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2026 FIFA WORLD CUP QUALIFIER

Qatar coach confident ahead of ‘crucial’ tie against Kyrgyzstan

‘We have completed our preparations and the players are well aware of the importance of this game’

By Sports Reporter
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Coach Luis Garcia seeks another three points when Qatar face Kyrgyzstan for their AFC Asian Qualifiers – Road to 26 Group A tie today.

Last Thursday, Qatar crushed North Korea 5-1 in their 2026 FIFA World Cup clash at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha.

Influential Akram Afif played a captain's role as the victory took Qatar level on 10 points with the UAE, nine behind leaders Iran and six adrift of Uzbekistan, with only the top two teams to qualify automatically for next year's global showpiece.

The crushing defeat four days ago for North Korea left them rooted at the bottom with two points.

“Yes, we are absolutely prepared for match against the Kyrgyz national team,” Coach Luis Garcia began, addressing the press conference, said yesterday.

“We are fully focused and our aim is clear: to return with a positive result. We know this is a crucial match for us in the eighth round of the first group competition for the third round of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, and we are determined to perform at our best,” he added.

“We understand the challenge ahead, facing the Kyrgyz team on their home ground with their fans. It won't be easy, but we have completed our preparations and the players are well aware of the importance of this game. They know what's at stake in our journey to qualify for the World Cup finals, and the three points are incredibly important to us,” Garcia said.

“Our goal as a national team is to showcase the level of Qatari football and to achieve the desired result. This includes improving



Qatar players during a team training session at Dolen Omurzakov Stadium in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, yesterday. Qatar face hosts Kyrgyzstan in a 2026 FIFA World Cup Asian zone qualifying match today.

our chances of reaching the World Cup finals. I can feel the great desire and determination in every player who will take the field tomorrow. They are all eager to achieve success and make our nation proud,” the Qatar coach said.

Qatar defender Lucas Mendez also sounded confident.

“I have full confidence in the ability of all of my teammate so that we provide the desired level and achieve a result that every-

one is looking forward to,” Mendez said yesterday.

“We are going to enter the match with the goal of winning and collecting three points that will enhance the national team's chances of reaching the World Cup finals,” he added. “The Kyrgyz national team will be a tough opponent for sure. All of my teammates understand the importance of the match, and they have full knowledge of the rival

team that has previously met with the Qatari national team at this stage of the qualifiers in Doha,” Mendez said.

Mendez confirmed that the goal for them is to achieve a positive result to please the Qatari fans, adding that all members of the team have the experience and ability to handle such important matches.

Kyrgyzstan's debut at this stage of the AFC Asian Qualifiers has

been a valuable learning experience with the Central Asian side holding their own despite only having three points to their name.

Kyrgyzstan coach Maxim Lisitsyn said his team faces a tough challenge but he is confident in the Kyrgyzstan players' abilities.

He added that his team will seek to make up for the previous 1-0 loss to Uzbekistan, noting that the reason for the loss was due to lack of experience, while the numerical

disadvantage of completing the match with ten players also had an impact on their result.

Sitting seven points behind UAE and Qatar, Kyrgyzstan have to win their remaining three matches if they are to stand a chance of advancing to the playoffs, where another two tickets to the FIFA World Cup 2026 will be available.

The match will be played at Dolen Omurzakov Stadium with kick off slated for 4:45pm Qatar time.

FOOTBALL

New Zealand qualify for World Cup but striker Wood injured

AFP
Auckland

New Zealand reached the World Cup for only the third time with a 3-0 win over New Caledonia yesterday but lost in-form Nottingham Forest striker Chris Wood to injury.

The All Whites join already qualified Japan and co-hosts the United States, Canada and Mexico at next year's finals thanks to three second-half goals.

But the victory in Auckland in the final of Oceania qualifying came at a cost, with skipper Wood suffering what appeared to be a hip injury.

Soon after half time at Eden Park, Wood hurt himself swivelling for a shot and required treatment before hobbling off in the 54th minute.

“It's not great for us losing our captain and our goalscorer. It was a difficult thing for the team but they came through so well,” said New Zealand's English coach Darren Bazeley.

The hosts looked out of ideas

after dominating the first half, but then up popped veteran defender Michael Boxall on 61 minutes to head home from a corner with his first goal for his country.

Five minutes later Wood's replacement Kosta Barbarouses chipped the ball over advancing New Caledonia goalkeeper Rocky Nyikeine. Substitute Eli Just put gloss on the scoreline from close range with 10 minutes left.

New Caledonia's unlikely World Cup hopes are not over and they will go into an intercontinental playoff.

Next year's World Cup has been expanded to 48 teams, meaning direct entry for the first time for the team that won the qualifying competition in Oceania.

The region's top side previously had to go through an intercontinental playoff, with New Zealand falling at the final hurdle to Mexico, Costa Rica and Peru in recent editions.

New Zealand have been to the World Cup twice before, in 1982 and 2010, but are yet to win at the competition in six matches.

“Once the World Cup expanded we expected this of ourselves,”

said Boxall. “It's not about getting there, it's about what we do when we get there.”

