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CRICKET

India 'all-time great' Ashwin retires from international cricket

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FOOTBALL

Real outclass Pachuca to clinch Intercontinental Cup

Mbappe and Vinicius scored a goal each, with Rodrygo adding another after a spectacular solo effort



Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior takes a selfie with teammates and the trophy after winning the Intercontinental Cup at the Lusail Stadium yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil



Carlo Ancelotti (centre) became the most decorated coach in Real Madrid's history with his 15th title, surpassing the 14 trophies won by Miguel Munoz, who managed the Spanish powerhouse in the 1960s and '70s.



Vinicius gets the ball past Pachuca's goalkeeper Carlos Moreno.

come the best player in the world. I'm always happy for my friend's achievements, especially after seeing his work every day."

Pachuca, winners of the Concacaf Champions Cup, defeated CAF Champions League holders Al Ahly of Egypt to reach the final. Real, however, did not take part in the earlier rounds. Pachuca coach Guillermo Almada admitted his side failed to capitalise on their opportunities and paid the price. "We had our chances, but their efficiency was decisive. We had opportunities and couldn't capitalize on them. Many young players gained their first international experience throughout the tournament. It was an amazing experience. Of course, we wanted to win the final, but the effort was outstanding," Almada said.



Kylian Mbappe poses with the trophy.

This is the first edition of the FIFA-backed Intercontinental Cup, which broadly maintains the format of the previous Club World Cup. The latter is being expanded to include 32 teams in 2025 and will now be played every four years. A past version of the Intercontinental Cup ran from 1960 to 2004, involving the champions of Europe and South America.

Madrid are set to play Pachuca again at next year's Club World Cup in the United States, alongside an Al Hilal team featuring Neymar and Red Bull Salzburg. Carlo Ancelotti's side will host Sevilla in La Liga on Sunday in their final game of the year. They are scheduled to return to the Middle East in early January for the four-team Spanish Super Cup in Saudi Arabia.

By **Sahan Bidappa**
Doha

Despite Real Madrid's struggles in recent times, this was a result that was never in doubt. The Spanish giants brushed past Mexican side Pachuca to clinch the Intercontinental Cup title at Lusail Stadium last night.

Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Jr scored a goal each, with Rodrygo adding another after a spectacular solo effort, as Real capped off an exceptional year with yet another title. Against underdogs Pachuca, Real faced an opponent well below their level. Still, as coach Carlo Ancelotti had warned on the eve of the match: "Every game is a trap, particularly the Cup ones."

Madrid started off slow, but once they warmed up on a cold night, the La Liga and Champions League holders ran away with the title – their ninth global trophy, including three in the original Intercontinental Cup format and five FIFA Club World Cups. Ancelotti, who has been under pressure for his team's underwhelming performances this season, became the most decorated coach in Real Madrid's history with his 15th title, surpassing the 14 trophies won by Miguel Munoz, who managed the Spanish powerhouse in the 1960s and '70s.

"I am very happy, it is natural," the 65-year-old Ancelotti said. "We did the things we prepared, and this made the difference. Everyone played a good match. I am very happy. It was a match that, in the middle of the season, could have caused

problems, and instead, we deservedly won it. We didn't get off to a good start but finished well, showing great attitude."

The Italian coach will hope that last night's victory helps regroup his side, which has struggled defensively this season – not least due to the absence of defenders Dani Carvajal and Eder Militao, both sidelined long-term with ACL tears. 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.

Ancelotti will also be pleased with the performances of Mbappe and Vinicius, who combined for the opening goal. The French star, who missed Madrid's 3-3 draw with Rayo Vallecano on Saturday due to a thigh problem, played 62 minutes without any visible discomfort. Meanwhile, Vinicius played the full match, having returned from injury during Tuesday's Champions League win in Bergamo.

Exactly two years to the day after his iconic hat-trick in the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 final at the same venue – which France lost to Argentina on penalties – Mbappe opened the scoring with a clinical finish. Jude Bellingham's perfectly timed pass set up Vinicius, who mesmerised with dazzling footwork to evade Pachuca goalkeeper Carlos Moreno. The Brazilian then squared the ball to Mbappe, who calmly slotted it into an empty net.

Pachuca had started the game with

promise, as Luis Rodríguez tested Thibaut Courtois early on with a powerful drive, but the Belgian goalkeeper was equal to the task. Madrid gradually took control, and Mbappe nearly doubled the lead with a fierce 20-yard shot that narrowly missed the target.

The European champions doubled their advantage early in the second half when Rodrygo unleashed a sublime curling effort from the edge of the box in the 52nd minute. A brief VAR review followed to determine whether Bellingham, standing in an offside position, interfered with the play. The referee deemed otherwise, allowing the goal to stand.

Pachuca, to their credit, refused to fold under pressure. Captain Salomon Rondon came close to reducing the deficit twice – first with a perfectly struck free-kick saved by Courtois and then with a header that skimmed just over the bar.

