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FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP FINAL

Ancelotti faces crucial test as Real battle Pachuca in Lusail

THE REAL COACH TAD CAUTIOUS ABOUT KYLIAN MBAPPE'S AVAILABILITY FOR THE FINAL



FROM LEFT: Real Madrid players Fran Garcia, Luka Modric, Kylian Mbappe and Jude Bellingham train at the Lusail Stadium yesterday, on the eve of the FIFA Intercontinental Cup final against Mexican side Pachuca. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil



Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti speaks at a press conference in Lusail.



Pachuca coach Guillermo Almada.

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

Crisis is a word rarely associated with Real Madrid or their coach Carlo Ancelotti. However, the current season has tested that narrative. Following a 2-0 defeat at Liverpool in the Champions League in the last week of November, the Spanish giants have managed three wins and one draw in their last five matches across all competitions.

Currently sitting third in La Liga with 37 points from 17 games, Real trail leaders Barcelona by just one point, although Barca have played an additional game.

Their Champions League campaign, however, remains precarious, with automatic progression to the Round of 16 far from guaranteed.

The season began on a high note with Ancelotti steering Madrid to a UEFA Super Cup victory over Atalanta. But inconsistency has since plagued a side that welcomed French forward Kylian Mbappe into their ranks after last season's La Liga and Champions League triumphs. A humiliating 4-0 loss to Barcelona in October, disappointing performances against lower-tier league opponents, and Champions League defeats to Liverpool, AC Milan, and Lille have raised serious doubts about Ancelotti's tenure. Despite signing a contract extension last year amid speculation linking him to Brazil's national team, Ancelotti's future beyond this season could hinge on securing major silverware.

His current deal runs until 2026, but a trophyless campaign might spell the end of his second stint in Madrid.

Tonight, Ancelotti has a chance to breathe life into his team's floundering season when Madrid face Mexican side Pachuca in the FIFA Intercontinental Cup

final at Lusail Stadium. Victory over Pachuca would see Ancelotti become Real Madrid's most successful manager, surpassing the legendary Miguel Munoz, who won 14 titles during his tenure from 1960-1974.

Ahead of the final, the 65-year-old addressed the intense scrutiny surrounding his team, explaining that football doesn't always follow expectations, especially after such a successful campaign last year.

"As I said, I understand the criticism because Real Madrid won La Liga and the Champions League last season, then they signed the best player in the world in the summer. So everyone's thinking it's going to be a walk in the park. That's not how football works. Football is about fighting in every game, understanding you can't control everything all the time," he said.

"We can't control the results of the games. Sometimes you deserve to win and you don't; others, you deserve to lose but you win. I think that's the source of this criticism, the fact that this team had such a fantastic season last term and then signed the best player in the world. One plus one is two, but it's not always the way it goes in football," he added.

Ancelotti acknowledged the challenge posed by Pachuca, saying: "Every game is a potential banana skin. Pachuca are here because they've earned it, beating Botafogo and Al Ahly. We respect their quality. Finals are emotional, and we have to ensure the team is well-prepared."

Madrid have endured significant injury setbacks, with defenders Dani Carvajal and Eder Militao sidelined long-term due to ACL tears, and David Alaba yet to return from a similar injury. Mbappe, Ferland Mendy, and Eduardo Camavinga are also dealing with short-term fitness issues. Vinicius Junior is also part of the squad having made his return from injury in



Pachuca player's warm up before a training session at the Lusail Stadium yesterday.

Tuesday's Champions League win in Bergamo.

Mbappe, who has scored 12 goals this season, missed Madrid's 3-3 draw with Rayo Vallecano on Saturday due to a thigh problem but has been included in the squad for the final against Pachuca. The France international, who trained yesterday at the Lusail Stadium, has primarily been deployed as a centre-forward at Madrid and is yet to rediscover the form that

saw him score 44 goals for PSG last term.

Ancelotti expressed cautious optimism about Mbappe's availability. The Italian said: "It's simple: yesterday he trained well, he felt good. He did some sprints and everything went well. Today is an important training session, where we will evaluate his feelings and the risk. If he is fine, after speaking with the doctors, he will play. If there is a minimal risk, obviously not. But his feelings yesterday were very good.

We are optimistic." Pachuca's continental crown secured their place at the FIFA Derby of the Americas, which meant they still had two more games to win to reach this tournament's showpiece. The Mexican outfit did just that, with a 3-0 reverse of Botafogo on December 11 at the Stadium 974, followed up three days later by a dramatic penalty shootout victory over Al Ahly after the match had finished goalless at the same venue. Their unshakeable belief and undoubted quality has carried Pachuca this far and makes it a fascinating match-up with Real Madrid.

