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Wednesday, March 26, 2025  
Ramadan 26, 1446 AH

# GULF TIMES

## SPORT



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2026 FIFA WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

# Qatar's hopes in balance after 3-1 loss to Kyrgyzstan

IRAN SEAL WORLD CUP QUALIFICATION AS TAREMI DOUBLE EARNS 2-2 DRAW AGAINST UZBEKISTAN

**Agencies**  
Bishkek/ Tehran

**T**en-man Qatar slipped to a 3-1 loss to Kyrgyzstan in their Group A Asian qualifiers – Road to 26 match in Bishkek as Iran confirmed their qualification for the next year's global showpiece event yesterday.

Two goals in 11 minutes earned Kyrgyzstan a key win over Asian Champions Qatar to keep alive the central Asian nation's hopes of a place in the playoffs as Maksim Lisitskin's side claimed victory.

Aleksandr Mischenko thumped a left-foot strike from distance beyond Meshal Barsham to put the White Falcons on front with eight minutes remaining and Alimardon Shukurov put the result beyond doubt with a neat finish three minutes into injury time.

Those goals came after Valeriy Kichin's opener in first half injury time had been cancelled out by Lucas Mendes in the 52nd minute, two minutes before the defender was sent off to leave the AFC Asian Cup holders shorthanded.

The win was Kyrgyzstan's second in the third phase of the preliminaries and moves Lisitskin's side onto six points from eight matches, four adrift of the fourth-placed Qataris with two games remaining.

Mischenko had headed wide in the 10th minute for the hosts while Shukurov could have done better three minutes later when he pulled his effort wide of Barsham's left post as the home side made a strong start. Qatar had rarely threatened despite dominating the possession but could have taken the lead in the 28th minute.

Naji Hussein raced into the penalty area before cutting the ball back towards Almoez Ali but the striker, returning to the team after missing the 5-1 win over DPR Korea on Thursday, thumped his rising shot inches over the bar.

Barsham was left motionless with three minutes remaining of the opening half as Kyrgyzstan went closest to going in front. Shukurov's strike from distance came out of nothing and the goalkeeper could only watch as it crashed against his crossbar.

Moments later the Qatar goalkeeper was beaten. Kichin's low free kick was curled towards goal and, while Kozubaev moved in the direction of the ball, no one made contact as the delivery bounced past Barsham.

Kyrgyzstan's lead was to only last until the seventh minute of



Qatar players react as referee shows red card to Lucas Mendes during their Group A World Cup Asian qualifying match against Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, yesterday. (Reuters)

the second half as Akram Afif's corner unlocked the home defence, the AFC Player of the Year landing his set-piece on the head of Ahmed Suhail and his flick clipped Mendes on its way past Erzhan Tokotaev.

Moments later Qatar's hopes suffered a serious blow as Mendes was dismissed for a high follow-through when he tackled Kai Merk. Both sides pushed for the winner, with Ali thrashing his shot straight at Tokotaev with nine minutes remaining but Mischenko netted, sending a curling shot high into the net over Barsham's outstretched hand.

Shukurov then put the result beyond doubt with a low left-foot finish to complete a famous win for Kyrgyzstan. Iran became the second Asian side to secure their place in the World Cup after twice coming from behind to draw 2-2 with Uzbekistan in Tehran yesterday.

Needing a point to join Japan among the Asian nations at the finals, the Iranians twice went behind only for Inter Milan striker Taremi to rescue his team and book

their ticket for the tournament in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Hojimat Erkinov put Uzbekistan ahead in the 16th minute, making the most of hesitation in the Iranian defence to slide his shot past Alireza Beiranvand.

But seven minutes into the second half Taremi levelled, lashing an unstoppable volley over the outstretched hand of Utkin Yusupov. It took Uzbekistan a minute to reclaim the lead, Abbosbek Fayzulaliev's free kick from the left evading three home defenders, who allowed the ball to bounce beyond Beiranvand and across the line.

Taremi, however, bailed out his team again with seven minutes remaining, pouncing with his outstretched boot on a bouncing ball inside the six-yard box to score.

The point guarantees Iran one of the two automatic berths available from Group A at the finals as Amir Ghalehnoei's side move onto 20 points from eight games, 7 more than third-placed UAE, who beat North Korea 2-1 yesterday.

Uzbekistan remain in second place on 17 points.



Iran's Mehdi Taremi celebrates after scoring during the FIFA World Cup 2026 Asian qualifier Group A match against Uzbekistan in Tehran yesterday. (AFP)

## Al Arabi beat Al Sadd to secure final berth



Al Arabi scored a convincing 91-67 win over Al Sadd in the Qatar Basketball Men's League playoff to secure a final berth at the QBF's Al Gharafa Hall yesterday. Al Arabi prevailed in four quarters, 28-19, 24-16, 17-6, 22-26, and will next play Al Rayyan in the final. Al Arabi's Osiris Eldridge emerged as the Most Valuable Player scoring 20 points with six rebounds and three assists. Al Sadd will lock horns with Al Ahli in a match for the third place.