Facing a side ranked 152 in the world, 63 places below them, hosts New Zealand immediately went on the front foot.

New Caledonia, a French Pacific territory of about 300,000 people which has never been to the World Cup, twice cleared off the line in quick succession after 20 minutes.

Wood, who is in the form of his life at Forest with 18 goals in the Premier League this season, had a chance in the 32nd minute but Nyikeine saved comfortably.

The 33-year-old Wood then headed over the bar from a corner and at the half-time whistle, with the game unexpectedly level, the New Caledonia players mobbed Nyikeine.

Bazeley had seen enough and made two changes at the break, bringing on winger Just and defender Francis de Vries.

Despite losing talisman Wood, New Zealand's pressure eventually paid off against a rapidly tiring New Caledonia to put the All Whites into the World Cup.

FIRST DOHA SCHOOLS DIAMOND LEAGUE KICKS OFF IN PRESENCE OF MO FARAH

The first edition of the Doha Schools Diamond League, organised by the Qatar Athletics Federation, kicked off in the presence of former middle-distance runner Mo Farah of the UK at the Suheim Bin Hamad Stadium on Sunday.

The Diamond League is seeing the participation of 10 schools: Al Khor International School, the Jordanian School, the Egyptian Language School, the Syrian School, the Eadad International Academy, Newton International School, Lycee Bonaparte, Sherborne Qatar, King's College Doha and Doha College.

The Qatar Athletics Federation said that the Doha Schools Diamond League is part of the Federation's strategic steps to support and nurture emerging talents in community, international, and private schools in Doha, to promote athletics and widen its popularity.

Running for two days, the tournament is featuring track and field competitions.

Top performers in the Doha Schools Diamond League will have the opportunity to participate in local races to be held alongside the Diamond League – Doha to be held on May 16, with the participation of a lineup of world champions, Olympic and world medalists and world record holders in various races from around the globe. (QNA)



Former middle-distance runner Mo Farah of the UK poses with the participants of the first edition of the Doha Schools Diamond League at the Suheim Bin Hamad Stadium.

CRICKET

Ashutosh blitz helps Delhi beat Lucknow in IPL

Ashutosh lifted his team from 65-5 to achieve their target of 210



Delhi Capitals' Ashutosh Sharma celebrates after his team beat Lucknow Super Giants in their Indian Premier League match at ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium, Visakhapatnam, India. (Reuters)

AFP
Visakhapatnam, India

Ashutosh Sharma hammered a remarkable unbeaten 66 to snatch Delhi Capitals a thrilling one-wicket victory over Lucknow Super Giants in the IPL yesterday. Ashutosh, an impact substitute on debut for Delhi, lifted his new team from a precarious 65-5 to achieve their target of 210 with three balls to spare in Visakhapatnam. Needing 22 off the final two overs and six off the last six balls with one wicket remaining, Ashutosh stood strong and hit the winning six. Delhi were 7-3 in the second over, and had lost half their side for 65 when Faf du Plessis got out on 29 in his first match for the franchise. New captain Axar Patel hit a quickfire 22 and Tristan Stubbs smashed 34. When Stubbs was bowled by

Manimaran Siddharth, the ball after hitting consecutive sixes, the game looked up with Delhi 113-6 and requiring 97 runs off 7.3 overs. But Ashutosh and IPL debutant Vipraj Nigam, who hit 39 off 15 balls, struck flurry of boundaries to revive the chase with a partnership of 55 off 22 balls. Nigam fell in the 17th over and Lucknow lost two more wickets but Ashutosh justified the faith of new mentor Kevin Pietersen, who had predicted during the innings break that the big-hitter would come up with something special. Ashutosh sparked in his first IPL campaign last year for Punjab Kings in a finisher's role, but initially showed restraint yesterday as he reached 20 from his first 20 deliveries. When wickets fell around him he opened his shoulders, clubbing 46 from the final 11 balls he faced. With six needed off the final over, number 11 Mohit Sharma narrowly avoided being stumped

when the ball brushed his pad as he stepped out of his crease and Lucknow captain Rishabh Pant could not take the ball cleanly behind the stumps. The batters managed to scramble a single off the next delivery, leaving the stage clear for Ashutosh to seal a dramatic win by smashing Shahbaz Ahmed for his fifth six. Lucknow pay for mid-innings collapse Earlier, Lucknow posted 209-8 batting first despite losing a flurry of wickets after an 87-run stand between Mitchell Marsh and Nicholas Pooran. Australia all-rounder Marsh attacked from the off in his first competitive outing after a back injury which forced him to miss the recent Champions Trophy. Marsh, who is playing in this IPL only as a batter, hit six fours and six sixes in his 36-ball 72. He lost his opening partner Aiden Markram early but then put on a brilliant partnership with

Pooran, who struck 75 off just 30 deliveries. Pant flopped on his first outing for Lucknow, facing his former team Delhi for whom he played in eight IPL seasons. Pant was dismissed for a six-ball duck off Kuldeep Yadav's left-arm wrist spin. Pant parted ways with Delhi and Lucknow signed him for a record \$3.21mn in the November auction. Mitchell Starc bowled Pooran to trigger a mid-innings Lucknow collapse. Starc, who missed the Champions Trophy for personal reasons, took three wickets, while Kuldeep returned impressive figures of 2-20 in his four overs.