Real Madrid, however, ensured victory was beyond doubt in the closing stages. Vinicius, fresh off being named The Best FIFA Men's Player after missing out on the Ballon d'Or, converted an 84th-minute penalty after Oussama Idrissi fouled Lucas Vazquez in the box.

Rodrygo had special praise for Vinicius, calling his countryman "an example of resilience." He said: "I've been following Vini since he started in Brazil. We never played against each other in the professional league, only with youth teams," said the forward. "We've always talked about all the difficulties he had in the beginning. He is an example of resilience, for everything he went through, and now he has be-



Drummers perform before the start of the match at the Lusail Stadium.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Ashwin retires from international cricket

AFP
Brisbane, Australia

India's off-spinning great Ravichandran Ashwin announced his immediate retirement from international cricket following the third Test against Australia in Brisbane yesterday.

The 38-year-old took 537 wickets in his 106 Tests at an average of 24.00, leaving him seventh on the all-time list and second only to Anil Kumble (619) for his country.

He also played 116 one-day and 65 Twenty20 internationals.

"This will be my last day as an Indian cricketer in all formats at an international level," Ashwin said at the post match press conference alongside skipper Rohit Sharma after the match was drawn.

"I feel there's a little bit of punch left in me as a cricketer, but I'd like to express that, showcase that, in club-level cricket."

He was not selected for Brisbane with his final Test coming in Adelaide last week where he took 1-53.

"I've had a lot of fun. I have made a lot of memories alongside Rohit and several of my teammates," he added. "Obviously there are a lot of people to thank, but I will be failing in my duties if I didn't thank the BCCI and fellow teammates."

Rohit said Ashwin had decided to call it a day during the Perth Test but he had persuaded him to stay on for Adelaide.

However, he decided during this Test that his time as an international cricketer was over.

"As a team we have to respect that decision," Rohit said. "He was very sure about what he wanted to do and the team has complete backing of his thought process."

"He's had so many big moments with the Indian team and he's been a big match-winner for us. He's allowed to make these decisions, and if it is now, so be it."

Australian captain Pat Cummins said Ashwin had been a fierce competitor.

"He's obviously been a fantastic player all around the world - there aren't that many finger spinners that have that kind of longevity," Cummins said. "He'll go down as one of the all-time greats."

"There's a massive respect from our change room for the career that he's had."

Ashwin made his Test debut in 2011 against the West Indies and was also handy with the bat, scoring 3,503 runs with six centuries and 14 fifties.

India's go-to bowler was central to their Test dominance in the last decade with his ability to outfox top batsmen.

Described as an "all-time great" by Rohit, Ashwin earlier this year became only the ninth bowler to reach 500 Test wickets.

Ashwin walked into the sunset after the drawn third Test yesterday.

He was visibly emotional as he was hugged by Virat Kohli in the dressing room.

India head coach Gautam Gambhir paid tribute to a player he said would be greatly missed.

"The privilege of seeing you grow from a young bowler to a legend of modern cricket is something that I wouldn't trade for the world," Gambhir wrote on social media.

Teammate Kohli said he had "enjoyed



This picture taken on December 1, 2024 shows India's spin bowler Ravichandran Ashwin (right) attending a warm-up session with teammate Jasprit Bumrah at Manuka Oval in Canberra yesterday. (AFP)

every bit of the journey" with the bowler.

"Your skill and match-winning contributions to Indian cricket are second to none and you will always be remembered as a legend of Indian cricket," Kohli said.

Ashwin, who is from the southern city of Chennai, started out as an IT engineer after graduating from university and is known for his precision.

The innovative Ashwin always worked on his craft, even after his skill and guile led to a glittering international career. He reached the landmark of 500 wick-

ets in the third Test against England in February at Rajkot when he dismissed Zak Crawley.

A master craftsman, Ashwin employed the full width of the crease as he delivered his off-spin from multiple angles with varying pace.

He also had a deceptive "arm ball" that goes straight on, and worked to develop a "carrom ball" that goes the other way, delivered using his knuckles.

But his sometimes blunt, no-nonsense attitude has led to the occasional contro-

versy, such as when inflicting "Mankad" runouts at the non-striker's end.

Ashwin was part of India's 2011 50-over World Cup title win at home and then the 2013 Champions Trophy, but it was three years later that he matured as a top-level bowler.

He took 48 wickets in eight Tests and had 27 victims in 19 Twenty20 matches in the 2015-16 season to be named the ICC cricketer of the year.

Ashwin ended with 37 five-wicket Test hauls to his name, with a best of 7-59.

Ashwin enjoyed a healthy rivalry with his Australia counterpart Nathan Lyon, who has 533 Test wickets in 132 matches.

"He's a world-class bowler and somebody I have watched closely from the start of his career," Lyon said.

Ashwin started off as a batsman who bowled medium-pace before switching to off-spin, and has called himself an "accidental spinner".

"I wanted to be a batter all along. Life gave me a chance," he once said.