## World Athletics approves swab test to determine female gender

World Athletics said yesterday it had approved the introduction of a cheek swab test to determine if an athlete is biologically female. Sebastian Coe, the head of the international track and field federation, said the decision taken by the body's decision-making council was a "really important" way of protecting the female category. "It's important to do it because it maintains everything that we've been talking about, and particularly recently, about not just talking about the integrity of female women's sport, but actually guaranteeing it," Coe said in a press conference after the World Indoor Championships in Nanjing, China. "We feel this is a really important way of providing

confidence and maintaining that absolute focus on the integrity of competition."

World Athletics added that it had not fixed a date for the introduction of the measure, "but it is expected to be in place for the World Championships in Tokyo this year".

Coe said the decision to introduce the swab testing was taken after a wide consultation on the proposal. "Overwhelmingly, the view has come back that this is absolutely the way to go," although he added that the swab test was not considered to be overly intrusive. He said he was confident that the policy could stand up to legal challenge, but added: "You accept the fact that that is the world we

live in. "I would never have set off down this path to protect the female category in sport if I'd been anything other than prepared to take the challenge head on. "We've been to the Court of Arbitration on our DSD (difference of sex development) regulations. "They have been upheld, and they have again been upheld after appeal. So we will doggedly protect the female category, and we'll do whatever is necessary to do it." Coe announced the policy a week after finishing third in the race to be the new president of the International Olympic Committee, won by Kirsty Coventry, the former Olympic swimmer from Zimbabwe. (AFP)



## CRICKET

# Big bucks Iyer leads Punjab to win over Gujarat in IPL

Both sides walloped 16 sixes each across two innings on the fourth day of the cash-rich T20 tournament

**AFP**  
Ahmedabad, India

**I**ndia batsman Shreyas Iyer led from the front with an unbeaten 97 to set up a 11-run win for Punjab Kings in a big-hitting IPL clash with Gujarat Titans yesterday.

Iyer's 42-ball knock steered the team to 243-5 after being invited to bat first at the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

Gujarat finished on 232-5 despite a valiant 41-ball 74 by opener Sai Sudharsan who set up a blazing start to the run chase, featuring a 84-run second wicket stand with England's Jos Buttler (54).

Both sides walloped 16 sixes each across the two innings on the fourth day of the cash-rich Indian Premier League T20 tournament.

Iyer, who led Kolkata Knight Riders to a title win last year, has already gone some way to justifying his top price tag, after Punjab paid a whopping \$3.17mn in the November auction.

The top-order batter started with a boundary off Gujarat's South African import Kagiso Rabada and three balls later smashed

a six. He allowed attacking opener Priyansh Arya to take charge as the Indian young left-hander hammered 47 off 23 deliveries before being denied his fifty by Afghanistan spin wizard Rashid Khan.

Gujarat's Sai Kishore joined the bowling charge to strike twice in two balls, including trapping Australia's Glenn Maxwell lbw for a first-ball duck, but Marcus Stoinis avoided the hat-trick. Maxwell walked back without a review but tracking technology later revealed the ball would have gone over the stumps as a dejected Punjab coach Ricky Ponting looked upset.

Iyer stood strong as he took on the attack with sixes and fours and found support from Australian hard-hitter Stoinis, who smashed a 15-ball 20 before becoming Kishore's third wicket.

Iyer reached his fifty in 27 balls and kept up the charge as he struck three sixes and a four in a 24-run off seam bowler Prasidh Krishna.

Iyer, the Player of the Match, said: "Ecstatic, to be honest. Getting 97 in the first match is always the icing on the cake. No better feeling to be honest. It was important for me to go ahead and adapt.

Sudharsan fell to left-arm pace bowler Arshdeep Singh and Buttler, after reaching his fifty, was bowled by South African left-

I got four off the first ball, and that gave an immense boost. That flicked six off Rabada – I think the momentum changed... There was some extra bounce as well."

He added: "I think we adapted quickly. You see the 44 runs Shashank scored off 16 or 17 balls... with the dew coming in, we knew the scenario would be changing. Thankfully, we were able to execute. I think Arshdeep played an important role. Everyone chipped in with their mindset."

Iyer went past his previous IPL best of 96 but missed out on his century as partner Shashank Singh dominated the strike in the latter stages and finished on an unbeaten 16-ball 44.

Iyer and Shashank hammered 81 runs between them in 28 balls to finish with a flourish.

In reply, the left-handed Sudharsan and skipper Shubman Gill, who hit 33 off 14 balls, handed Gujarat a blazing start but the ever-increasing run-rate made the home team fall behind the chase despite having wickets in hand.