BRIEF SCORES
Delhi Capitals 211 for 9 (Ashutosh 66*, Nigam 39, Stubbs 34, Rathi 2-31, Siddharth 2-39, Bishnoi 2-53) **beat Lucknow Super Giants 209 for 8** (Pooran 75, Marsh 72, Starc 3-42, Kuldeep 2-20) **by one wicket**

FOCUS

Ingebrigtsen Sr in the dock for alleged abuse of Olympic champ

AFP
Oslo

The father and former coach of double Olympic champion runner Jakob Ingebrigtsen denied physically abusing his son and daughter as his trial on the charges began in Norway yesterday. After the indictment was read out, Gjert Ingebrigtsen, 59, told the court he rejected the accusations against him, on the first day of his trial in the Sandnes district court in southwestern Norway where the family lives. Jakob Ingebrigtsen, who won two world indoor track championship titles in Nanjing this weekend, and two of his brothers, Henrik and Filip, who are also athletes, shocked Norway in October 2023 when they accused their father of using "physical violence" and "threats" as part of their upbringing. Gjert Ingebrigtsen, whom the brothers described as "a very aggressive and authoritarian father", coached Jakob until after the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, where Jakob won 1500m gold. He faces up to six years in prison if found guilty. "Our client contests the charges against him and categorically denies having subjected his children to abuse, whether physical or psychological," his lawyer John Christian Elden told AFP ahead of the trial, which will run until May 16. "Based on our analysis of the evidence included in the case, we believe that the indictment is baseless," he said. The brothers' allegations in an October 2023 op-ed made headlines in Norway and abroad, and prompted Norwegian police to open an investigation covering all

of the seven Ingebrigtsen siblings. Police have dropped some of the accusations due to lack of evidence or the statute of limitations, but the prosecution retained several charges that involved Jakob, 24, and his sister Ingrid, born in 2006. According to the charge sheet, Gjert hit, threatened and insulted Jakob on multiple occasions between 2008 - when the boy was just seven years old - and 2017-2018 when he, on the cusp of reaching the age of majority, moved out. During the summer of 2009, Gjert allegedly kicked Jakob in the stomach when he fell off his scooter. Several years later, he allegedly threatened to "beat him senseless". Over a period of four years from 2018 to 2022, Gjert Ingebrigtsen is also accused of having been abusive toward his daughter, insulting, threatening and slapping her across the face with his hand or a towel. The lawyer representing Jakob and Ingrid, Mette Yvonne Larsen, told AFP her clients were "eager for it to be over". According to their spokesman Espen Skolan, the Ingebrigtsen brothers do not wish to comment on the case at this point. "We still feel a sense of discomfort and fear that we have felt since childhood," the three brothers Jakob, Henrik and Filip wrote in their 2023 op-ed. Their father Gjert reacted at the time: "I am far from perfect as a father and husband, but I have never resorted to violence." The sporting world has over the years seen numerous athletes coached by parents accused of being violent or abusive, including Mary Pierce of tennis and Todd Marinovich of American football.

Bangladesh ex-captain Tamim in hospital after heart attack

Dhaka: Former Bangladesh one-day cricket captain Tamim Iqbal was taken to hospital yesterday after suffering a heart attack on the field during a domestic match. Tamim, 36, was leading Mohammediyan Sporting Club in a match of the 50-over Dhaka Premier Division Cricket League. A report on www.cricinfo.com said he has undergone emergency angioplasty. Doctors said that Tamim had regained consciousness and spoken to a family member following the emergency surgery yesterday, the report added. Tamim will remain in the coronary care unit (CCU) for the next 48 hours as doctors will monitor his recovery from the heart surgery. Tamim participated in the toss but later complained of chest pain and after initial treatment on the field he was transported to a

nearby hospital. "He suffered a heart attack. What I know so far is that his heart started to function better," Debashis Chowdhury, a medical officer of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), told AFP. Tariqul Islam, a team official, told AFP that Tamim was being treated at a hospital in Savar on Dhaka's outskirts and urged the Bangladeshi public to pray for his quick recovery. The BCB called off its scheduled board meeting for the day following Tamim's sudden illness, with several board members heading to the hospital to visit him. Tamim represented Bangladesh in 391 matches across formats between 2007 and 2023. He has more than 15,000 international runs under his belt and is the only Bangladeshi batsman to score centuries in all three international formats.

QCA T10 Ramadan Cup 2025: Arshad shines as Fireox Unit enter semis



A steady 40-run knock from Saqlain Arshad propelled Fireox Unit Cricket Club to a 9-wicket win over Fighters Cricket Club in the quarter-final of the QCA T10 Ramadan Cup 2025 at the West End International Stadium on Sunday. Arshad's knock came off 32 balls and included four fours and one six as Fireox chased down a target of 92 to win with ease. Earlier Fighters CC lost six wickets while scoring 91 off their allotted 10 overs.