Ashwin has recounted how he first got the chance to shine as a spinner while playing for Chennai Super Kings in the IPL.

All-time top wicket-taker Muttiah Muralitharan had declined to use the new ball so it was given to him instead - and the rest was history. The all-rounder also has 3,503 Test runs - including six centuries - from playing in the middle- and lower-order, with a career-high of 124. He formed a potent spin partnership with Ravindra Jadeja, becoming the most successful pair for India in Tests.

THIRD TEST

A damp squib as Brisbane Test ends in a draw

'IT FELT LIKE WE'RE RIGHT AHEAD OF THE GAME FOR ALL OF IT'

Reuters
Brisbane

The third Test between Australia and India in Brisbane ended in a draw after storms halted the hosts' bid for an unlikely win yesterday to leave the series locked 1-1.

Early tea was taken on the final day at the Gabba because of bad light with India 8-0 having been set a target of 275 for victory, after Australia declared on 89-7.

But a big storm swept over the ground during the break and play was abandoned, with the five-Test series now heading to Melbourne and then Sydney.

The draw badly hurts India's chances of making the final of the World Test Championship at Lord's next year, with Australia now likely to defend their title against South Africa.

"Unfortunately a lot of rain, which you can't do anything about, but really happy with how the guys played," said Australia skipper Pat Cummins.

"To put 450 (first innings) on is a huge total and then it felt like we're right ahead of the game for all of it."

With rain causing regular disruptions throughout the Test, the chance of a result other than a draw looked to have disappeared when India avoided the follow-on late on Tuesday.

"I mean, we'll take that obviously, to have interruptions like that wasn't great," said India skipper Rohit Sharma.

"But going to Melbourne with one-all pretty much gives us that confidence that we can go out there and try and pull things towards us."

After losing most of the morning session, Australia began their second innings after lunch showing no signs of an attacking approach. But once under-pressure openers Usman Khawaja and Nathan McSweeney fell, along with the equally out-of-form Marnus Labuschagne, the Australian approach seemed to change as the batsmen started to attack every ball.

Khawaja, who turned 38 yesterday, came into the second innings after a run of poor form which has seen him not score a century since June 2023.

He spanked two fours from the first over he faced from Mohammed Siraj but it took the talis-



Australia's captain Pat Cummins (right) leads his team off the ground due to a rain delay on day five of the third Test against India at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)



India's captain Rohit Sharma (right) gestures next to Virat Kohli during day five of the third Test against Australia at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)

manic Jasprit Bumrah just one ball to get his man, the left-hander bowled off an inside edge that also clipped his pad.

Labuschagne was next to go after wafting at a wide ball from Bumrah and edging to wicket-keeper Rishabh Pant.

The carnage continued when McSweeney played a cut shot off Akash Deep, edging to Pant to leave the Australians 16-3.

Deep had his second when Mitchell Marsh, promoted to bat

at number four, also left his bat hanging and edged to Pant, with Australia staggering at 28-4.

That became 33-5 when Steve Smith was well caught by a diving Pant down the leg side off Siraj for four.

Australia were obviously trying to set a target for the Indians to chase and Travis Head (17) fell going for quick runs, a wild slog off Siraj getting a top edge that flew skywards for Pant to come around for his fifth catch. Cummins came

in and smashed 22 runs off just 10 balls before miscuing an attempted pull shot off Bumrah and holing out to KL Rahul at mid-off.

He sent Mitchell Starc out but declared soon after.

India resumed the day on 252-9 in reply to the hosts' 445 after a 10th-wicket partnership between Bumrah and Deep late Tuesday allowed them to avoid the follow-on. They were dismissed for 260 four overs into the first session when Deep was stumped by wicketkeeper Alex Carey off part-time spinner Head.

Cummins later leapt to the defence of his top order batsmen after they again struggled for runs in the drawn third Test against India. Cummins said his batters fell quickly yesterday while chasing quick runs to allow a declaration that could set up a small chance of victory.

"We are not beholden to stats," Cummins said. "We know there are certain roles and easier times to bat and harder times to bat, just like bowlers. You are looking at the best seven batters as a unit to play the best you can."

BRIEF SCORES (Third Test, Day 5)
Australia 445 (Head 152, Smith 101, Carey 70, Bumrah 6-76) **and 89 for 7 dec** (Bumrah 3-18) **drew with India 260** (Rahul 84, Jadeja 77, Cummins 4-81, Starc 3-83) **and 8 for 0**

SPOTLIGHT

South Africa call on uncapped Bosch for Pakistan Test series

Reuters
Cape Town

South Africa have called on uncapped all-rounder and Corbin Bosch for the crucial two-Test home series against Pakistan that starts in Pretoria on Dec. 26, but will offer injured Wiaan Mulder time to prove his fitness.

All-rounder Mulder missed the second test win over Sri Lanka earlier this month with a fractured middle finger, having been a key part of the South Africa side hoping to seal a place in the ICC's World Test Championship final with a win over Pakistan.