Pachuca coach Guillermo Almada highlighted the significance of the occasion, saying: "We're coming into the game with a heavy load of matches and we've played a lot in different tournaments. We've had very few holidays. We've been trying to inject intensity into our game by refreshing certain aspects. It's been going well for us and we hope to continue on this path."

He added: "It's a final, and no matter who we're up against... Real Madrid is one of the most recognised brands in the world. The most publicised. There are always rivals that provoke certain feelings, and without a doubt, a team of this calibre is one of them."

Almada also praised Ancelotti's accomplishments while expressing his intent to deny the Italian coach another trophy. "What can I say about him? Any compliments I could offer, he has more than earned. He is currently one of the greats, with an impressive record. We will try to make sure that he is not the manager with the most titles in history," he said.

"This is football. History doesn't play the game; the teams on the pitch do. We'll aim to defend our dream and compete against one of the world's most iconic clubs. Real Madrid is a great team, but we must focus on our strengths."

THIRD TEST

NZ bid farewell to Southee with big consolation win

THE TALL PACER TAKES TWO WICKETS IN HIS FINAL INNINGS TO FINISH HIS CAREER WITH 391

Reuters
Hamilton

New Zealand beat England by 423 runs yesterday to send Tim Southee out a winner on his home ground in his final Test and claim a consolation victory as one-sided as their losses in the first two matches of the series.

The Black Caps had come into the series with confidence high after their remarkable 3-0 sweep in India only to be completely outplayed in more familiar conditions in Christchurch and Wellington.

At Hamilton's Seddon Park, they rediscovered their mojo to claim their biggest ever win by runs and inflict the fourth-worst defeat by the same measure on the tourists inside four days.

Recalled spinner Mitchell Santner (4-85) was named Player of the Match after ripping through the England tail for a match tally of seven wickets to go with his 76 and 49 with the bat, but it was a proper team victory.

Kane Williamson could have claimed the honour for a second-innings 156 that took England's victory target well into world record areas, or Will O'Rourke for a dizzying spell of bowling on day one.

"It's obviously pleasing to finish in that fashion," said New Zealand captain Tom Latham.

"We certainly knew we weren't



New Zealand's Tim Southee gestures to the crowd as he leaves the field in his final Test after victory during day four of the third test against England at Seddon Park in Hamilton yesterday. (AFP)

quite at our best those first couple of games, but I think the way we came in here and were able to adapt to the surface was very pleasing."

England, so dominant in the first two Tests, crumbled to 234 all out after lunch on day four in their improbable chase for 658 runs to sweep the series.

Captain Ben Stokes, who is being treated for a left hamstring in-

jury sustained on Monday, did not bat in England's second innings to further hasten the conclusion.

The end came swiftly with England, who looked determined to go down fighting before the break, losing their last three wickets in 12 deliveries for the addition of three runs.

Southee failed to add to his extraordinary tally of 98 Test sixes on

Monday but he did take two wickets in his final innings to finish his career with 391, the second highest for a New Zealander behind Richard Hadlee. "We're certainly leaving one of the greats behind, but I'm sure he's got a bright future ahead of him, whatever that may be," added Latham, who was front and centre as Southee was honoured by Hadlee after the match.



England's Ben Stokes holds the series trophy at Seddon Park in Hamilton yesterday. (AFP)

IMPRESSIVE BETHELL

Although the tourists were disappointed to finish with such a crushing defeat, even yesterday there were some positives to go along with becoming the first England team to win a series in New Zealand since 2008.

Jacob Bethell continued his impressive start to Test cricket with a third half-century of the series before he holed out for 76 to become Southee's final Test victim.

Joe Root reached his 65th Test half-century before being dismissed for 54 by Santner but Harry Brook was unable to find the runs that were so instrumental to England's wins in the first two Test matches.

Named Player of the Series for

his two centuries and 350 runs, Brook faced six deliveries for one run before O'Rourke had him caught in the slips with the sort of steeping delivery that is fast becoming his trademark.

O'Rourke also dismissed Brook for a golden duck in the first innings during a spell that will have reassured local fans that the future of New Zealand seam bowling is secure despite the retirements of Southee and Trent Boult.

Brydon Carse, Gus Atkinson and Matthew Potts did the same over the series for England fans still mourning the departure of James Anderson and Stuart Broad.