Sudharsan fell to left-arm pace bowler Arshdeep Singh and Buttler, after reaching his fifty, was bowled by South African left-



Punjab Kings' captain Shreyas Iyer (left) reacts during the Indian Premier League match against Gujarat Titans in Ahmedabad yesterday as Titans' Mohammed Siraj looks on. (AFP)

arm quick Marco Jansen. Impact player Sherfane Rutherford, a left-handed West Indian hard-hitter, made a desperate effort to pull off a miracle with his 28-ball 46 be-

fore falling to Arshdeep in the final over.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
Punjab Kings 243 for 5 (Iyer 97\*,

Arya 47, Shashank 44\*, Sai Kishore 3-30) beat Gujarat Titans 232 for 5 (Sudharsan 74, Buttler 54, Rutherford 46, Gill 33, Arshdeep 2-36) by 11 runs

## COMMENT

## 'Lots of life left' for Delhi Capitals' 40-year-old veteran Faf du Plessis



Delhi Capitals' Faf du Plessis in action against Lucknow Super Giants during their IPL match at ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium in Visakhapatnam, India, on Monday. (Reuters)

**AFP**  
Visakhapatnam, India

**S**outh African veteran Faf du Plessis declared he has "lots of life left" as a franchise player but said his latest IPL move would be the last chapter of his career.

The 40-year-old opener made 29 from 18 balls in a one-wicket victory for his Delhi Capitals over Lucknow Super Giants in a Monday night thriller.

du Plessis, who led Royal Challengers Bengaluru for three years until the end of last season, joined Delhi after the November player auction and was named deputy to captain Axar Patel.

du Plessis won two IPL titles with Chennai Super Kings, in 2018 and 2021, but is relishing a new

challenge with a team still hunting for their first crown in the T20 tournament.

"Lots of life left in the old dog," Du Plessis told commentator and former England player Graeme Swann after Delhi's nail-biting win. "New team, new challenge for me. I almost see it as a new chapter you can look forward to," he added.

"Moving from Chennai to RCB was a really good chapter. Now the last chapter of the book, for however long the pages may be, will be with the new team."

du Plessis is among a select list of players over 40 and still performing well in the money-spinning tournament.

Chennai icon MS Dhoni remains a key player for his team at 43 and said "even if I'm in a wheelchair, they'll pull me along".

India stars Virat Kohli (Bengaluru)

and Rohit Sharma (Mumbai Indians) have also defied age and critics to continue playing at 36 and 37 years respectively.

Delhi wobbled in Monday's chase before impact substitute Ashutosh Sharma rescued them from 65-5 with an unbeaten 66 off 31 balls. The impact player rule was introduced in the 2023 IPL, to the consternation of critics who said it made the format too batting-heavy. The rule allows a player to be substituted into the starting 11 at any time and most teams have swapped a bowler for a batsman to fuel run chases and take totals past 200.

"A lot of cricketers, they will complain about the new rule in IPL," said Du Plessis. "That's why the new rule is there, when you think the game is dead and buried, someone comes on and plays like that."

## BANGLADESH EX-CAPTAIN TAMIM IQBAL RECOVERING AFTER HEART ATTACK

**Dhaka:** Former Bangladesh captain Tamim Iqbal regained consciousness and was speaking to family members after suffering a major heart attack during a domestic match, cricket officials told AFP yesterday.

The 36-year-old was leading Mohammadan Sporting Club in a match of the 50-over Dhaka Premier Division Cricket League when he was rushed to a nearby hospital after severe chest pain on Monday.

"He is now better. He talked to his family members and also walked briefly at the hospital," club official Tariqul Islam said.

Mohammadan physiotherapist Enamul Haque said Tamim was in a stable condition and would likely be transferred to another medical facility soon.

"We had to go to hospital quickly to save his life, and luckily we did that," Enamul told AFP.

Tamim was in critical condition when he was rushed to hospital, Razeeb Hasan, the medical director at the facility where Tamim received treatment, told reporters on Monday.

He also said Tamim had to undergo surgery to implant stents to clear an artery blockage. News of Tamim's health crisis saw an outpouring of support from the cricketing world.

"Please pray that my brother Tamim recovers quickly and returns to the game!" long-time teammate Shakib Al Hasan wrote in a social media post. Tamim's heart attack came the same day as Shakib's 38th birthday, but the all-rounder said he was unable to enjoy the occasion because of the news.

Indian cricketer Yuvraj Singh likewise offered his "prayers and wishes".

"You've faced tough opponents before and come out stronger, this will be no different. Wishing you a speedy recovery. Stay strong," Yuvraj wrote on social media.

Tamim represented Bangladesh in 391 matches across formats between 2007 and 2023, and was their one-day captain.

He scored more than 15,000 runs and is the only Bangladeshi to record centuries in all three international formats.

## FOCUS

## England captaincy would be a dream, says batsman Duckett

**Reuters**  
London

**E**ngland Ben Duckett said it would be a dream to captain his country but the top-order batsman has no idea if he is even in the running to replace Jos Buttler as limited-overs skipper.

Wicketkeeper-batter Buttler stepped down from the role on February 28, three days after England's group-stage exit at the Champions Trophy, with Harry

Brook considered a front-runner to replace him.

Asked if he would be interested in taking over the vacant role, Duckett told Sky Sports: "To captain England would obviously be a dream. I don't think it's on the radar but I don't know that, which is why I am answering like that."

"We will see what happens moving forward and what decisions are made. I am just pretty happy playing for

England at the minute. "Three or four years ago I wouldn't have thought I'd be doing that, so just living my dream as a kid, representing my country – I am very happy playing all three formats."