South Africa, who currently top the table, need victory in one of the two matches in the series to book a place at the Lord's final in June next year, with the second fixture starting in Cape Town on Jan. 3.

Coach Shukri Conrad has named an expanded 16-player squad for the Pakistan games to cover for Mulder, with uncapped 18-year-old fast bowler Kwena Maphaka also part of the selection.

"We have added Corbin to the mix. His all-round ability with both bat and ball adds depth and his pace brings an extra bite to our

attack, so we're excited to see him make that step up to test cricket," Conrad said.

Corbin, 30, is the son of former seamer Tertius Bosch, who played in South Africa's first Test back in international cricket against the West Indies in 1992. That was his only cap before he died from Guillain-Barre syndrome aged 33 in 2000.

Spinner Keshav Maharaj has also been selected despite pulling out of the first one-day international against Pakistan on Tuesday with an acute groin strain.

Senuran Muthusamy is the only other specialist spinner in the squad for the Centurion Park test on a wicket that is likely to favour the seamers.

"We are keeping a close eye on Kesh (Maharaj) and hope his injury is not too serious," Conrad said.

SOUTH AFRICA SQUAD: Temba Bavuma (captain), David Bedingham, Corbin Bosch, Matthew Breetzke, Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj, Kwena Maphaka, Aiden Markram, Wiaan Mulder, Senuran Muthusamy, Dane Paterson, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tristan Stubbs and Kyle Verreynne.

FOCUS

Rocky, 16-year-old son of Flintoff, named in England Lions squad

AFP
London

Ashes hero Andrew Flintoff is to coach his son on next month's England Lions cricket tour of Australia.

Rocky Flintoff, 16, has been included in England's second-string side during a tour that will include two four-day matches against a Cricket Australia XI in Brisbane followed by a 'Test' against Australia A in Sydney. Flintoff junior was a late inclusion in the Lions squad during their training camp in South Africa earlier this month.

An all-rounder, like his father, Rocky made his debut for Lancashire during the summer and has impressed for the England Young Lions. The 16-strong squad announced yesterday for the Lions' tour of Australia also includes five players - Shoaib Bashir, Pat Brown, Tom Hartley, Josh Tongue and John Turner - who have represented England at senior level.

Andrew Flintoff, a star of England's 2005 Ashes series win over Australia, returned to cricket last year after a horrific car crash while he filmed for the BBC's Top Gear television programme at the end

of 2022. He became involved with the England white-ball set-up and went on to coach the Northern Superchargers in the English domestic game's Hundred competition.

Having filmed the second series Freddie Flintoff's Field of Dreams series, where he introduces young people to the sport, the 47-year-old former England captain told Britain's PA news agency: "I always wanted to do something in cricket and I was never quite sure what it was."

"I have dabbled a little bit, I've done a bit of commentary, which I didn't particularly like and it's not really me. I have always had an ambition to coach but I'm not quite sure my route to doing that, or who I'd coach and let's be honest, who'd have me?"

England will travel to Australia on Jan. 3 for two four-day matches against a Cricket Australia XI in Brisbane, followed by a first-class Test against Australia A in Sydney.

ENGLAND MEN'S LIONS SQUAD: Sonny Baker, Shoaib Bashir, Pat Brown, James Coles, Sam Cook, Alex Davies, Rocky Flintoff, Tom Hartley, Tom Lawes, Freddie McCann, Ben McKinney, James Rew, Hamza Shaikh, Mitch Stanley, Josh Tongue, John Turner.

FOCUS

NZ sports get \$93.69mn in govt funding

Agencies
Auckland

High Performance Sport New Zealand yesterday announced NZ\$162.8mn (\$93.69mn) in government funding for Olympic and Paralympic sports in the run-up to the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

New Zealand enjoyed its best ever Olympics in Paris earlier this year and most sports that helped towards its tally of 10 golds, seven silver and three bronze medals have been rewarded with consistent or extra funding.

Some sports, such as diving, surfing, golf and badminton, will get no funding, while others, such as swimming and hockey, will receive reduced investments.

Among those receiving lower funding is the men's All Blacks Rugby Sevens team, which lost to

South Africa in the quarter-finals in Paris and finished fifth.

"We understand that some sports will be disappointed with these decisions," said HPSNZ's director of high performance Steve Tew, a former chief executive of New Zealand Rugby.

"This was a robust process with a focus on winning medals at the LA 2028 Olympics and Paralympics and other pinnacle events during the cycle."

Although the funding models are not identical, Britain this week announced an investment of £330mn (\$419.43mn) in Olympic and Paralympic sports over the same period.

Australia in November said A\$385mn (\$243.90mn) would be granted to Summer and Winter Olympic and Paralympic sports over the next 18 months.

Meanwhile the New Zealand Olympic Committee has appointed octosport as its commercial agency

with the organisations to work collaboratively to find partners of the New Zealand Team to the next Summer Olympic, Olympic Winter and Commonwealth Games and beyond.

