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PREMIER LEAGUE

Saka 'ready to go' for Arsenal after long injury lay-off: Arteta

'The fact that he's able to come in the most important part of season is a massive boost for him and the team'

AFP
London

Bukayo Saka is "ready to go" for Arsenal after three months out with a hamstring injury, manager Mikel Arteta said yesterday.

The England forward, 23, who has scored nine goals in all competitions for the club this season, has not featured since Arsenal's 5-1 win at Crystal Palace on December 21.

"Bukayo is ready to go," Arteta said on the eve of today's match against Fulham.

"All the careful things are already done so now it's about putting him on the grass in the right moments. But he's pushing because he really wants to."

"We have respected the timeframe and we have done everything and we had to hold him back, even. He is ready to go."

Asked whether Saka, who had hamstring surgery in December, could start against eighth-place Fulham at the Emirates, the Arsenal boss replied: "Yeah, yeah."

Arteta added: "Bukayo is a massive weapon. We know the impact that he has had in the team and how important his role and his contribution is to our success. It's great to have him back."

Arsenal are second in the Premier League, 12 points behind Liverpool with just nine games to go and realistically out of the title race.

But they are through to the Champions League quarter-finals and host Real Madrid in the first leg of their tie on April 8.

The return of Saka is a huge boost for Arteta, who has been short of firepower in recent weeks, with Kai Havertz and Gabriel Jesus out of action with long-term injuries.

The Spaniard said Saka's return would be a huge lift for Arsenal.

"It's more the energy that he transmits, that he's missed the thing that he loves the most in his life, which is to be around the team, to play, to train, and to compete at the highest level," he said.

"The fact that he's able to come in the most important part of the season is a massive boost for him and the team as well."

"He hasn't played for three months, but has played for the last 48 months. So three in 48 is a very small percentage."

Arteta said Jurrien Timber is available after a bout of illness but fellow defender Riccardo Calafiori faces a spell on the sidelines after picking up a knee injury on international duty for Italy.

The Arsenal boss spoke in glowing terms about the club's new sporting director Andrea Berta, whose appointment was confirmed on Sunday. The 53-year-old Italian, who previously worked at Atletico Madrid, succeeds the Gunners' former midfielder Edu in the role.

"We certainly believe that he is someone who is going to impact the club," said Arteta.

"And he's got that experience, he's got this personality as well, this charisma, and... will to win. That is going to be very contagious."

Meanwhile, Arsenal have appointed Italian Andrea Berta as new sporting director after his 12-year stint at Atletico Madrid, the Premier League club said.

"I am thrilled to be joining Arsenal in what is a hugely exciting period for the club," said Berta, who replaces Brazilian Edu after his resignation last year.

"I have watched with great interest the way Arsenal have evolved in recent years and I have admired the hard work that has gone in to re-establishing the club as a major force in European football with a passionate following around the world," he added in a statement from the club.

During his time with Atleti as technical then sporting director, Berta played a major role in shaping squads that clinched the La Liga title for the first time in 18 years when they won in 2013-14 and again in 2020-21.

The club also reached two Champions League finals and won the Europa League title in 2018.

Arsenal will play Tottenham in a pre-season friendly in Hong Kong, the first North London derby to be held outside the United Kingdom, the clubs said yesterday.



QATAR SECOND DIVISION CUP

Al Bidda's second triumph showcases consistency, cements legacy

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Bidda are rejoicing after the sports club last week underlined their growing stature by claiming the Qatar Second Division Cup defeating Al Sailiya 2-0 in the final at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium, last Wednesday night.

The victory, which marked their first triumph since the 2021 season, was sealed with goals from Cristian Dal Bello and Abdullah Nouri, cementing Al Bidda's legacy in the tournament's seventh edition.

Dal Bello had opened the scoring with a penalty in first-half stoppage time (45+1'), capitalising on a red card given to Al Sailiya's goalkeeper Nabil Akram in the 36th minute for a foul.