SPOTLIGHT

Australia rewrites plan to host the 2032 Olympics



AFP
Sydney

Australia said yesterday it is overhauling its multi-billion-dollar plans for hosting the 2032 Summer Olympics in Brisbane after years of "chaos and crisis". The new plan, reportedly including a new 60,000-seat stadium, rewrites much of a Aus\$7bn (\$4.4bn) infrastructure scheme announced two years ago. "I do believe we've got a plan that can get the show back on the road," Queensland Premier David Crisafulli told reporters on the eve of the official unveiling of the new scheme. "It's a plan to make sure that

we do deliver generational infrastructure, and it's a plan to make sure that we do host a great Games when the eyes of the world are on us," the conservative state leader said. "Even the most partisan person, looking at where we are at the moment, would acknowledge that it's been three years of chaos and crisis since we were awarded the Games." The Queensland capital was awarded the 2032 summer Olympics and Paralympics in July 2021, returning the Games to Australia for a third time after Melbourne 1956 and then Sydney 2000. Two years ago, the state's then centre-left Labor government had announced plans to expand the famous Gabba cricket ground and create a new 17,000-seat indoor



David Crisafulli

stadium for the Games. But Australian media, including Brisbane's *Courier Mail*, said plans for the revamped Gabba and new stadium were now expected to be scrapped. In all, six of the previously planned 14 Brisbane Games venues were set to be changed or axed, the *Cou-*

rier Mail said. The new plan would likely feature a new 60,000-seat stadium to be built in the city's Victoria Park, the newspaper said. Crisafulli said he had discussed the revamped plan with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, whose Labor government faces general elections in May. The federal government had committed to paying for much of the Brisbane Games infrastructure in the previous scheme. "Of course, that there's been some strong negotiations," Crisafulli said in a joint news conference with the Australian prime minister. "Two people of Italian descent, you'd expect that," he said. "But there's nothing that can't be solved over a bit of common sense and a cannoli."

TENNIS

Philippine wild card stuns Keys, Djokovic sets record

Djokovic surpasses Nadal in ATP Masters 1000 wins, Sabalenka shows the exit to defending champion

Reuters
Miami

Australian Open champion Madison Keys was dumped out of the Miami Open third round on Sunday, falling 6-4 6-2 to Philippine wild card Alexandra Eala, while Novak Djokovic earned a record-setting 411th ATP Masters 1000 level match win.

For 19-year-old Eala, the upset victory over the American fifth seed extended her dream run in Miami where she has now toppled two Grand Slam champions having beaten 2017 French Open winner Jelena Ostapenko in the second round.

"I am just in disbelief," she told *Tennis Channel*. "I knew I could win from the start but the chances were low given that she is a great player, but I think my belief and the trust I had in myself is what pushed me through."

Eala, who has trained at Rafa Nadal's academy in Mallorca since she was 13, required a medical timeout for what appeared to be a leg injury but was a force from the baseline against Keys, who reached the Indian Wells semi-final last week.

Up next for Eala, who has not dropped a set in Miami, will be Spanish 10th seed Paula Badosa.

Former champion Iga Swiatek earned a 7-6(2) 6-1 win over Belgian 27th seed Elise Mertens that made the Polish second seed the first player to reach the last 16 of a WTA 1000 event in 25 consecutive appearances. "I'm happy that I got my level up in the tiebreaker to close it in two sets. Also in the second set I felt like I was playing good, big confidence," said Swiatek. Up next for Swiatek will be Ukrainian Elina Svitolina, who beat Czech 15th seed Karolina Muchova 6-2 3-6 6-2.

DJOKOVIC SETS RECORD

Six-times champion Djokovic moved into the fourth round with a 6-1 7-6(1) triumph over Argentine



Alexandra Eala of the Philippines reacts after winning a point against Madison Keys of the US on day six of the Miami Open. (Reuters)

lucky loser Camilo Ugo Carabelli that moved the Serbian fourth seed ahead of Nadal and into top spot on the all-time list of Masters 1000 match wins.

Djokovic, who is also seeking a record seventh Miami title, will next face Lorenzo Musetti after the Italian 15th seed beat Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime 4-6 6-2 6-3.

In other men's action, Bulgarian 14th seed Grigor Dimitrov, who lost in last year's final, was a 6-7(3) 6-4 7-5 winner over Russian Khachanov and set up a clash with American Brandon Nakashima.

SABALENKA OUSTS COLLINS

Top seed Aryna Sabalenka yesterday was hot on her heels, ending No. 14 seed Danielle Collins' title defence 6-4, 6-4 in 1 hour and 18 minutes.

Next, Sabalenka will be up against ninth seed Zheng Qinwen

who reached her second consecutive WTA 1000 quarter-final, with a straight-sets win over Ashlyn Krueger.

Italy's Jasmine Paolini enjoyed a 3-6, 6-4, 6-4 comeback win over Naomi Osaka in 2 hours and 15 minutes.

Men's top seed Alexander Zverev recovered from a slow start to power into the fourth round with a 7-5, 6-4 win against Australia's Jordan Thompson yesterday.

"Jordan made it difficult for me for sure. He's a quality player," said Zverev.

"When you're in rhythm, he knows how to break it a little bit. So he did extremely well today. I'm happy with my level from 1-4 onwards," he added.