The New Zealand Team is predominantly funded by commercial brands to get its Teams to Games and to spread the Olympic movement through schools and communities.

Octosport is a sports marketing, advisory and capital raising firm, dedicated to unlocking the full potential for rights holders, governing bodies, competition organisers and those operating within the dynamic world of sports.

Co-founded by Richard Thomas and Karl Budge, they bring an incredible track record of success with major global rights holders and domestically in New Zealand including New Zealand Rugby, ASB Classic and SailGP

Nicki Nicol, New Zealand Olympic Committee Secretary General and CEO says she's pleased to appoint octosport.



A recent screenshot of one of the pages on the New Zealand's official Olympics website.

with octosport to drive our commercial programme forward and build on the inspiring brand and performance of our Team's over

the last 100 years. Richard and Karl come with a huge amount of respect and relationships in the sport and business communities in New Zealand and we look forward to collaborating with them to build on our commercial foundations and set us up for the future?"

"We are honoured to partner with the New Zealand Olympic Committee, the pinnacle of sports properties in New Zealand," said Budge. "Few teams or events capture the hearts of Kiwis and unite the nation around a shared passion quite like the New Zealand Team during Games times. As we look ahead to one of the most exciting periods in Olympic history, from Milano Cortina 2026, through LA2028 and to Brisbane 2032 almost in our backyard, we are excited to help bring the values of the New Zealand Team to life through innovative and meaningful partnerships."

The NZOC will be sending a Team to upcoming Games including; the Milano Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games, the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games and the Los Angeles 2028 Summer Olympic Games, as well as various pre-elite multisport events across the quadrennial.

SPOTLIGHT

Track and field enjoyed stellar season, says Coe

'IT'S IMPORTANT WE PUT MORE FUNDING INTO THE SPORT'

Reuters
London

World Athletics President Sebastian Coe says his sport enjoyed a stellar 2024 and is on an upward curve in terms of performance and investment, but he also had a word of warning about the latest athlete to carry the mantle of "the new Usain Bolt".

Coe, who is bidding to become the next President of the International Olympic Committee, returned to his bread and butter to review the athletics year, which of course peaked with 10 days of amazing action on and inside the purple track of the Stade de France in August.

"Paris cemented the sport absolutely at the centre of the Olympic Movement in a year of jaw-dropping performances where we had something like 700 personal bests and two or three hundred national records - extraordinary," Coe told reporters.

"If you want a definition of global reach as a sport, then 75 countries had top-eight finishes in Paris where 27 won gold and 43 claimed a medal of some description.

"We had some seven and a half thousand broadcast hours in Paris compared with five and a half in Tokyo and 1,500 in Rio, so on any set of metrics the sport is moving in the right direction. That's provided us with the momentum and a platform for opening new income streams."

One of those areas of investment has bypassed World Athletics in the form of Michael Johnson's new Grand Slam Track series.

The American 200/400 me-



International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach (left) and World Athletics president Sebastian Coe at the 2024 Paris Olympics on August 11. (Reuters)

tres multi-medallist and former world record holder-turned pundit will launch his new four-event series in 2025 with a \$12.6m prize pot, where 48 contracted track athletes will receive a base salary to compete, along with 48 "challengers" with a \$100,000 prize pot up for grabs in each of the combined race events.

The series, which will not include any field events, is seen as something of a challenge to the Diamond League, which is often criticised for its haphazard nature and irregular star head-to-heads, but Coe said he welcomed it.

"I want it to be successful, I want it to add lustre to the direction the sport is going and I take comfort from the fact that kind of investment would not have been around 10 years ago," he said.

"It's important we put more funding into the sport, particularly if that makes a seismic dif-

ference to the welfare and the financial security of athletes.

"I also think the Diamond League's in good shape. Its broadcast numbers were higher than ever last year. I think ultimately there's probably a middle road here with increased funding coming in next year.

"Zurich, Brussels, Oslo, Eugene - these are events that grab global footage but I'm a great believer in market competition and everybody, every year should be sharpening their pencil, including World Athletics."

One of the big attractions on the circuit next year, and at the September World Championships in Tokyo, is likely to be 16-year-old sprint sensation Gout Gout.

The teenager ran 20.04 seconds earlier this month to break the 56-year-old Australian 200 metres record and also pipped

Bolt's world under-16 record, a performance the Jamaican great acknowledged by posting "he looks like a young me".

"He is clearly talented but there is also a need for some sensible realism here as well," Coe said.

"The biggest challenge in coaching is taking a really talented 17 or 18-year-old into the upper echelons of the senior teams.

"I'm not remotely pouring cold water on what is an outstanding talent but the vast majority of people who win world junior titles don't go on to compete for their national team at senior level.

"But he has a good federation that understands that journey, particularly through the junior into the senior ranks, and the networks around him will be important as this is a rare and precious talent that will need will need nurturing and protecting," he said.