Atkinson blasted 43 off 41 balls with seven fours and one six in a defiant rearguard yesterday but once he departed with a miscued slog to deep cover, the end was not long in coming.

"We want to come out and win every game that we play," said Stokes.

"It's obviously disappointing as a team to finish like we have done but ... the first two Test matches is where it really counted for us, and that's where we played our best cricket."

BRIEF SCORES (Third Test, Day 4)
New Zealand 347 (Santner 76, Latham 63, Potts 4-90) **and 453** (Williamson 156, Young 60, Mitchell 60) **beat England 143** (Henry 4-48, Santner 3-7, O'Rourke 3-33) **and 234** (Bethell 76, Root 54, Santner 4-85) **by 423 runs**

SPOTLIGHT

Australia frustrated as India avoid follow-on

Reuters
Brisbane

Jasprit Bumrah and Akash Deep mounted a defiant 10th wicket stand to help India avoid the follow-on on day four of the third Test in Brisbane yesterday as Australia's slight hopes of victory were further diminished by an injury to Josh Hazlewood.

Opener KL Rahul and recalled all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja also scored brave fifties as India dug deep on another rain-blighted day at the Gabba.

With a gloom falling over the stadium, Deep sent a thick edge off Pat Cummins flying over a leaping fielder at gully for four runs to push India to safety, sparking celebrations among teammates watching in the stands.

Number 11 Deep smashed the Australia captain for six two balls later with a touch of arrogance, then blocked another delivery before stumps were called due to failing light.

Deep was unbeaten on 27, with Bumrah on 10, the tailenders having pushed India to 252 for nine, still 193 runs behind Australia's first innings 445.

Their unbroken 39-run partnership has all but saved India from defeat and a 2-1 deficit in the five-Test series, with Australia forced to bat again and left with little time to take another 10 wickets.

The hosts' task has been made tougher with a calf injury to fast bowler Hazlewood, who has been ruled out of the remainder of the test and is expected to miss the rest of the five-match series.

"It was not just the runs they got but the heart they showed. It will give us as a group a lot of confidence," Rahul said of the Deep-Bumrah rearguard.

"When it mattered they played some very exciting shots. "It is really good to see that they could get that partnership and avoid the follow-on."

"It makes a huge difference knowing that there is a bit of rain around. We needed to find a way to stay in the game. Bumrah and Akash did that. It was a good way to end the day for us."

India had resumed on 201 for seven after tea, still 45 runs short of avoiding the follow-on.

It looked bleak for them when Jadeja holed out with a pull-shot



Australia's captain Pat Cummins (left) looks on as Marnus Labuschagne (right) attempts the run out of India's Mohammed Siraj on day four of the third Test at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)



India's Ravindra Jadeja hooks Australia's captain Pat Cummins on day four of the third Test at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)

off Cummins to fall for 77, with Mitchell Marsh bolting in from deep square leg to take a fine, low catch.

Mitchell Starc had earlier done for Mohammed Siraj, the number nine caught behind for one.

But with Hazlewood out of commission and spinner Nathan

Lyon ineffective, a fatigued Starc and Cummins were unable to grab the last wicket.

STUNNING CATCH

Rain breaks continuously sapped Australia's momentum but Cummins found time to take the wicket of Nitish Kumar Reddy for 16

before tea when the all-rounder chopped onto his stumps.

That broke a patient 53-run stand with Jadeja, who was crucial to India avoiding the follow-on.

As was Rahul. Steve Smith dropped Rahul on 33 with the first ball of the morning when Cummins had the opening edge to the slips.

Rahul went on to score 84 before Smith redeemed himself with a stunning catch at slip to deny him a century, leaping to his right to pluck a one-hander off Lyon's bowling.

Though Australia have dominated the rain-hit Test, time will most likely deny the hosts.

Whichever way the match goes, India captain Rohit Sharma will face more scrutiny after another failure with the bat.

He was caught behind for 10 in the morning, nicking fast bowler Cummins with a lead-footed drive after being softened up by a bouncer from the Australian skipper.

Rohit has 19 runs from his three innings in the series, having missed India's victory in Perth while caring for his newborn son.

BRIEF SCORES (Third Test, Day 4)
India 252 for 9 (Rahul 84, Jadeja 77, Cummins 4-80, Starc 3-83) **trail Australia 445 by 193 runs**

FOCUS

Ayub and Agha guide Pakistan to fighting win



Pakistan's Saim Ayub (left) celebrates after scoring a century with teammate Salman Ali Agha during the first one day international against South Africa at The Boland Oval in Paarl yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Paarl

Pakistan's exciting opener Saim Ayub gave a vivid display of his prodigious talent with a classy century yesterday to lead his team to a closely fought three-wicket win over South Africa in the first of their three One Day Internationals.