Nouri then doubled the lead in the 61st minute, securing the trophy for Al Bidda in the presence of Qatar Football Association (QFA) Executive Committee member Hani Ballan, and QFA Secretary-General Mansoor al-Ansari, who also presided over the post-match awards ceremony.

The match showcased intensity and skill, with both teams delivering a spirited performance despite Al Sailiya's numerical disadvantage. Al Bidda's path to the final included a 2-0 semi-final win over Al Waab, while Al Sailiya edged Al Markhiya 1-0.

In the league stage, Al Markhiya had topped Group A with 16 points, while Al Bidda narrowly led Group B over Al Sailiya on goal difference (11 points each).

Al Bidda lifting the trophy a second time also saw them join Muaiher SC (2017, 2019) and Mesameer SC (2018, 2020) as multi-time winners of the Second Division Cup. The tournament, which had paused in 2023-2024, re-



Al Bidda players celebrate after winning the Qatar Second Division Cup defeating Al Sailiya 2-0 in the final at Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium.

sumed this season with Al Shahania as defending champions (2022-2023).

Al Bidda SC have shown remarkable growth in the recent times and their success can also be traced to the signing a long-term partnership agreement with Amsterdam's famous football club - Ajax (last year) - to manage and train their club youth programme, utilising Ajax's worldwide renowned philosophy, culture, and methodology.

At the signing ceremony, held at Stadium 974, Sheikh Hamad bin Mohamed bin Fahad al-Thani, Vice-Chairman of Al Bidda SC, had said: "With this partnership, we are setting a strong and solid foundation towards creating the best local club Football Youth Academy in Qatar. This, in turn, will help us foster great talents who will move up to join our first team. The Ajax academy is one of the best, if not the best, in the world. They

have been doing it for a long time, and they have produced global talents and legends. Indeed, this would have a very positive impact on our players, coaches, administrators at the club, and, of course, for the development of Qatari football."

Alex Kroes, Technical Director of Ajax, had said: "We are delighted to expand our international football network through this partnership. The global interest in Ajax's football expertise is enormous and



Qatar Football Association Executive Committee member Hani Ballan presents the trophy to Al Bidda captain.

we are convinced that, in Al Bidda SC, we have found a partner with the same vision as Ajax. In the coming years, we will make every effort to set up a strong youth academy, which should ultimately ensure a constant flow of youth players to their first team. It is also great that we can implement our football philosophy on a broader scale. We have noticed a huge demand for this and are looking forward to these activities."

Ronald De Boer, former Netherlands star and now Ajax Al assistant manager, who was also present on the occasion, while speaking of the partnership said Ajax were keen to work with the youth of Al Bidda SC.

"When I came here, I saw football was already very popular, and Qatar had a vision to improve, and it doesn't stop even after the FIFA World Cup."

The Al Bidda SC was established in Qatar in 2015 and started with an amateur team playing in the Second Division, winning the cup first in 2022 and being a finalist in 2023. In July 2023, the club was granted full membership in the Qatar Football Association.



Debutant Ashwani powers Mumbai to first win of season

'VERY SATISFYING. TO WIN, ESPECIALLY AT HOME AND THE WAY WE DID IT AS A GROUP - EVERYONE CHIPPED IN, CANNOT BE HAPPIER'



Mumbai Indians' Ashwani Kumar bowls during the IPL match against Kolkata Knight Riders at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Mumbai

A sparkling debut performance by medium pacer Ashwani Kumar helped IPL powerhouses Mumbai Indians register their first win of the season yesterday, downing Kolkata Knight Riders by eight wickets.

Kumar's 4-24 - and an overall disciplined bowling performance - restricted champions Kolkata to a modest total of 116, which Mumbai chased down with more than seven overs to spare.

"There was some pressure in the beginning but the team atmosphere put me at ease," Kumar told broadcasters during the innings break.

South African wicketkeeper-batsman Ryan Rickleton spearheaded Mumbai's chase, scoring a busy 62 off 41 balls, an innings laced with five sixes.

Playing their first home match

of the year, Mumbai dominated from the word go with New Zealand pacer Trent Boult claiming opener Sunil Narine's stumps in the very first over of the match.