Belgian cycling legend Rik Van Looy dies aged 90

Brussels, Belgium: Cycling legend Rik Van Looy, renowned for his prowess in the one-day classics, has died at the age of 90 following a short illness, Belgian media reported yesterday. Van Looy was rated as the greatest cycling champion Belgium had produced until the arrival of five-time Tour de France winner Eddy Merckx.

Known as the 'Emperor of Herentals' after the Belgian city where he lived, Van Looy delivered newspapers on his bicycle from the age of 12, turned professional at 20 and went on to chalk up 371 pro victories.

He was a specialist in the one-day classics in his heyday in the late 1950s and '60s, becoming the first cyclist, before Merckx and Roger De Vlaeminck, to win at least once all five of cycling's monuments - Milan-San Remo, the Tour of Flanders, Paris-Roubaix, Liege-Bastogne-Liege and the Tour of Lombardy.

Van Looy was competing in a memorable era of cycling alongside the likes of Rik Van Steenbergen, Fausto Coppi, Ferdi Kubler, Hugo Koblet, Louison Bobet, Jacques Anquetil, Raymond Poulidor and Charly Gaul as well as an emerging Merckx. He was the only rider to win all the classics, 16 in total including eight monuments, something that Merckx, who never won Paris-Tours, was unable to do.

Rik was an immense champion, an absolute icon with an incredible record of achievements," said Merckx, who was Van Looy's teammate for one season in 1965, in a statement.

"Rik was a super champion who was almost unbeatable in the classics. I'm happy to have been able to race against him."

The 79-year-old revealed that Van Looy had contacted him 10 days ago to wish him well after Merckx had fallen from his bike, necessitating a hip replacement.

"Even though he was ill, he took the trouble to call me when I was in hospital after my crash," said Merckx. "It wasn't until last month that his condition deteriorated rapidly. A few days ago, I gave him some words of encouragement myself."

De Vlaeminck, 77, meanwhile expressed his "pain at seeing my idol go".

"We battled for about four years," he said. "I still have a photo of Van Looy, Eddy Merckx and myself before the start of a race."

Aside from his one-day success Van Looy claimed numerous stages on all the three big Tours in France, Italy and Spain and won the world road race title in 1960 and 1961.

His successes prompted an element of celebrity: at his peak, Van Looy was receiving up to 1,000 letters a week from admirers.

TENNIS GREAT FRASER LAID TO REST



A portrait of former Australian tennis great Neale Fraser sits in St Patrick's Cathedral ahead of a state funeral for the three-time Grand Slam winner who died aged 91, in Melbourne yesterday. Fraser died on December 2, 2024. (AFP)

GOLF

McIlroy and Scheffler join hands to win The Showdown over LIV opponents

Reuters
Las Vegas

The PGA Tour got the best of LIV Golf during a high-stakes duel in the desert as Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland and Scottie Scheffler teamed to earn 2 1/2 points and win "The Showdown" over Brooks Koepka and Bryson DeChambeau on Tuesday in Las Vegas.

Playing three different 2-on-2 competitions of six holes apiece, with the final 10 holes under temporary lights, the PGA Tour duo won the opening best-ball competition after just four holes and also came out on top during the alternate-shot competition over holes 7-12.

In singles competition over the final six holes, Scheffler secured the decisive half-point by going up two holes on Koepka with two to play.

With four total points available - two in singles play - 2 1/2 points were needed for the victory. The final McIlroy/DeChambeau match was not played to completion.

As the rift thaws between the duelling tours, the competition at Shadow Creek Golf Club could end up being a precursor to a full-blown Ryder Cup-style match between the two tours played over an entire weekend.

McIlroy's hot start helped the PGA Tour team earn a point in the best-ball competition.

McIlroy opened with birdies on medium-range putts to win the

first two holes. He then clinched the point in the opening session with a 50-foot putt, while DeChambeau missed a short putt to tie. In the alternate-shot competition over the middle six holes, a DeChambeau missed putt gave McIlroy and Scheffler the ninth hole, and a McIlroy 4-footer at No 12 clinched the session for a 2-0 lead. The LIV Golf team did not win a hole until No 11.

While DeChambeau struggled with his putter all day, it was a pair of stray drives at No 16 for both DeChambeau and Koepka that spelled doom. Scheffler, the No 1 player in the world, clinched the match with a birdie at 16, while Koepka missed a birdie putt to tie the singles match.

McIlroy and Scheffler shared



Bryson DeChambeau and Brooks Koepka of the US talk on the driving range before The Showdown: McIlroy and Scheffler vs DeChambeau and Koepka at Shadow Creek Golf Course in Las Vegas, Nevada. (AFP)

\$10mn for the victory, with the sum paid in cryptocurrency.

PGA drops Vegas from next year's autumn schedule

The PGA Tour announced its schedule of seven post-season tournaments for the fall of 2025 with no Las Vegas event on the calendar for the first time since 1983.

The lineup is one fewer than this year and tees off with the Procore Championship in Napa, California, on September 11-14, two weeks after the 2025 Tour Championship.