The 22-year-old Ayub hit his second ton in his seventh ODI with an elegant 109 off 119 balls to lay the foundation for the win as Pakistan scored 242-7 with three balls to spare in reply to South Africa's 239-9 in their 50 overs at Boland Park in Paarl.

A fifth wicket stand of 141 runs off 133 balls for the fifth wicket with Salman Ali Agha turned the game in Pakistan's favour as they struggled initially to score and fell behind the required run rate as South Africa's bowlers held early sway.

Saim battered South Africa quick Ottniel Baartman for 17 runs in four balls in the 35th over to kick start the chase and offer Pakistan sight of the finish line.

Ayub, who struck 10 fours and three sixes, holed out to a catch at deep fine leg off Kagiso Rabada, with 39 runs needed and eight overs remaining.

Two more wickets then fell quickly to put the brakes on Pakistan's march, and offered home fans hope of an unlikely comeback, but Salman's unbeaten 82 saw Pakistan home in a close finish.

South Africa, who won the toss and chose to bat, slumped from 70-0 to 88-4 as part-time off-spinner Salman ran through their top order, finishing with 4-32 in eight overs.

The home side had Heinrich Klaasen to thank for being able to post a competitive total as he hit 86 from 97 balls to steady the innings in an impressive 73-run partnership for the fifth wicket with captain Aiden Markram, who scored 35.

The second ODI is at Newlands in Cape Town tomorrow.

BRIEF SCORES
South Africa 239 for 9 (Klaasen 86, Agha 4-32, Abrar 2-32) **lost to Pakistan 242 for 7** (Ayub 109, Agha 82 not out, Baartman 2 fo3 37) **by three wickets**

FIA MIDDLE EAST RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

Qatar International Rally to be held from February 6-8

Concessions on offer to both international and GCC crews

Agencies
Lusail

The Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has unveiled the itinerary and format for the 2025 Qatar International Rally. The event will return to being the second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) and takes place on February 6-8.

After a year's absence from the international rallying calendar, the Oman International Rally will kick-start the regional rally series on January 23-25 with the Lusail-based Qatar event being followed by a new event in Saudi Arabia (May 1-3), Jordan Rally (May 22-24), Rally of Lebanon (September 7-9) and the finale in Cyprus (October 4-6).

A three-day format for the Qatar International Rally will see competitors tackle 13 timed special stages and 212.64 competitive kilometres in a route of 627.19km.

Scrutineering facilities will be based at the Lusail International Circuit with media and administration based out of QMMF's offices. Administration checks will take place on Tuesday, February 4 with scrutineering set for the afternoon of February 5th and the morning of February 6.

The pre-event press conference (17.30hrs) and ceremonial start (18.00hrs) will then precede the opening 4.36km asphalt special stage, starting at 19.00hrs on February 6.

The northern deserts will then host two days of special stage action with two loops of three special stages scheduled for both Friday, February 7 and Saturday, February 8. The post-event press conference, prize giving and ceremonial finish will then wrap up proceedings from 18.30hrs onwards on Saturday.

Runs through the Waab Al Mashrab, Al Waab and Al Khor stages to the north of Doha will



Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah in action during the 2024 Qatar International Rally.

offer the first desert gravel challenges to competitors on February 7. The three tests will be repeated in the afternoon following a late morning return to the Lusail International Circuit for a regroup and service break.

The final morning will see competitors tackle passes through the Umm Birka, Ras Laffan and Al Thakhira stages. The three will be repeated in the afternoon after another return to Lusail. The second run through the Al Thakhira stage of 13.98km will also act as the event's Power Stage finale with additional championship points available.

This year's Qatar International Rally will be held under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai, senior committee member Abdulrazaq al-Kuwari and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro al-Hamad. Portugal's Pedro Almeida will again work as the Clerk of the Course alongside his deputy Rashid al-Sulaiti.

"We have retained the usual format, with a super special stage on Thursday and two loops of three stages on Friday and Saturday," said QMMF Executive Director Amro al-Hamad. "The last few events have seen a very strong entry and some fantastic competition throughout the field. We hope that our new-look event in 2025 will be no exception."

Pedro Almeida added: "Even though we have kept the stage names, all the stages have been partially modified with the inclusion of new routes. There are three new kilometres in the Al Waab stage and five in Umm Birka. We have also changed the order for the running of the Al Khor and Umm Birka stages. This gives us a better balance between the competitive distances over the two days."