Narine's in-form batting partner Quinton de Kock was next to go, out caught trying to loft Deepak Chahar.

Captain Ajinkya Rahane followed soon after, slicing a wide and full ball from Kumar to the deep backward point fielder after scoring 11 off seven deliveries.

Aggressive middle-order batter Venkatesh Iyer struggled to get off the blocks, falling for three from nine balls. The left-handed Angkush Raghuvanshi batted fluently for his 26 runs but failed to carry on, leaving the visitors reeling at 45-5 in seven overs.

Despite some resistance by impact substitute Manish Pandey (19 off 14) and the attacking Rinku Singh (17 off 14), Kolkata never recovered.

A late flurry by Ramandeep Singh (22 off 12) helped Kolkata

reach the three-figure mark but it was too little too late, with the innings folding in the 17th over.

In contrast, Mumbai got off to a brisk start but India batter Rohit Sharma missed out once again, managing only 13 off 12 balls.

England all-rounder Will Jacks, who came in to replace Sharma, pulled his second ball over fine leg for a six, extinguishing any hopes of a Kolkata comeback.

Jacks (16 off 17) and Rickleton put together a partnership of 45 runs to take Mumbai closer to the target. T20 specialist Suryakumar Yadav's quickfire 27 off just nine balls ensured Mumbai crossed the line without further hiccups.

"Very satisfying. To win, especially at home and the way we did it as a group - everyone chipped in, cannot be happier," said Mumbai captain Hardik Pandya.

"It is always a challenge of picking one guy here or there. Our team is sorted with the players we are backing and the players we have. We thought Ashwani can

come in (on this pitch) and bowl the way he bowled. It is all scouts - they picked him. They have gone to all the places and picked these young kids. We played a practice game, he had that zip, that late swing, something off the wicket, a different action and he was a leftie. We just backed him and the way he took that wicket of Russell was a very crucial wicket, and how he started with the catch of de Kock, it was terrific to see (a fast bowler jumping up to take it). When it goes my way, it looks good. But the kind of team we have, we have a lot of young and experienced players combined and I do not have to worry much. Early start, but a great sign for everyone to chip in and kick off the tournament for us."

BRIEF SCORES
Mumbai Indians 121 for 2
(Rickleton 62*, Russell 2-35)
beat Kolkata Knight Riders 116
(Raghuvanshi 26, Ashwani 4-24)
by eight wickets.

FOCUS

Brathwaite steps down as West Indies Test captain, Hope to lead T20 team

AFP
St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda

Kraig Brathwaite quit as West Indies Test captain yesterday after four years in charge while ODI skipper Shai Hope was handed leadership of the T20 team, officials said.

The 32-year-old Brathwaite, who is two matches shy of reaching the 100-Test mark, led the team to a first Test victory in Australia in 27 years with an eight-run win in Brisbane last year.

Earlier this season, he was in charge when the West Indies won a Test match in Pakistan for the first time in nearly 35 years. A dogged and disciplined opening batsman, Brathwaite has accumulated 5,935 runs in Tests with 12 centuries and 31 fifties but at an average of just over 33.

He is also renowned for feats of patience, batting for the best part of 16 hours over two innings to secure a draw with England at Barbados in 2022.