Absent from the schedule is the Shriners Children's Open in Las Vegas. After the Ryder Cup next September at Bethpage Black, the PGA Tour events resume with the Sanderson Farms Championship on October 2-5.

MOTORSPORT

QMMF inaugurates Mena Karting Championship Nations Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Mena Karting Championship Nations Cup kicked off at Lusail International Circuit (LIC), hosted by the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF). The event is set to provide a lively day out for families and racing enthusiasts, featuring a variety of fan zone activities and on-site food vendors.

FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem said: "It is an honour unlike any other to represent your nation in the sport you love, and I am looking forward to witnessing the talent and competition that these young drivers will bring to the track."

Now in its fifth year, the Mena Karting Championship Nations

Cup, represents the strength of motorsport in this region. We continue to see this unique competition go from strength to strength and the eyes of our sporting world are once again on Qatar."

Abdulrahman bin Abdullatif al-Mannai, President of QMMF and Lusail International Circuit, said: "Motorsport has always been deeply ingrained in Qatar's culture, and Lusail International Circuit is honoured to be at the heart of this tradition."

"This championship showcases Qatar's commitment to nurturing motorsport talent and inspires the next generation to pursue their passion for racing."

He also added: "I would like to thank FIA President, Mohammed Ben Sulayem, for his initiative in founding the Nations Cup, which supports grassroots motorsport in the MENA region and highlights

the talents of our young drivers."

This year's championship brings together more than 150 drivers from 16 nations, competing in the following categories: Micro Max (ages 8-11); Mini Max (ages 10-13); Junior Max (ages 12-15); Senior Max (ages 14+); DD2 (ages 15+); DD2 Masters (ages 31+); R390 Sprint (ages 15+); R390 Endurance (ages 15+)

The Mena Karting Championship Nations Cup is set to deliver an exhilarating showcase of skill, determination, and camaraderie. Beyond the thrill of the races, the event symbolizes the spirit of international collaboration and friendly competition among the participating nations.

Limited trackside seating will be available for spectators to catch action, secure your spot now by registering yourself here (<https://events.lisc.qa/preregistration>).



Qatar drivers participating in the Mena Karting Championship Nations Cup pose at Lusail International Circuit.

FOOTBALL

Amorim eager for wantaway Rashford to stay at United

'WE HAVE HERE A NEW CHALLENGE, IT'S A TOUGH ONE'

AFP
London

Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim said he wants to keep Marcus Rashford in his squad after the England forward suggested he could leave Old Trafford for a "new challenge".

The 27-year-old was dropped by Amorim for Sunday's win at Manchester City and responded by hinting he would consider ending his time at United.

Rashford came through United's youth ranks and has chalked up 138 goals in 426 appearances for the club since making his debut in 2016. However, he has lost form over the last 18 months with United and was also axed from England's Euro 2024 squad.

Amorim's first decision of his reign to was followed by Rashford's interview on social media on Tuesday in which he refused to rule out quitting United.

Amorim, who arrived from Sporting Lisbon in November, was quizzed on Rashford's comments when he faced the media yesterday ahead of United's League Cup quarter-final at Tottenham today.

"No (I've not spoken to him)," Amorim said. "Not yet. It was yesterday (when) I gave the day off to the lads, so he's our player and he's ready for the next game."

Asked if he would be happy to retain Rashford, Amorim replied: "Of course, because this kind of



Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim with Marcus Rashford during a Premier League match.

club needs big talents and he's a big talent.

"So, he just needs to perform at the highest level and that is my focus. I just want to help Marcus."

Amorim added the "new challenge" Rashford spoke of could be found at Old Trafford in trying

to revive the fortunes of United, once the dominant force in English football, but now a lowly 13th in the Premier League.

"We have here a new challenge, it's a tough one," he said.

"For me, it's the biggest challenge in football because we are in a difficult situation and I already

said that this is one of the biggest clubs in the world.

"So, this is a really new challenge and the biggest one. I hope all my players are ready for this new challenge."

Having endured speculation about his own position amid a troubled campaign, Tottenham manager Ange Postecoglou refused to get involved in the debate on Rashford's future.

"There's always noise about Manchester United, come on mate. Where have you been?" Postecoglou said yesterday.

"No interest. Don't care. Not interested. He is a Manchester United player. A very good player, they have plenty of good players, but I manage my players and other managers will manage their own players. "In terms of Marcus' situation, I have no real desire to examine it any further."

Tottenham have been linked with a potential January move for Rashford if United are willing to sell. But the Australian added: "If I looked at everyone we were linked to, I would have no time to do anything else to be honest. I have got other people to do that part of the process. For us, we've been pretty disciplined in what we're trying to build here and we'll continue to be so."

Pressed again on whether Rashford was a potential target, Postecoglou added: "That's not on my radar. You can ask me about Marcus but you can ask me about every single Premier League footballer and I'll say the same."