Supplementary regulations and further details are available from www.qmmf.com, with the first closing date for entries set for Wednesday, January 8. A final cut-

off has been set for Wednesday, January 22.

The QMMF has also announced a series of generous concessions for international and GCC competitors. International entrants will be given a \$6,000 shipping allowance, with GCC teams receiving \$3,000, subject to all vehicles passing scrutineering and administrative checks.

In addition, the QMMF will arrange a flight ticket allowance for both driver and co-driver and supply one twin room with breakfast for five nights, again subject to vehicles passing scrutineering and administrative checks. Further details are available in the supplementary regulations.

Start prizes will also be awarded: entrants who pass scrutineering and administrative checks and enter before the first cut-off date will receive QR5000 and QR4000 will be awarded to starters who enter after the early cut-off and before January 22.

FOOTBALL

Arsenal cup glory could be springboard for more trophies: Arteta

AFP
London

Mikel Arteta said yesterday winning the League Cup could be a launchpad for more silverware as he celebrates five years in charge at Arsenal this week.

The Spaniard won the FA Cup in his first season in charge, in 2020, but the trophy cupboard has been bare since then despite some near misses.

Arsenal, Premier League runners-up for the past two seasons, are currently third in the English top-flight, six points behind leaders Liverpool having played a game more.

Today they host Crystal Palace in the quarter-finals of the League Cup, three days before a match against the same opposition in the league.

Arteta said he was hungry for more silverware including "the big ones", adding a cup run builds momentum.

"I fully believe in that, the fact you are winning, you get into the next round of the competition, it builds, it creates something

different around the team, that's why these kind of games are really, really important," he said.

The 42-year-old said winning the League Cup would be a huge shot in the arm for the club, who have not won the Premier League since 2004.

"It brings belief, trust, positive energy," he said.

"Touching a cup, beating someone in the semi-final, beating someone in the final, it generates that energy."

"And I think it creates that right path to go and do something else, especially because of the timing and when the competition is played in this country, it gets the momentum going."

The League Cup final will be held at Wembley on March 16 next year.

Arteta, appointed as Arsenal boss in December 2019, said he would "decide the best team to win it" when asked about the potential for wholesale changes in today's fixture.

"We'll decide that in the morning in relation to how the squad is, obviously the relevance of the match and where we are in the quarter-finals, it becomes a very important match," he said.

CHELSEA'S MUDRYK FAILS DRUGS TEST: PREMIER LEAGUE CLUB

Chelsea forward Mykhailo Mudryk has failed a doping test, the Premier League club said yesterday, as reports stated the Ukraine international has been provisionally suspended.

The Blues said they were notified by the Football Association of an "adverse finding" in a urine sample provided by the 23-year-old winger.

"Chelsea Football Club can confirm that the Football Association recently contacted our player, Mykhailo Mudryk, concerning an adverse finding in a routine urine test," a club statement said.

"Both the club and Mykhailo fully support the FA's testing programme and all our players, including Mykhailo, are regularly tested. Mykhailo has confirmed categorically that he has never knowingly used any banned substances. Both Mykhailo and the Club will now work with the relevant authorities to establish what has caused the adverse finding." Mudryk issued a statement via

his Instagram account. "I can confirm that I have been notified that a sample I provided to the FA contained a banned substance," it said. "This has come as a complete shock as I have never knowingly used any banned substances or broken any rules, and am working closely with my team to investigate how this could have happened."

"I know that I have not done anything wrong and remain hopeful that I will be back on the pitch soon. I cannot say any more now due to the confidentiality of the process, but I will as soon as I can."

Athletes are warned on the UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) website that they face a ban of four years if it is found a banned substance was taken intentionally. If the violation involved a specified substance or a contaminated product, and the athlete can demonstrate they had no significant fault, ineligibility may range from two years to a reprimand, depending on the level of fault.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar's padel team wins bronze at Arabian Gulf Cup in Kuwait

Agencies
Doha

Qatar's padel team won the bronze medal at the 2024 Arabian Gulf Cup held in Kuwait with the participation of hosts Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Oman.

The Qatar team beat Bahrain 2-0 in the third-place match to claim the bronze medal. Qatar's team comprised of Mohammed Saadoun al-Kuwari, Jabr Noah, Abdullah

Haji, Hassan Wali, Mohammed al-Khenji, Rayan al-Jafari, Mishari Nawaf, in addition to Omar Hassan and Mohammed Abdullah. Khalid al-Khalifi, Board Member of the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Padel and Badminton Federation and Head of the National Teams Committee, praised the achievements of the Qatar padel team players at the championship and thanked them for their outstanding performance throughout.