The 30-year-old has played 22 ODIs and 17 Twenty20 Internationals, scoring 1,058 and 412 runs, respectively.

He has also played in 32 Tests, scoring 2,270 runs.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Olympic champion Ingebrigtsen testifies against his father in abuse trial

**AFP**  
Oslo

**D**ouble Olympic champion runner Jakob Ingebrigtsen took the stand yesterday at the trial of his father – who is charged with abusing the sports star and his sister – portraying a controlling and manipulative parent.

The 24-year-old athlete had returned to Norway late on Monday from the World Indoor Championships in Nanjing, China, where he won two gold medals.

"My upbringing was very much characterised by fear," Ingebrigtsen told the court in Sandnes, according to newspaper *Verdens Gang* (VG). "Everything was controlled and decided for me. An enormous amount of manipulation," he said as he described his father and former coach.

Ingebrigtsen explained in par-

ticular how, as a schoolboy, he could not go to parties with the other children and how, as a teenager, he was made to train two or three times a day.

Gjert Ingebrigtsen, 59, is accused of physical and psychological violence against two of his seven children, Jakob and his sister Ingrid, 18, over a total period of 14 years, from 2008 to 2022.

He faces up to six years in prison if found guilty of the charges, which he denies.

Addressing the court, Jakob claimed to be unable to cite a single good memory from his childhood with his family, and recounted several episodes of physical violence, including slaps and kicks to the stomach listed in the indictment – some of which occurred when he was under eight years old.

"When I was younger, between five and eleven years old, I would describe him as nervous, neurotic, and insecure. Extremely control-



Norwegian athlete Jakob Ingebrigtsen (right) is seen with his lawyers Mette Yvonne Larsen (left) and Veslemy Aga at the South Rogaland District Court in Sandnes, Norway. (AFP)

Team Ingebrigtsen, produced by public broadcaster NRK.

They argued that the series, composed of five seasons, which closely followed the Ingebrigtsen family over several years, shows a family where high-level athletes share their daily life with their coach and while it showcases a demanding environment, it is not equivalent to domestic violence.

"I heard the defence say yesterday that we do not understand what it takes to become a world champion," Mette Yvonne Larsen, the lawyer representing the plaintiffs, responded yesterday.

"But these children above all wanted to be children," she added to the court.

Today, it will be Ingrid's turn to testify. According to the indictment, she was insulted, threatened and hit in the face.

She lived several years in foster care due to her conflict with her father.

Jakob Ingebrigtsen 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.

The brothers' allegations in an op-ed made headlines in Norway and abroad and prompted Norwegian police to open an investigation covering all of the seven Ingebrigtsen siblings.

Police dropped some of the accusations due to lack of evidence or the statute of limitations, but the prosecution retained several charges that involved Jakob and his sister Ingrid.

Jakob Ingebrigtsen is the most successful of the three brothers, winning gold in the world championships over 5,000m in 2022 and 2023, and claiming the 1,500m and 3,000m titles in Nanjing this weekend to win a rare world indoor double.

## SPOTLIGHT

# Brisbane to build new main stadium for 2032 Olympics

THE ICONIC GABBA GROUND WILL HOST CRICKET AT THE OLYMPICS BEFORE BEING TORN DOWN

Reuters  
Sydney

**A** new 60,000-seat stadium and a national aquatics centre will be built in an inner city Brisbane park for the 2032 Olympics, Queensland State Premier David Crisafulli announced yesterday as he unveiled the third venue plan for the Games.

Crisafulli said another 20,000-seat boutique stadium would be constructed at Brisbane Showgrounds, while some events have been moved out of the city to regional Queensland.

Brisbane's Queensland Tennis Centre will be upgraded with the addition of a new 3,000-seat showcourt, while the Gabba ground will host cricket at the Games before being torn down.

The issue of venues has been a matter of much political conflict since the Games were awarded to Brisbane in 2021 and Crisafulli said organisers could now get started on constructing and refurbishing the various arenas.

"Finally, Queensland has a plan," Crisafulli said in Brisbane. "The time has come to just get on



An aerial view of the Gabba, the iconic cricket venue in Brisbane. Apart from hosting Tests and white-ball internationals for Australia, it is the home ground for the Brisbane Lions, Brisbane Heat and Queensland Bulls. (@GabbaBrisbane)

with it. We will." A \$1.57bn indoor arena and entertainment venue which was to have been paid for by the federal government will now be put out to private tender with the promised funds going to other infrastructure.

Crisafulli is likely to come under fire for the stadium plan as he went on the record opposing the construction of a new arena in the city

in the run-up to the state elections that brought him to power last November.

"It's my decision," he added. "I wasn't prepared to take the politically easy option when the truth is that wouldn't be of benefit to the state.

"I believe in this plan and I think Queensland is going to back it," Environmental lobby group

Save Victoria Park picketed outside Crisafulli's announcement yesterday and issued an open letter last week saying any construction in the park for the Olympics would be an embarrassment for Brisbane.

"Do we really want to be known as the city that concretes over its historic parkland for a mega stadium?" said spokesperson Sue Bremner.