FOCUS

Chelsea 'trust' Mudryk despite failed drugs test

AFP
London

Chelsea boss Enzo Maresca believes Mykhailo Mudryk did not knowingly take a banned supplement.

The Blues said Tuesday they were notified by the Football Association of an "adverse finding" in a urine sample provided by the 23-year-old Ukrainian winger. Mudryk said in an Instagram post the results of his 'A' sample had come as a "complete shock" and insisted he had not intentionally taken a banned substance.

"We trust Misha," said Maresca yesterday.

"When this kind of thing happens you need to support your player in all aspects. "Misha is a Chelsea player, it's my duty to be in contact with him. Me, the club, his team-mates, we are all there."

"Trust means we believe Misha."

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.

Mudryk has made 15 appearances for Chelsea this season and last played in a 2-0 win at German side Heidenheim in the Conference League on November 28, in which he scored his third goal of the season. He has not featured in the past five matches in all competitions.

"I think he's going to come back, the only thing is we don't know when," said Maresca.

He added: "Any player in the

world when this happens, they need support. No matter if he's 20 or 30, no matter if he's English or Italian or Ukrainian. When this kind of things happens, we all need support. It's not about his age or his country.

"With Misha it is exactly the same. I'm there to try to help him in anything he needs because in this moment it's normal that he's going need help from the club, from me, from his team-mates, and we are all there to try to support."

Mudryk joined Chelsea for a reported £88.5mn (\$112mn) from Ukrainian club Shakhtar Donetsk in January 2023. Maresca's side are second in the Premier League and top the European Conference League table ahead of their match against Irish club Shamrock Rovers today.

Lopetegui returns to Spain for father's funeral

West Ham manager Julen Lopetegui has returned to Spain to attend the funeral of his father, the Premier League club have announced.

Jose Lopetegui, a champion weightlifter who competed in the Basque sport of stone-lifting, died aged 94 on Tuesday.

But Julen Lopetegui could be back in time to take charge for the Premier League match at home to Brighton on Saturday.

Meanwhile, Lopetegui's coaching staff - Pablo Sanz and Edu Rubio - will take training.

"West Ham United can confirm head coach Julen Lopetegui has returned to Spain to attend the funeral of his father, Jose, who sadly passed away on Tuesday at the age of 94," said a club spokesperson yesterday.

"The thoughts and sincere condolences of everyone at the club are with Julen, his family and friends, and we kindly ask that their privacy is respected at this time."

FORMULA 1

Perez leaves Red Bull after season of struggles

AFP
Paris

Red Bull announced yesterday that under-pressure Mexican driver Sergio Perez has departed the Formula One team after four seasons.

Perez, 34, joined Red Bull in 2021 and helped the team earn two constructors' titles and completed a drivers' standing one-two with four-time world champion teammate Max Verstappen in 2023.

He won five Grands Prix over 90 starts in Red Bull colours, including a victory at the Monaco GP and a double in Azerbaijan.

During the 2024 season, Perez and Red Bull signed a contract extension, tying the pair together until 2026. However, the Guadalajara-native's form dropped drastically after that deal and he picked up just nine points from his final eight race weekends.

This dip in form led to rumours about his future in the team.

He came eighth in the drivers' standings as Red Bull surrendered their team title to McLaren with a

third-placed finish. Perez was adamant during his difficult period that he would stay with the team for next season but he will now part ways with Red Bull with immediate effect.

"I'm incredibly grateful for the past four years with Red Bull Racing and for the opportunity to race with such an amazing team," Perez said. "Driving for Red Bull has been an unforgettable experience and I'll always cherish the successes we achieved together."

The veteran will not have a seat on the grid next season, but it remains to be seen whether he will sign a deal elsewhere for 2026.

"A special thank you to the fans around the world, and especially to the Mexican fans for your unwavering support every day. We'll meet again soon. And remember... Never give up," Perez added. Red Bull said that "announcements regarding the team's full 2025 lineup will be made in due course".

New Zealander Liam Lawson, who currently drives for Red Bull sister team Racing Bulls, is considered the favourite to replace Perez.

The 22-year-old has earned

three top-10 finishes so far in his fledgling F1 career.

Lawson's fellow RB driver Yuki Tsunoda of Japan could also be in line for a promotion to the senior team, after the 24-year-old took part in post-season testing in Abu Dhabi for Red Bull.

"I would like to thank Checo (Perez) for all he has done for Red Bull Racing over the past four seasons," Red Bull team principal Christian Horner said in a statement. "From the moment he joined in 2021 he proved himself to be an extraordinary team player, helping us to two constructors' titles and to our first 1-2 finish in the drivers' championship."

"While Checo will not race for the team next season, he will always be an extremely popular team member and a treasured part of our history. Thank you, Checo."

Red Bull Racing's Mexican driver Sergio Perez walks to his garage after the qualifying session ahead of the Abu Dhabi Formula One Grand Prix at the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi on December 7, 2024. (AFP)