He said: "Our players showed a good level of performance and high level of sportsmanship."

Al-Khelaiifi stressed that this achievement represents an important step towards improving the level of the game in Qatar, supporting players and providing them with everything they need to achieve more success and development in the future. He noted the importance of the Gulf events in developing the game in the region, and that the Arabian Gulf Padel Cup contributes significantly to raising the level of competitiveness among players and providing an ideal environment for gaining experience and enhancing skills.



Kyrgios to team up with Djokovic for Brisbane International doubles

Record 24-times Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic will team up with former Wimbledon finalist Nick Kyrgios to play doubles at the Brisbane International, the Australian said.

The pair, who have developed a friendship after once being at loggerheads when Kyrgios labelled Djokovic "boneheaded" and a "tool", will use the Dec 29-Jan 5 ATP 250 event as a warm-up for next month's Australian Open.

Djokovic and Kyrgios have faced each other three times on the ATP Tour, with the Australian winning the first two encounters in 2017 before losing in four sets in the 2022 Wimbledon final. In a post on Insta-

gram on Monday, Kyrgios shared a picture of their meeting at Wimbledon, writing: "Doubles at Brisbane. See y'all there."

Organisers of the Brisbane International did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment. Kyrgios, who is also scheduled to play in the Dec 19-22 World Tennis League exhibition event in Abu Dhabi, has played just one singles tour match in the last two years due to knee, foot and wrist injuries. He is set to make his competitive singles return in Brisbane and will play at the Australian Open with a protected ranking of 21st, where he will also be reunited with Thanasi Kokkinakis in the men's doubles.

FOCUS

Slot set to rest some Liverpool stars for League Cup clash

AFP
Liverpool

Arne Slot says he is not surprised that Liverpool are flying on all fronts just months after he replaced Jurgen Klopp as he prepares to rest some stars for their League Cup quarter-final against Southampton.

The Reds are top of the Premier League and the Champions League, with 19 wins in 23 games in all competitions so far.

Slot said at yesterday's pre-match press conference that it was "normal for Liverpool to be fighting for every trophy and to be for a long time in every cup".

"This happened last season when this club won this competition," he said. "So I am not surprised that with the quality we have we are competing at this moment for these three trophies, and the fourth one (the FA Cup) is starting in January."

The Dutch manager, short of fit defenders, is set to rotate his players for today's tie as he plans for a trip to Tottenham in the Premier League at the weekend. He does not expect forward Diogo Jota, who scored as a substitute on his return from injury against Fulham, will be fit enough to start but Federico Chiesa could get some minutes for the first time since September. Caoimhin Kelleher will be back in goal, having recently impressed while deputising for Alisson Becker during his lay-off, and defender Kostas Tsimikas is nearing a return.

"I'm aware of the fact that we have only four defenders available and probably the ones that have started a lot of times will



not play 90 minutes for sure and maybe not even at all," said Slot.

"So it's going to be either academy players that are going to get playing time or it's going to be players that nobody would expect to see in the last line that are going to play in the last line tomorrow."

Slot must sit in the stands for Wednesday's match on the south coast after collecting a third

booking of the season against Fulham. The former Feyenoord boss is calmer on the sidelines than the expressive Klopp but he admitted he has "fire" inside him.

"I don't always think you have to show it to have that fire," he said. "I think it's clear that if you work at a club like this or around the world at a top club you do have this fire inside you that you want to win every game."

Wolves 'agree deal' to bring in Pereira as new boss

Wolverhampton Wanderers have agreed a deal for Vitor Pereira to become their new manager following the sacking of Gary O'Neil, according to reports yesterday. The BBC said the struggling Premier League club would pay around 1mn euros (\$1mn) to bring the boss of Saudi Pro League club Al Shabab to the English top flight. According to Sky, personal terms have been agreed and the 56-year-old is expected to sign a one-and-a-half year contract. He is understood to be flying to England on Tuesday, with official confirmation expected in the next 24 hours.

The widely travelled coach was close to replacing Rafael Benitez as Everton manager in 2022. During an extensive managerial career Pereira has won two Primeira Liga titles with Porto and the Greek Super League with Olympiakos. Wolves travel to face fellow-strugglers Leicester on Sunday - five points ahead of them in the table. O'Neil was sacked after Saturday's defeat - Wolves' fourth in a row - left them second bottom of the Premier League with nine points from 16 games.