Third-seed Taylor Fritz also moved into the fourth round beating Denis Shapovalov of Canada 7-5, 6-3.



Novak Djokovic of Serbia celebrates after his match against Camilo Ugo Carabelli of Argentina on day six of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (Reuters)

LIST OF RECORDS HELD BY DJOKOVIC

Miami: The following is a list of major records held by Novak Djokovic after the Serbian's 411th match win at a Masters tournament on Sunday:

GRAND SLAMS

* **Most Grand Slam titles:** 24 (Australian Open - 2008, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023; French Open - 2016, 2021, 2023; Wimbledon - 2011, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022; U.S. Open - 2011, 2015, 2018, 2023)

* **Most Grand Slam finals:** 37

* Only player to win all four Grand Slams at least three times

* **Most Grand Slam singles matches played in the Open Era:** 430 (as of Jan. 15, 2025)

* **Most Australian Open titles:** 10

* **Most hardcourt majors won:** 14

* Only player to win at least three majors in a single year four times

MASTERS & ATP FINALS

* **Most Masters titles:** 40

* Only player to win all Masters titles, winning each tournament at least twice.

* **Most Masters titles in a season:** Six in 2015

* **Most Masters finals in a season:** Eight in 2015

* **Most consecutive Masters finals won:** 12

* **Most Masters titles won without dropping a set:** 11

* **Most Masters matches won:** 411

* **Most ATP Finals titles:** Seven (2008, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2022, 2023)

* **Most consecutive ATP Finals titles won:** Four (2012-2015)

RANKINGS

* **Most weeks at world number one:** 428

* **Oldest player ranked at world number one:** 37-years-old

* **Most year-end number one ranking:** Eight (2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2023)

* **Most wins over top-10 ranked players in a season:** 31 in 2015

GOLF

Plucky Hovland rallies past Thomas to win Valspar Championship

Reuters
Palm Harbour, Florida

Norway's Viktor Hovland finally found a solid rhythm for the first time in a month, and it paid off at the Valspar Championship.

Hovland notched birdies on three of his final five holes to shoot 4-under-par 67 and win the tournament Sunday at Innisbrook Resort's Copperhead Course in Palm Harbour, Florida.

Hovland, who missed the cut in his previous three tournaments, finished at 11-under 273 for a one-stroke victory over Justin Thomas.

"It's still the same swing," Hovland said.

"I hit a lot of disgusting shots, but they happened to go where I look ... Somehow this week I was

able to hit the good shots that I can a lot more often than I have been in recent weeks."

Hovland, 27, now has seven career victories. This is his first title since the 2023 Tour Championship, which capped a string of three victories in a three-month stretch.

Still, he wasn't full of confidence when the tournament began.

"I honestly didn't believe I could do it this week," Hovland said.

Even with some hiccups along the way, there was an uptick of incentive as he reached the back nine on Sunday in the mix on a crowded leaderboard.

Hovland had been three strokes off the pace on the back side before he heated up and Thomas fell off.

"There was a bunch of guys tied at the end of my front nine," Hovland said. "I heard some noise

ahead and I knew he was probably up in front. ... I knew I had to make some birdies coming in."

Thomas had his second consecutive sterling round, but his 66 was marred by bogeys on Nos. 16 and 18. Those followed a five-hole stretch with four birdies.

"Way, way more good than bad," Thomas said. "Today was awesome. I felt so comfortable. I felt like the only nervy swing I truly felt was the wedge on 16."

Jacob Bridgeman, who led at the tournament's midway mark, posted 69 and was third at 9 under.

Bud Cauley (66), Billy Horschel (67) and Japan's Ryo Hisatsune (68) tied for fourth place at 8 under. Davis Riley (69) was seventh at 7 under.

Hovland got things rolling late with a 13-foot birdie putt on No. 14 before birdies on two of the next

three holes. His bogey on the final hole wasn't a problem because Thomas had already finished his round.

"Even when (Thomas) was three shots ahead, I still felt really calm and I really wasn't stressing even though I probably knew I had to make my putt on 14," Hovland said. "When that went in, I still felt really, really calm there."

It marked the second 67 of the tournament for Hovland, who also posted that number in Friday's second round.

Thomas wasn't discouraged despite missing an opportunity for another victory.

"It sucks not winning when you're that close and have a great chance," Thomas said. "But I just hopefully put myself in the same position in two weeks at Augusta and finish it off better."



Viktor Hovland of Norway poses with the trophy after putting in to win on the 18th green during the final round of the Valspar Championship 2025 at Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club in Palm Harbour, Florida. (AFP)

CYCLING

Vingegaard reveals concussion after fall

AFP
Copenhagen

Denmark's two-time Tour de France winner Jonas Vingegaard revealed yesterday that he suffered from a lengthy concussion after crashing during the Paris-Nice on March 13, leaving him feeling tired and nauseous for days afterwards.

Vingegaard will target a third Tour de France win this summer after his 2022 and 2023 wins on a route which favours his climbing skills.

But the concussion has scuppered his original build-up programme and he was replaced by teammate Simon Yates as Visma team leader for the Tour of Catalunya, which started yesterday.

