to put our standards really high, and for that they have to fight for their place in their team.

“Today we proved we can leave anybody out of the squad and you can manage to win if you play together.”

Amorim does not appear to be a man

who holds grudges, saying the slate would be wiped clean ahead of United's next game, which is against Tottenham in the League Cup quarter-finals on Thursday.

“Next week, next game, new life and they are fighting for the places,” he said. Rashford posted a picture on social

media after United celebrated their winner accompanied by a caption saying “Yessssssss! Love it lads,” with two heart emojis, while Garnacho stayed silent.

But speculation will continue over the future of 27-year-old Rashford, who has struggled for consistency since scoring 30 goals in the 2022/23 season. It is not a new situation for the England forward, who has been punished in the past for disciplinary lapses, including over-sleeping.

Garnacho, just 20, is seen as one of United's crown jewels but has also been inconsistent this season, pointedly refusing to celebrate a goal against Leicester, with Fernandes suggesting at the time that the Argentina international believes some fans have lost faith in him.

Former United captain Gary Neville, now a Sky Sports pundit, backed Amorim after Sunday's “brutal” call, criticising the work ethic of both players.

“They've both been poor on the pitch, that's a fact,” he said on The Gary Neville Podcast.

“And Amorim said the selection issue was down to performance and engagement with teammates. That means if they've not been good in the group. That's why they weren't here.

“What he's done is made a bold call. What he has to do is shake this club to its core.”

Neville said Amorim must get a group of players who can fit into his preferred 3-4-3 formation.

“He needs to make sure he's brutal with it, really brutal. And he's been brutal today,” he said.

Roy Keane, another former United captain turned TV pundit, told Sky Sports that Amorim was putting down a “marker”.

“It's a big talking point because he's obviously seen things he doesn't like,” he said. “But for us it's not a big surprise because both players have been poor and he has said enough is enough.

“He is putting a marker down. Let's see how they react to it.”

Brazil's fallen 'Emperor' Adriano bids farewell to football

Rio de Janeiro: Former Brazil and Inter Milan striker Adriano, nicknamed the ‘Emperor’ in his prime, bid farewell to football on Sunday in a testimonial match at the home of Flamengo, the club where his once promising career started.

The 42-year-old had been tipped to become one of the football greats, but eventually succumbed to the pressures of sporting fame and alcohol problems. The testimonial, played at the Maracana stadium in Rio de Janeiro, ended with a 4-3 victory for the ‘Flamengo Legends’ against ‘Friends of Italy’.

The occasion allowed Adriano to formally say goodbye, eight years after his last official match, and featured several Brazil greats including striker Romario and goalkeeper Julio Cesar.

The 48-times capped player was also accompanied on the pitch by his son Adrianinho, and scored goals for both teams.

An emotional Adriano was hugged by all the players when the screen showed a message created by artificial intelligence from his deceased father.

Winner of the Copa America in 2004 and the Confederations Cup the following year, at barely 22 years old, Adriano gradually disappeared from the radar. But after being a starter at the 2006 World Cup in Germany, he gradually lost his place in the national team and club football, plagued by weight and alcohol problems.

He won four Serie A titles with Inter Milan and the Italian Cup trophy twice. He also played for Italian clubs Roma, Parma and Fiorentina during his career which finished in 2016 after a brief stint with Miami United.

Returning to live in the favela of his childhood, in Rio, he spoke about his problems with alcoholism last month on the specialised site ‘The Players’ Tribune’.

“Do you know what it's like to be a ‘hope’? I know it. Including being a disappointed hope. The biggest waste in football: Me. I like that word ‘waste’... I don't do drugs, as they try to make people believe, I am not a criminal but, of course, I could have been... I drink every day,” he wrote.

UEFA to award 41mn euros in prize money for Women's Euro 2025

UEFA have approved 41mn euros (\$43mn) in prize money for the Women's Euro 2025 tournament, more than double the previous edition, European football's governing body announced yesterday. The winning team will receive up to 5.1mn euros – compared to the 2.085mn England received as champions in 2022 – with each of the 16 participating teams receiving 1.8mn euros.

In line with the development of women's football, the funding for the continental tournament has increased fivefold since Euro 2017, and by 156 per cent since Euro 2022 in England, when it amounted to 16mn euros.

Some 70 per cent of the total will be distributed to the teams involved, who will have to pay “between 30 and 40 per cent” of their allocation to their players, UEFA said.

Teams will receive 50,000 euros for a draw and 100,000 euros for a win during the group stage, then respectively 550,000, 700,000 and 850,000 euros if they reach the quarter-finals, semi-finals or the final.

UEFA announced in October its intention to invest one billion euros in women's football by 2030, targeting grassroots levels and further increasing professional standards at the top end and stadium attendance. Euro 2025 takes place in Switzerland from July 2-27.

(AFP)

COMMENT

Man City players still believe in Guardiola: Foden

AFP
London

Phil Foden insists Manchester City's players still believe in Pep Guardiola despite the painful loss against Manchester United that extended their dismal streak.

Guardiola's side have lost eight of their past 11 games in all competitions following the devastating 2-1 defeat in the Manchester derby at the Etihad Stadium on Sunday. Unhinged by the kind of dismal defending that has become a regular feature of their stunning decline, City conceded twice in the closing minutes as United dealt another blow to the Premier League champions' fading hopes of a fifth successive title.

Fifth-placed City are trailing nine points behind leaders Liverpool, who have a game in hand, and have already suffered

five league defeats this season – after enduring just three in the whole of the last top-flight campaign. Guardiola said after the game that he is “not good enough” as the worst crisis of his managerial career deepened.

But City forward Foden is adamant the Spaniard, who recently signed a new two-year contract, retains the support of his beleaguered squad. “We are still nowhere near our level, but I still believe that we are playing good enough to get points and results,” he said.

“It's about remaining focused throughout the full 90 minutes, but we keep switching off at important times. We just need to get the focus right.

“We stick together, regroup and believe in ourselves after what we've achieved in the past. We keep believing in the process and the manager I'm sure if we do that we will get back to winning ways and get back to our level.”

City desperately need to find a winning formula ahead of Saturday's Premier League trip to Aston Villa.

Foden admitted he is baffled by City's remarkable fall from grace, with the damage to the team's morale clear to him in the dressing room after the derby defeat.

“I can't put a finger on what's going on,” Foden said.

“I thought the performance was more than good enough to get the result, but we come out with no points, and it seems to be the same story at the



moment. We just have to stick together. The changing room is obviously going to be down and sad at the moment, but we can't dwell on this too much.”

After facing Villa, Guardiola's team host Everton on December 26 before visiting Leicester in their last game of 2024.

With the busy festive season looming, Foden urged his teammates to stick together.

“It's about keeping our mentality strong throughout the whole 90 minutes and we're not doing that at the moment,” he said.

“We have to go again and show character to come back from this blip. It's not a time for moaning, it's about sticking together, remaining strong and going again. I'm positive we are going to come back.”