Another major reverse on venues looks unlikely, however, as Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) chief executive Matt Carroll has already warned that the plan needs to be in place by the end of June.

The AOC yesterday welcomed the announcement as a "very positive step towards delivering a successful Games".

**BEST OF QUEENSLAND**  
Yesterday's announcement came on the back of a second review of the venue options undertaken by a seven-person panel, which reported earlier this month. The government said they had adopted over 90% of the panel's recommendations.

Queensland is nearly five times the size of Japan and Crisafulli said it was only fair that the whole state would take part in hosting the Games.

The rowing will now take place on a crocodile-infested river in Rockhampton some 600km to the north of Brisbane, while sailing events will be staged in the Whitsunday Islands near the Great Barrier Reef.

Brisbane organising committee chief Andrew Liveris said he had been in contact over the plans with Kirsty Coventry, who is the International Olympic Committee's point person for the Games and was elected as the new head of the Olympic movement last week.

"This is a go-get-it-done plan and this will be delivered," he said yesterday.

"Queensland gets the best of venues, the Games get the best of Queensland."

## TENNIS

## De Minaur ends Fonseca challenge, Zverev wins

AFP  
Miami Gardens, United States

**A**ustralia's Alex de Minaur put an end to Brazilian talent Joao Fonseca's challenge at the Miami Open, outlasting the 18-year-old 5-7, 7-5, 6-3 in an enthralling contest.

Attendance on stadium court had been sparse throughout Monday, but the Hard Rock Stadium turned into a mini-Maracana Stadium for Fonseca's match, complete with Brazilian flags and football-style chanting. Fonseca brought his energetic brand of ultra-attacking tennis, but De Minaur was up to the challenge, coping with both the blistering forehands and the partisan crowd.

Such was the dominance of Fonseca's raucous support that the referee switched to Portuguese for his appeals for quiet.

But de Minaur won six of the final seven games to move into the fourth round, keeping his cool even when the crowd, at times, disrupted his serve preparation.

"Mentally I was ready for this match, I knew I was not only going to play an incredible talent like Joao, playing with immense confidence and nothing to lose, but also an incredible crowd that was on his side from the first point until the last," de Minaur said.

"One of my biggest strengths is my mentality and that is what got me the win today," he added.

Top seed Alexander Zverev recovered from a slow start to power into the fourth round of the Miami Open with a 7-5, 6-4 win against Australia's Jordan Thompson. Zverev lost in the opening round at Indian Wells, but with Carlos Alcaraz already out in Miami he will fancy his chances of adding to his list of seven Masters 1000



Australia's Alex de Minaur hits a backhand against Brazil's Joao Fonseca at the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. (Reuters)

titles. Third-seed Taylor Fritz also moved into the fourth round beating Denis Shapovalov of Canada 7-5, 6-3. In the women's draw, third-seed Coco Gauff's bid ended with a 6-4 6-4 loss to Poland's Magda Linette.

Top-seed Aryna Sabalenka eased her way into the last eight with a 6-4, 6-4 win over last year's winner Danielle Collins of the USA. Next, Sabalenka will be up against ninth seeded Olympic gold medallist Zheng Qinwen who reached her second consecutive WTA 1000 quarter-final, with a straight-sets win over Ashlyn Krueger. "I'm super happy to get this win in straight sets and happy with the level I played today," said Sabalenka.

"She's a tough opponent, and we had a lot of tough and tricky matches in the past. So was very happy to get through this one," she added. Italy's Jasmine Paolini enjoyed a 3-6, 6-4, 6-4 comeback win over Naomi Osaka in 2 hours and 15 minutes.

**Raducanu wins easily**  
Emma Raducanu continued her

impressive form in Miami, cruising to a 6-1, 6-3 victory in 69 minutes over American Amanda Anisimova, who had eliminated Indian Wells winner Mirra Andreeva on Sunday.

It is the first time Raducanu has won four straight WTA Tour main draw matches in a row since her US Open triumph in 2021. She will face American Jessica Pegula next. Raducanu, who has brought in some old faces from the early days of her career for this tournament, said she was benefitting from their presence. "I'm really happy with how things are on and off the court right now and just so happy that's able to transfer on to the match court," she said.

Alexandra Eala, the 19-year-old from the Philippines was handed a place in the quarter-finals after her fourth round opponent, Spain's Paula Badosa, pulled out with a lower back injury.

**Swiatek gets extra security after harassment**  
World number two Iga Swiatek is receiving additional security at the Miami Open after she was

harassed by a spectator during her practice. Earlier Swiatek battled past Ukraine's Elina Svitolina 7-6 (7/5) 6-3. The issue comes after British player Raducanu was targeted by a stalker during last month's Dubai Open.

Media reports said that Swiatek was verbally harassed by a spectator, who has a history of online attacks against the player, during practice on Sunday.

"Security is a top priority. We monitor the network to catch these types of issues. Constructive criticism is one thing, and threats, hate speech or even disturbance during training is another – this cannot be condoned," a spokesperson for Swiatek told AFP.