"After the crash I was dizzy, and after the stage I got very nauseous

and was incredibly tired, which continued for the next several days," Vingegaard told the Danish daily *BT* of his recent fall.

"I'm happy to be back on the bike, even though it took a little longer than hoped because of my concussion, which has required a lot of rest," he explained.

Vingegaard placed an impressive second on the 2024 Tour de France after a life-threatening crash at the Tour of the Basque Country hospitalised him for 12 days last April.

He later admitted he considered walking away from cycling at that time.

And the steady mannered Dane is taking no chances on his health this time.

"For now, we'll take things day by day and let rehabilitation decide if we need to make any changes or additions to my programme."

UCI Champions League scrapped after four years

London: Track cycling's Champions League has been scrapped four years after its launch was hailed as a mind-blowing new way to present a sport often unfathomable to the general public.

A joint statement yesterday from cycling's governing body the UCI and media partner Warner Bros. Discovery (WBD) Sports confirmed the 2024 season was the last.

WBD originally committed to an eight-year partnership but the statement said it was "re-defining" its involvement in the promotion of track cycling.

The UCI said the Track Nations Cup would be revitalised and become the Track World Cup from 2026 and that the collaboration with WBD would continue over the next three years.

"Over the next three years we will focus on coverage of the UCI Track World Cup," UCI president David Lappartient said. "I am confident that track cycling will continue to grow in popularity, leading up to and beyond the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games."

The UCI Track Champions League featured the world's top endurance and sprint riders competing across multiple rounds in cities such as Palma, London, Berlin and Paris from November-December with the points lead-



ers in each category being crowned overall champions and pocketing €25,000. Spectacular light shows, music and a rapid and simplified format were meant to appeal to fans new to track cycling and designed to be TV-friendly. The two rounds held in London each year were hugely popular with large crowds but other venues found it harder to sell tickets.

Only three hosts staged a Champions League round in 2024.

The Champions League era came to an abrupt halt at the second London round

in December when a bad crash involving Britain's Olympic champion Katy Marchant meant the rest of the night's programme was cancelled.

The UCI Track World Cup will consist of three rounds, with a programme featuring the Olympic events as well as the elimination race, a format that has proved popular with the public. The series will form part of the qualification process for the world championships and Olympic Games. Bids are being accepted by the UCI for hosts for the rounds of the 2026, 2027 and 2028 editions.

NATIONS LEAGUE

Spain edge Netherlands on penalties, set up France semi

‘WE WERE CONVINCED WE WERE GOING TO DO SOMETHING GREAT’

AFP
Paris

Holders Spain beat the Netherlands on penalties after a dramatic quarter-final second leg in Valencia finished 3-3 on Sunday to set up a Nations League last-four clash with France, who edged Croatia in a shoot-out after a 2-2 aggregate draw.

On a dramatic night, Portugal battled past Denmark in extra time and will next face Finals hosts Germany after their tense 5-4 aggregate victory over Italy.

European champions Spain took the lead in the tie, after Thursday's 2-2 first-leg draw, when Mikel Oyarzabal picked himself up after being fouled in the box to slot home an early penalty.

The Netherlands equalised nine minutes into the second half as Memphis Depay also won and then netted a spot-kick.

Oyarzabal grabbed his second in the 67th minute after a strong run forward by Nico Williams, only for the Dutch to level again with 11 minutes remaining through Ian Maatsen's fierce strike. Lamine Yamal struck shortly before the interval in extra time, though, curling the ball into the far corner after a couple of superb touches.

There was yet another twist as Spain goalkeeper Unai Simon brought down Xavi Simons, who picked himself up to score.

Spain edged home 5-4 in the shoot-out despite a miss from Yamal, as Simon saved from Netherlands winger Donyell Malen and Pedri struck the winning penalty.

“We’re Spain and we don’t have



Spain's players celebrate after winning the UEFA Nations League quarter-final second leg match against Netherlands on penalties at the Mestalla stadium in Valencia. (AFP)

to fear anyone,” Pedri told TVE of facing 2021 Nations League winners France in the semi-finals in Stuttgart on June 5. France wiped out a two-goal deficit against Croatia at the Stade de France.

Michael Olise's brilliant free-kick broke the deadlock on the night in the 52nd minute, before Ousmane Dembele swept Olise's cutback into the bottom corner to send the quarter-final to extra time. Theo Hernandez missed a penalty to win it for France in an eventful shoot-out, but Dayot Upamecano eventually secured a

5-4 success on penalties in sudden death. “We woke up thinking it could be a great night,” Kylian Mbappe told TF1. “We were convinced we were going to do something great.”

TRINCAO FIRES PORTUGAL THROUGH

Portugal, inspired by substitute Francisco Trincao, battled back after losing the first game 1-0 to win a thrilling last-eight encounter with Denmark 5-3 on aggregate. Cristiano Ronaldo, after a stuttering run-up, produced the

tamest of early penalties which was comfortably held by Denmark goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel.

Portugal were gifted the lead on the night when Joachim Andersen put through his own net.

But the Danes restored their aggregate advantage 11 minutes into the second half through Rasmus Kristensen's excellent header.