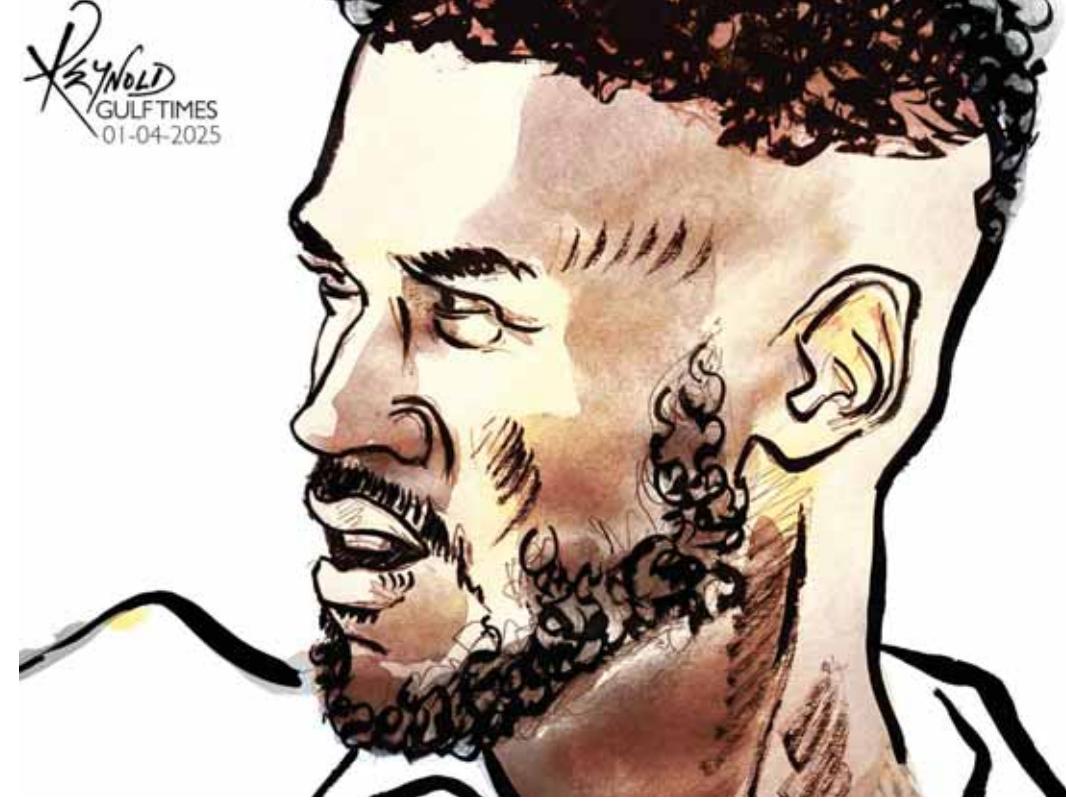
"Kraig Brathwaite has been an outstanding leader for our Test team, guiding the squad with discipline, resilience, and a deep understanding of the game," said West Indies director of cricket, Miles Bascombe.

"His contributions have been

invaluable, and under his leadership, we have witnessed historic moments that will be remembered for years to come."

Meanwhile, Hope replaces Rov-

RYNOLD
GULFTIMES
01-04-2025



man Powell, in charge since 2023, as T20 captain. Hope, 31, has played 133 ODIs and 39 T20 internationals, scoring more than 6,000 runs over both formats. He

has 17 centuries in ODI cricket. "Shai Hope's appointment signals a progressive shift for West Indies cricket," said head coach Darren Sammy.

SPOTLIGHT

England Test captain Stokes to miss early county games

AFP
London

Ben Stokes is not expected to play in the early rounds of the County Championship as he battles to be fit to lead England, his Durham coach Ryan Campbell said yesterday.

The 33-year-old Test captain is recovering from hamstring surgery after breaking down in New Zealand in December, his second hamstring tear in five months. But the all-rounder is not yet ready for action in the four-day domestic championship, which starts on Friday.

England host Zimbabwe in May, with a five-Test series against India to follow. Later in the year they head to Australia for a five-match Ashes series.

Durham have six matches in the top tier of the County Championship before the Zimbabwe Test. Campbell, who is also without England quicks Brydon Carse (toe) and Mark Wood (knee), made it clear no risks would be taken.

"When you look at Carse, Stokes and Wood, at this stage they're probably not likely to play for us. My expectation is that it'll be zero - anything else

is an added bonus," he said. "They're all coming back from serious injuries. The facts are that they need to get up and running by the time the Test matches start."

"But what we know about Stokes is that he's here nearly every single day working his butt off. The guy had hamstring surgery and was in the next day lifting weights, which I couldn't believe. He sets the bar, wherever he is."

Campbell has pledged to protect Carse, 29, who has impressed since making his Test debut against Pakistan in October 2024, taking 27 wickets at an average of 19.85 in five matches.