"We reported the matter to the tournament organiser, as well as to the WTA, which reacted immediately and took additional precautions, such as additional security, for which we are very grateful. Ensuring the safety of the players is crucial, they are the ones at the centre of the event, and it is our job to protect them," the spokesperson added.

## CYCLING

## Vernon takes Catalonia sprint as teen Brennan keeps the points lead

AFP  
Figueres, Spain

**B**ritish sprinter Ethan Vernon won a mass sprint on the Tour of Catalonia yesterday, followed over the line at Figueres by teenage compatriot Matthew Brennan.

After a four hour and 16 minute, 177km run, from Banyoles that included two mountains, the peloton was largely grouped as it raced at up to 70kph toward the finish line in Figueres.

Israel Premier-Tech's Vernon had been dropped in the mountains but kept calm to work his way back before the finish line in front of the Salvador Dalí museum, the surrealist painter's former home, a pink castle decorated by golden eggs.

"It was a very fast finish so a bit like a track sprint," said the 24-year-old winner. "We must have been going over 80kph, it was super fast! In the end, it helped me. I was a bit on the limit, but I held on. It's great! I'd been chasing a victory for a while."

The runner-up spot means Vis-

ma rider Brennan, just 19, retains the overall lead by 6sec from Australian Kaden Groves.

The seven-day race will be decided over three mountain stages today, tomorrow and on Saturday.

Home hope Juan Ayuso of UAE is the man to beat after his Tirreno-Adriatico triumph in Italy. He sat fifth overall yesterday, 13sec off the lead.

In the absence of champion Tadej Pogacar, the other 2024 podium finishers, Spain's Mikel Landa and Colombian former Tour de France winner Egan Bernal, could also contend.

Today's 218km run from Viladecans has a mountain-top finish at La Molina.

The leading climbers are nearly all competing including Primoz Roglic, twins Simon and Adam Yates, Richard Carapaz and Enric Mas as they prepare for the Tour de France.

The race ends in Barcelona Sunday with the ascent of Montjuic to the Olympic stadium.

The 1992 Olympic stadium where FC Barcelona currently play, will also be home to the Tour de France Grand Depart in 2026.



Israel Premier Tech team's Ethan Vernon (second right) competes prior crossing first the finish line of the 2nd stage of the 2025 Volta a Catalonia cycling tour of Catalonia, a 177.3km race between Banyoles and Figueres, yesterday. (AFP)

## MOTORSPORT

## Ezpeleta confirms MotoGP has renewed Valencia Grand Prix deal until 2031

Reuters  
Valencia

**V**alencia's Circuit Ricardo Tormo will host five more MotoGP Grand Prix between 2027 and 2031, the motorcycle racing organisation said yesterday.

The Valencia GP, which started in 1999, has been the final Grand Prix of the MotoGP season in most years since 2002.

It is known for its atmosphere and high turnout and has won the best Grand Prix

award several times, MotoGP said in a statement.

Circuit Ricardo Tormo, which was already under contract until 2026, has signed a new five-year deal, MotoGP added.

"The track is unique with the view it offers to the spectators, and the fans make it unique for us with the incredible atmosphere they create," said Carmelo Ezpeleta, CEO of MotoGP rights holder Dorna Sports. "It is always full of people, the promoter does a fantastic job."

The Valencia GP was cancelled last year after a deadly flood killed over 200 people

in the region. The circuit was also affected by the flood, with the approach roads to the venue suffering extensive damage.

"After what happened in 2024, we hope our return for another five Grand Prix underlines our longer term commitment to Valencia too. We're looking forward to coming back this season, and to celebrating more fantastic Grands Prix until 2031," Ezpeleta added. Carlos Mazon, President of the Generalitat Valenciana, said: "Thank you for your commitment to Valencia. I think it's a safe bet! There is no other Grand Prix that hangs the sold out

sign up as far in advance as Valencia. Here there is a huge fandom, a love of motorsport, for motorcycling. It's fundamental for Valencia, for Cheste, for the province of Valencia and for the Valencian Community."

This renewal comes in a context of greater competitiveness than ever and we were always convinced that we had the winning card. The great differential, apart from these magnificent facilities and team, is the fans. "I also don't want to fail to mention the economic impact MotoGP has, and when we are working on recovery – not only emotional recovery, but eco-

nomic recovery. And with fans behind us like the ones we have, the winning card is there."

He added: "I want to congratulate you all: the entire Valencian motorcycling family, the Spanish motorcycling family and that of the entire world, which will now once again have one of the circuits, and if I may, the circuit with the most soul and after this last year even more, that it can offer to this great sport."

The current MotoGP season is set to conclude with the Valencia GP on November 16.

## FOCUS

# Blatter and Platini cleared in FIFA graft case

**AFP**  
Muttenz, Switzerland

Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter and ex-UEFA chief Michel Platini yesterday were acquitted on appeal by a Swiss court in a long-running corruption case that shattered their careers as the most powerful figures in world football.

Blatter, 89, and Platini, 69, listened in silence as the Extraordinary Court of Appeal clerk in the town of Muttenz, near Basel, read out a decision identical to the one handed down in 2022, which had initially cleared them.