Ronaldo did get his 136th international goal, though, turning the ball in after Schmeichel tipped Fernandes' shot against the post.

But Portugal were caught out in the 76th minute when Christian



Portugal's Francisco Trincao scores his team's fourth goal during the UEFA Nations League quarter-final second leg match against Denmark at the Jose Alvalade stadium in Lisbon. (AFP)

Eriksen tapped home. The hosts managed to force an added half-hour when Schmeichel's weak punch fell to Mendes, who teed up Trincao to drill a shot into the bottom corner. Trincao netted his second in the first minute of extra time and Goncalo Ramos secured a meeting with Germany in Munich on June 4.

GERMANY HOLD OFF ITALY FIGHTBACK

Julian Nagelsmann's Germans survived an Italy comeback to win 5-4 on aggregate after a 3-3 draw in Dortmund. Germany extended their overall advantage on the half-hour mark when Joshua Kimmich tucked home a spot-kick before playing a key role in a bizarre second goal.

Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma left his goal af-

ter making a save to complain at the referee and Kimmich took a quickly-taken corner which was flicked into an empty net by Jamal Musiala. Tim Kleindienst nodded in Kimmich's clipped cross on the stroke of half-time, but Moise Kean scored twice to give Italy a glimmer of hope heading into the last 20 minutes.

Giacomo Raspadori converted a penalty in injury time to equalise on the night, but there was not long enough left for the Azzurri.

“A football game is never perfect, but it was some unbelievable football, and the best I've seen us play,” Germany coach Nagelsmann said. Elsewhere, Belgium narrowly avoided relegation to League B as two late goals from Romelu Lukaku helped them overturn a 3-1 first-leg deficit against Ukraine with a 3-0 victory.

Spain star Yamal still maturing after rollercoaster night

Lamine Yamal scored a brilliant goal but also missed a penalty on another night of growth for Barcelona's teenage star as Spain reached the Nations League semi-finals.

The 17-year-old thrilled during the 3-3 draw against the Netherlands on Sunday at a sold-out Mestalla stadium in Valencia, even if he ended up with a bittersweet feeling as Bart Verbruggen denied him in the shoot-out.

Spain progressed 5-4 on penalties after a wildly entertaining 5-5 aggregate tie, another stepping stone on his journey to the top of the game.

A key player for Barcelona and already having won Euro 2024 with his country, a day after turning 17 last July, Yamal's incursions on the right flank draw spectators to their feet and comparisons to Argentina great Lionel Messi.

The loudest roar as the home team was read out by the Mestalla stadium announcer was reserved for his name, and “Yamal” was printed on the back of more than a fair share of the Spain shirts flooding through the gates.

The highlight of the night for many was Yamal's stunning extra-time strike, controlling Dean Huijsen's lofted pass with a deft flick, turning to eke out a yard of space and bending the ball past Verbruggen in the Netherlands goal.

It was the perfect riposte to criticism that appeared after a relatively quiet night in the 2-2 quarter-final first leg draw in Rotterdam last week. “I see things that are starting to bother me a little... shorts a little lower, not making much of an effort,” said former Netherlands international Rafael van der Vaart.

Yamal responded on the pitch, and then off it with a post on Instagram following the game.

“Shorts down, a goal, a missed penalty and into the semi-finals, come on Spain!” wrote Yamal on the social media platform, including a photo



Spain's Lamine Yamal celebrates scoring his team's third goal during the UEFA Nations League quarter-final second leg match against Netherlands at the Mestalla stadium in Valencia. (AFP)

of Van der Vaart's face. Yamal is not shy of firing back at his critics, as he showed with a jab at Adrien Rabiot during the Euros, after helping eliminate France by scoring a wondergoal.

Spain will face France again in the Nations League semi-finals as they bid to defend the title they won for the first time in 2023.

Yamal's Barcelona teammate Pedri said the teenager would bounce back from his penalty miss, a surprisingly tame effort kept out by Verbruggen.

“I told him it was a terrible penalty,” laughed Pedri, who netted Spain's winner from the spot after Donyell Malen missed for Netherlands. “But no, you learn from these situations, he doesn't let the pressure affect him and you have to take a penalty to be able to miss it. “How calm he is has always surprised us, it's like pressure doesn't exist for him when you see the way he dribbles so easily, and the way he plays. “We have to take care of him and most of all, enjoy having him.”

Yamal has four goals in 19 Spain appearances, but plays with the self-assurance of a superstar at their peak.

Defender Marc Cucurella also joked about Yamal's penalty miss - with Spain players' willingness to laugh about it showing they believe the winger can take the jibes on the chin.

“I saw him go up to take it with confidence and I thought, he'll score here for sure,” said the left-back.

“Then I saw how he hit it and I said ‘What a disaster!’”

Penalties aside, Yamal, and Athletic Bilbao winger Nico Williams on the opposite flank, help make Spain a hugely exciting side to watch.

“We always want to attack, and attack a lot,” said Spain coach Luis de la Fuente.

“That's why the fans have enjoyed this so much, the game was out of control in some moments, it's a spectacle to see.”