O'Neil was appointed in August 2023 following the departure of Julen Lopetegui and signed a new four-year deal with the club in August this year.

Minister of Sports, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs attend FIFA Awards



Minister of Sports and Youth HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani met FIFA President Gianni Infantino during the Aspire Academy's 20th Anniversary celebration gala dinner and The Best FIFA Football Awards 2024 ceremony in Doha yesterday.



Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi speaks to Real Madrid president Florentino Perez during the Best FIFA Football Awards 2024 ceremony at Aspire Academy. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Aspire celebrates two decades of sporting excellence

Since its inception in 2004, Aspire has become one of the foremost academies

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Aspire Academy celebrated its 20-year anniversary yesterday, alongside hosting The Best FIFA Football Awards. Held under the patronage of HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, the Minister of Sports and Youth, the event was attended by FIFA President Gianni Infantino and Real Madrid chief Florentino Perez.

Since its inception in 2004, Aspire Academy has become one of the foremost national sports academies in the world. The Academy, currently home to 273 student-athletes across various sporting programmes, marked the occasion with a series of events designed to showcase Aspire Academy's commitment to continuing its mission of developing Qatar's next generation of sporting champions.

At the same time, Aspire reflected on the Academy's remarkable journey since its establishment and the role it has played in shaping Qatar's current and future champions. Aspire Academy has achieved unprecedented success in developing world-class athletes and contributing to Qatar's proud sporting legacy, with its graduates achieving remarkable feats across multiple disciplines. The impact of the Academy has been on full display for two decades, with graduates achieving many individual medals at several Olympic Games, World Championships, Asian Championships and three continental titles in football.

These, and the many other proud achievements of Aspire's 642 graduates, are a testament to Aspire Academy's deep impact in fostering sporting talent over the past 20 years. Aspire Academy's Director General, Ivan Bravo, reflected on the significance of the 20th anniversary as he paid tribute to everyone working at the Academy and insisted that it is not resting on its laurels and is always learning and striving to improve.

"Twenty years is an incredible milestone for us privileged ones who are here on a daily basis, who love this place, and who have been given the opportunity to contribute to the growth of this institution that we all hold dear," he said.

"Visitors are immediately struck by the facilities that we have here and how the place is, but we always stress one thing: yes, the facilities are incredible, and there is



A glimpse of Aspire Academy's 20th anniversary celebration yesterday.

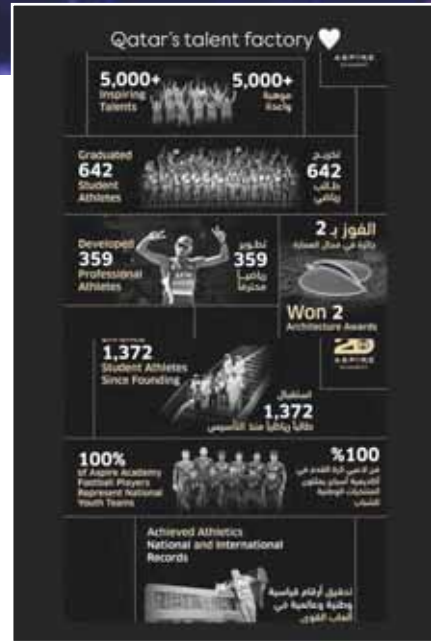
nothing quite like this anywhere else in the world, but the people here are the most important part of this project. It centres on the student-athletes but includes all of those people around them who help them develop in all sorts of areas, not just physical but mental and mindset."

Bravo continued: "Excellence is not something you have; it is something you have to pursue. You must feel excellence is always ahead of you, and you may well never get to it. Our founder, His Highness Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani, didn't just want to produce top-class sportsmen but also prepare them for life in other areas, and so their education was another key part of his vision - champions in sport and in life. His Highness Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani is still constantly following up about how we can take it (Aspire Academy) to the next level without being complacent. He also al-

ways asks how we are keeping aware of the latest developments?"

"We are still trying to stay ahead of the curve as we target the 2030 Asian Games and, of course, for the senior national football team to qualify for the World Cup, and we have an Asian Cup in 2027. We continue to believe that if we continue to be humble and hungry collectively, this Academy will celebrate even more success when it reaches its 40th anniversary."