Prosecutors had requested suspended sentences of 20 months for the pair, but charges of fraud, for which they risked five years' imprisonment, as well as disloyal management, breach of trust and forgery of documents were all dismissed.

After almost 10 years of legal proceedings, a final appeal is still possible before the Swiss Supreme Court, but only on limited legal grounds. The prosecutors' office said in a statement it "will decide about how to further proceed".

"The persecution by FIFA and some Swiss federal prosecutors for 10 years is now over," Platini told



Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter addresses media as he leaves the courthouse after the verdict of an appeal by Swiss Attorney General's office against former UEFA and FIFA presidents over a suspected fraudulent payment, in Muttenz near Basel, yesterday. (AFP)

reporters. "Today my honour is restored, and I'm very happy."

Platini, a former France captain and manager, said he felt "from the start" that the purpose of the affair was to prevent him "from being president of FIFA".

"I know that for my enemies, it was time that was important... They kept me out for 10 years," continued Platini, whose downfall cleared the way for the election in early 2016 of Gianni Infantino

as FIFA boss. Blatter and Platini returned to court earlier this month on charges stemming from a delayed payment of two million Swiss francs (1.8 million euros) FIFA made to Platini in 2011 for consultancy services.

"After two acquittals, the federal prosecutor's office must also admit that this criminal procedure has definitively failed. Michel Platini must finally be left alone in criminal matters," said Dominic



Former UEFA president Michel Platini reacts when leaving the courthouse after the verdict in Muttenz near Basel, yesterday. (AFP)

Nellen, Platini's lawyer.

#### 'GENTLEMEN'S AGREEMENT'

The case began in 2015 when Blatter quit as head of FIFA in a corruption crisis. Blatter and Platini were initially acquitted by the Swiss Federal Criminal Court in June 2022, but the Swiss Attorney General's office immediately appealed that verdict.

The defence and prosecution agreed that Platini did advise

Blatter between 1998 and 2002, during the Swiss administrator's first term at the head of FIFA, and that in 1999 the two men signed a contract agreeing an annual remuneration of 300,000 Swiss francs, to be "paid in full by FIFA".

Blatter and Platini said that at the start they agreed orally, and without witnesses, on an annual salary of one million Swiss francs, but FIFA's financial state did not allow for immediate payment.

Blatter called it a "gentlemen's agreement".

Prosecutor Thomas Hildbrand said the argument was implausible. Even if FIFA had transferred one million Swiss francs to Platini in 1999, it would still have had "more than 21 million francs in cash", and its reserves had reached 328 million in 2002.

To agree such a sum without a written record, without witnesses and without ever making provision for it in the accounts was, he said, "contrary to commercial practice" as well as to FIFA's norms.

In January 2011, "more than eight years after the end of his activity as adviser", Platini "claimed a debt of two million Swiss francs", which FIFA paid.

Prosecutors argued that this was an "unfounded" payment, obtained by "cleverly misleading" FIFA's internal controls through false statements made by the two executives.

At the time, Blatter was running for re-election as FIFA president and Platini had become head of European football. Platini backed Blatter in his successful bid for a fourth term in charge of FIFA.

Both men were eventually banned from football by FIFA's ethics committee.

## FOOTBALL

# Australia, Saudis keep World Cup hopes alive

**AFP**  
Hangzhou, China

Australia beat China 2-0 yesterday to boost their chances of automatic World Cup qualification, but Saudi Arabia stayed in touch in Group C with a goalless draw in Japan.

In Asian Group B, Son Heung-min's South Korea remain top and favourites to progress, but they put in another toothless performance to be held at home for the second match in a row.

Australia's victory leaves the Socceroos second in Group C on 13 points with two to play, three points ahead of Saudi Arabia with a much better goal difference.

Japan are already guaranteed to finish top and progress to the 2026 World Cup in Canada, the United States and Mexico.

Australia host Japan and travel to Saudi Arabia for their final qualifiers in June, leaving the race for the second direct qualification place on a knife edge.

Jackson Irvine curled home the opener for Australia in Hangzhou in the 16th minute after sloppy Chinese defending.

Then a terrible blunder by goalkeeper Wang Dalei allowed Nishan Velupillay's scuffed shot to squirm through his grasp and trickle over the line in the 29th minute.

The result leaves China bottom on six points, but they can progress to a further qualifying stage by finishing third or fourth.

Indonesia moved into fourth on nine points courtesy of a 1-0 win over Bahrain. Oxford United forward Ole Romeny scored his second goal in as many games to give Netherlands and Barcelona great Patrick Kluivert his first victory since becoming manager. South Korea drew 1-1 with second-placed Jordan in Suwon after registering the same scoreline against Oman last week.

Two wins would have seen South Korea qualify for the tournament with two matches to spare.