The coach, who previously said Yamal had been ‘touched by a magic wand’, acknowledged the youngster is still growing.

“Lamine is disappointed (with the penalty) but he's happy,” added De la Fuente.

“He gave us what we needed from him but he's still growing and maturing.”

SPOTLIGHT

Ooredoo Qatar and QTSPBF extend winning partnership



Chief Executive Officer of Ooredoo Qatar Sheikh Ali bin Jabor al-Thani and Secretary-General of QTSPBF Tariq Zainal pose during the agreement signing ceremony yesterday. **PICTURE: Shaji Thottathil**

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Ooredoo, Qatar's leading telecommunications provider, has renewed its successful partnership with the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Padel, and Badminton Federation (QTSPBF), reinforcing its dedication to developing padel in Qatar and across the region. The agreement was signed by Sheikh Ali bin Jabor al-Thani, Chief Executive Officer of Ooredoo Qatar, and Tariq Zainal, Secretary-General of QTSPBF.

This renewed collaboration comes ahead of the Ooredoo Qatar Major Premier Padel 2025, scheduled from 14 to 19 April at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex. Recognised as a Major tournament within the Qatar Airways Premier Padel Tour, the event represents the highest level of professional padel, attracting the world's best players and top teams to Doha. With each edition, the tournament has grown in both scale and prestige, further reiterating Qatar's reputation as a hub for world-class sporting events.

Sheikh Ali bin Jabor al-Thani, CEO of Ooredoo Qatar, said: “We are pleased to extend our partnership with QTSPBF, reaffirming our commitment to developing this rapidly growing sport in Qatar and across

the region. At Ooredoo, we are committed to empowering the communities we serve through sports, and this renewed partnership will allow us to continue supporting the great game of padel in Qatar and beyond. We look forward to another exciting tournament and an even brighter future for the sport.”

Tariq Zainal, Secretary-General of QTSPBF, said: “We are thrilled to extend our collaboration with Ooredoo as the title sponsor of the prestigious Ooredoo Qatar Major Premier Padel 2025. This partnership reflects Ooredoo's strong commitment to advancing sports in Qatar and supporting major events, further strengthening Qatar's position as a leading global sporting hub.”

He added, “Our ongoing collaboration with Ooredoo is a key step towards elevating this tournament to even greater heights,” highlighting that this partnership will contribute to delivering an exceptional sporting experience for padel enthusiasts in Qatar and worldwide.

Ooredoo has been a long-standing supporter of sports in Qatar, championing initiatives that bring communities together and inspire a new generation of athletes. This renewed commitment ensures that Qatar remains at the forefront of world padel, welcoming top-ranked players, elite teams, and passionate fans to yet another thrilling edition of the Ooredoo Qatar Major Premier Padel.

FOCUS

Juve roll the dice after costly Motta flop

AFP
Milan, Italy

Juventus gambled on their short-term future after dumping Thiago Motta in the hope of securing a spot in next season's Champions League and attracting a big name replacement who can put right some costly mistakes.

Motta fell victim on Sunday to poor results and a strained relationship with both club management and his expensively assembled squad, all of which had the “Old Lady” of Italian football once again in turmoil. His statement released on Monday afternoon, in which he thanked Juventus for “the opportunity to be a part of a great club” belied a fraught 10

months in charge. Former Italy international Motta was supposed to be the key addition to Juve's move away from a recent past filled with mishaps, scandal and heavy financial losses when he arrived in June.

He was a new face for a new-look Juve who in recent seasons had suffered the ignominy of a points deduction for transfer offences and then Paul Pogba's doping ban soap opera, all as the Milan teams, Napoli and even provincial upstarts Atalanta stole the limelight from Italy's biggest club.

Tasked with making Juve a more dynamic, modern team after the stodgy football of Massimiliano Allegri, Motta was heavily backed to the tune of over 200 million euros (\$217 million) in a squad rebuild after arriving on a high from taking Bologna into the

Champions League. Such were the positive vibes around Turin last summer that Juve were tipped to challenge champions and fiercest rivals Inter Milan for the Serie A title, a prediction which looked accurate after they began the season with two thumping 3-0 wins over Como and Verona.

But the promised on-pitch revolution never came, with a series of uninspiring performances and the two most expensive summer signings - midfielders Teun Koopmeiners and Douglas Luiz - failing to justify the over 100 million euros invested in buying them from Atalanta and Aston Villa.

Early elimination from the Champions League, an embarrassing exit from the Italian Cup at the hands of lowly Empoli and their two most recent thumpings

by Atalanta and Fiorentina (4-0 and 3-0 respectively) meant Motta likely wouldn't have lasted the summer even if he had made it to the end of the season.

Motta's reign ended with Juve sitting one point outside the top four and below his former club Bologna, who under Vincenzo Italiano may be the team to finish in Italy's fourth and final spot in Europe's top club competition.

The Juve hierarchy have also damaged relations with supporters after the way the dismissal was handled, exactly a week after the heavy defeat at Fiorentina prompted sporting Cristiano Giuntoli to insist that Motta was part of a “long-term project”.

His replacement Igor Tudor now has the task of getting Champions League qualification.