Currently nurturing 273 student-athletes across various sports programmes, the Academy continues to maintain its high standards of both athletic and academic excellence, as evidenced by its CIS (Council of International Schools) accreditation status, which has been in place since 2016. To date, the Academy has produced 642 graduates, many of whom have gone on to represent Qatar in international competitions.



ASPIRE'S SUCCESS STORY



Mutaz Barshim, Aspire Academy's high jumper, has won multiple Olympic medals for Qatar, including silver in London 2012 and Rio 2016, gold in Tokyo 2020 and bronze in Paris 2024.

Akram Afif, Aspire Academy's football graduate, has twice been crowned best player in Asia (2019 and 2023), just the third player in history to win the award twice.

Fellow Aspire Academy football graduate Abdelkarim Hassan was named best player in Asia in 2018, contributing to the legacy and impact of the Academy in Asian football.

70% of the squad of the Qatar team which competed at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and won the 2019 AFC Asian Cup was developed at Aspire Academy.

Aspire Academy graduate Almoez Ali broke the 23-year-old record held by Ali Daei of Iran, scoring nine goals at the 2019 AFC Asian Cup, which also made him the tournament's top scorer and MVP.

Aspire Academy student-athlete Hashim Ali was the youngest player to have ever scored at an AFC U23 Championship. By the time he scored for Qatar against Palestine on 19 January 2018, he was 17 years, 5 months, and 2 days old.

During the 2018 Asian U23 Championship, the Qatar National Team, composed of 95% Aspire Academy current and graduate players, finished 3rd in Asia from 47 member nations.

Totally comprised of Aspire Academy student-athletes, Qatar's U19 National Team won the 2014 Asian U19 Championship in Myanmar and thereby qualified for the 2015 FIFA U20 World Cup. Qatar's Ahmed Moein received the Player of the Tournament Award, and he was awarded "Asian Young Footballer of the Year" in the following year.

Aspire Academy's Owaab Barrow won gold in the 110m Hurdles event at the Youth Olympics, Buenos Aires 2018.

World Junior medals were also claimed by Aspire Academy's student-athletes, including Bassem Hemeida, winning Silver at the 400m hurdles event in Tampere 2018, and Moaz Ibrahim, winning gold at the Discus throw event in Bydgoszcz 2016.

FOCUS

Vinicius, Bonmati named FIFA best players of the year



Vinicius Junior of Real Madrid poses with The Best FIFA Men's Player Award at Aspire Academy in Doha yesterday. PICTURE: FIFA

Reuters
Doha

Brazil and Real Madrid forward Vinicius Jr was named FIFA men's player of the year at the Aspire Academy in Doha yesterday, with Spain and Barcelona midfielder Aitana Bonmati winning the women's award for the second year in a row.

Vinicius scored 24 goals in 39 appearances across all competitions to help Real Madrid clinch the La Liga and Champions League double, and he also netted in their Champions League final win over Borussia Dortmund. The Brazilian won the award ahead of Spain and Manchester City midfielder Rodri and his teammate at Real, England's Jude Bellingham.

The 24-year-old, who narrowly missed out on the Ballon d'Or to Rodri in October, was in Doha to collect the award, with Real in Qatar for today's FIFA Intercontinental Cup

final against Mexico's Pachuca. "It seemed impossible when I played barefoot in the streets of Sao Goncalo and now I'm here," Vinicius said.

Bonmati retained the FIFA women's player of the year award ahead of Zambia's Barbra Banda and Norway's Caroline Graham Hansen, having also won the women's Ballon d'Or for the second consecutive year in October.

The 26-year-old helped her club to a domestic treble last season in a campaign in which Barca also retained the Champions League, and Bonmati scored in the semi-final and final when Spain won the Nations League in February. "I'm very grateful for this award, but I always say that this is a team effort, with a Barca that won everything and the national team," Bonmati said.

Real Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti won the best men's coach award, after the Italian led his club to the league and Champions League double last season. "I want to share this with the

club, with my president and with my players, those of the best club in the world," Ancelotti said.

Emma Hayes won the best women's coach award, after taking the US to the gold medal at this year's Olympic Games having taken Chelsea to the WSL title last season, her fifth successive league win with the club.

Alejandro Garnacho won the Puskas Award, for best goal of the year for the Argentine winger's strike for Manchester United against Everton in the Premier League in November last year.

Brazil's Marta won the inaugural Marta Award, for the best goal in women's football, taking the prize named in her honour for her goal against Jamaica in June of this year.

The best women's goalkeeper award went to American Alyssa Naeher of the Chicago Red Stars while Emiliano Martinez of Argentina and Aston Villa took the men's award.