Australia's Jackson Irvine (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring a goal during the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualification match against China in Hangzhou yesterday. (AFP)



Saudi Arabia's Salem al-Dawsari (right) fights for the ball with Japan's Takefusa Kubo during the 2026 World Cup qualification match in Saitama yesterday. (AFP)

#### 'EVERYTHING CAN HAPPEN'

Now they face a tricky away trip to Iraq in June and a final home clash against Kuwait needing four points to be certain of progressing without having to rely on other results. Jordan are three points behind

South Korea but Iraq can leapfrog them and close the gap to one point at the top of Group B if they beat Palestine in Amman later. Lee Jae-sung put the hosts ahead in the fifth minute when he turned in Son's corner unmarked from close range.

But that was as good as it got for the Koreans, who had the lion's share of possession but lacked penetration in attack.

Jordan carried a threat on the break and equalised through Mahmoud al-Mardi's deflected shot in the 30th minute.

In Saitama, Saudi Arabia coach Herve Renard knew that the point gained in their 0-0 draw against Japan could prove invaluable. "There are still two games, everything can happen," said the Frenchman.

"It's a tough fight. We just have to think about the four points we got during these two games and we look to be better offensively."

Renard led the Saudis to a famous victory over eventual winners Argentina at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and he returned for a second stint in October when Roberto Mancini was sacked.

Japan became the first team to qualify for next year's World Cup when they beat Bahrain 2-0 last week.

## Real Madrid making progress on Alexander-Arnold transfer: reports

Trent Alexander-Arnold is closing in on a move to Real Madrid when his Liverpool contract expires at the end of the season, according to reports yesterday. The defender has long been linked with a move to the Bernabeu on a free transfer and talks between the 26-year-old and the Spanish giants are understood to be making progress.

The England international, who came through

the youth ranks at Liverpool and has been at the Premier League club for more than two decades, has been able to discuss terms with overseas clubs since January. Alexander-Arnold made his Liverpool debut as an 18-year-old in 2016. The right-back has won the Champions League, Premier League, FA Cup and Club World Cup with his boyhood club and is on course to add a second league crown this

season, with Arne Slot's side currently 12 points clear at the top of the table. Alexander-Arnold is one of three key Liverpool players out of contract at the end of the season, with the futures of Mohamed Salah and Virgil van Dijk still unclear. Alexander-Arnold is currently out of action with an ankle injury and missed Liverpool's defeat to Newcastle in the League Cup final earlier this month.

**AFP**  
London

Thomas Tuchel admitted Jude Bellingham was "lucky" to escape a red card as England "struggled" to secure a 3-0 win against minnows Latvia on Monday.

Just two days after claiming Bellingham can be "very emotional" and needed to control his mood on the pitch, the Real Madrid star was fortunate not to be sent off in the World Cup qualifier at Wembley.

After being booked in the first half, Bellingham avoided a second yellow card despite crunching into a crude challenge on Raivis Jurkovskis soon after the interval. England boss Tuchel responded by sending on Phil Foden to replace the midfielder moments later to ensure he was not given his marching orders.

"A bit lucky. We took straight away the decision to not take the risk and take him off," Tuchel said.

Leading through Reece James's superb first half free-kick, England were struggling to kill off stubborn Latvia when Bellingham was substituted.

His lack of discipline could have hampered Tuchel's bid for a second successive win to start his reign.

Harry Kane netted moments after Bellingham's departure before Eberechi Eze wrapped up the points on the road to next year's World Cup.

Facing an unheralded Latvia team 136 places below them in FIFA's world rankings, Tuchel acknowledged England were far from convincing again after a lacklustre 2-0 win against Albania in his debut on Friday.

"It was not an easy match. We saw a lot of good things, created good chances. We needed a free-kick to unlock it. I'm happy with the attitude, energy and desire. We will get there," the German said.

"The second half we started to slow the game down and

made little movement, which makes no sense. But the second goal was better as we showed acceleration from one of our sixes.

"We encourage everyone to have these late accelerations but we struggled a bit until the goal. I learn about the players and the game, so it is interesting."

#### 'HIS QUALITY IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL'

James's eye-catching first England start since September 2022 was the highlight of the evening for Tuchel.

The Chelsea right-back - hampered by hamstring injuries for the last two seasons - starred under Tuchel during the Blues' Champions League-winning campaign in 2021.

"I know Reece and the quality the boy has is amazing. He has every right to be proud and happy with his performance," Tuchel said.

"He is in excellent shape. He looks sharp and the quality there can be no doubt."

"If you play a dominant match like today, he can be a hybrid midfielder to help create an overload. His quality is at the highest level."

"We were in close contact in the last weeks. We knew he was in a good space mentally. That's what he proved. He was very positive throughout the camp."

Tuchel was also impressed by Aston Villa midfielder Morgan Rogers in his first England start.

Rogers has become a key figure for Villa during their run to the Champions League quarter-finals this season and Tuchel saw signs that he can replicate that form on the international stage.

"I'm happy with him. He deserved to start. A match where we are so dominant could suit him more to play from the wings," said Tuchel, whose team return to action against Andorra in June.

"He felt more freedom when we played him there. There was more space. He did good."



England's Jude Bellingham crosses the ball during the 2026 World Cup Group K qualifier match against Latvia at Wembley stadium in London yesterday. (AFP)