"I think Brydon Carse is probably the number one priority for England right now," he said.

"With what he's shown in Test cricket, he's born for that sort of stuff. There's 11 Tests over the summer and winter, and I think he's going to be number one on England's list to make sure that he's ready to go for that."

"Does that mean he's going to play for us? I'm not so sure.... We've known about his foot problems for a year now. It's not new, but he needs to get it right if he's going to be playing a lot of Test cricket."

Cricket Australia hails 'box office' India fixtures

Cricket Australia has touted India's "box office appeal" after confirming the schedule for a string of white-ball fixtures at home ahead of the Ashes later this year. Australia's men will host India for three one day internationals and a five-match Twenty20 series in October-November.

The women's teams play in February and March next year in three T20s, three ODIs and a sole Test match. Cricket Australia chief executive Todd Greenberg welcomed "the fantastic box office appeal of the India men's and women's teams".

New South Wales cricket boss Lee German said he expected a "massive groundswell of support from Indian fans within our community".

Australia's schedule also includes three home T20s and three ODIs against South Africa in August. Matches will be spread far and wide across Australia, mixing grounds in the country's tropical north with more storied venues such as the Sydney Cricket Ground.

Australia host England for the five-Test Ashes series starting in November. It will be the first time an Ashes Test has been staged at the new Perth venue which replaced the old WACA ground, last used in 2017.

SRI LANKA CRICKET CHIEF GETS FOURTH TERM IN OFFICE

Colombo: Sri Lankan cricket board president Shami Silva was re-elected unopposed yesterday to serve a fourth consecutive term despite attempts by a former sports minister to remove him.

It was the third time Silva had been elected uncontested by Sri Lanka cricket's annual general meeting.

Roshan Ranasinghe, who was sports minister at the time, sacked Silva and his executive committee in November 2023, accusing them of maladministration and corruption.

Silva's committee was reinstated by the courts and Ranasinghe was dismissed from his post as sports minister by Sri Lanka's then president Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Sri Lanka Cricket is the country's richest sporting body. The 64-year-old Silva has also been president of the Asian Cricket Council since late last year.

(AFP)

Chennai coach Fleming says Dhoni faces balancing act with batting position

Chennai Super Kings (CSK) veteran Mahendra Singh Dhoni has raised eyebrows by dropping down their batting order in this year's Indian Premier League but coach Stephen Fleming said the 43-year-old is carefully managing his body.

Dhoni, renowned for his ability to help chase down totals, left fans stunned when he batted at number nine in Chennai's 50-run loss to Royal Challengers Bengaluru last week and at number seven in Sunday's six-run defeat by Rajasthan Royals.

While Dhoni has dazzled with his wicket-keeping skills so far this season, Fleming said batting for long periods in the middle overs may not be on the menu anymore for the seasoned campaigner who underwent knee surgery in 2023.

"Yeah, it's a time thing," Fleming told reporters.

"MS judges it. His body is, his knees aren't what they used to be and he's moving okay but there's still an attrition aspect to it."

"So he'll gauge on the day what he can give us. If the game's in the balance, he'll go a little bit earlier, and he backs other players when other opportunities are up. So he's balancing that."

Dhoni scored an unbeaten 30 off 16 balls against Bengaluru before making 16 off 11 balls against Rajasthan and Fleming said the former Chennai skipper had plenty to offer the five-times IPL champions even if he bats for just a few overs.

"I said it last year, he's too valuable to us - leadership and wicket-keeping - to throw him in at nine, 10 overs," added the New Zealander.

"He's actually never done that. So look, from around 13-14 overs, he's looking to go depending on who's in."

Chennai next take on Delhi Capitals at home on Saturday.



FOCUS

Brathwaite steps down as West Indies Test captain, Hope to lead T20 team

AFP
St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda

Kraig Brathwaite quit as West Indies Test captain yesterday after four years in charge while ODI skipper Shai Hope was handed leadership of the T20 team, officials said.

The 32-year-old Brathwaite, who is two matches shy of reaching the 100-Test mark, led the team to a first Test victory in Australia in 27 years with an eight-run win in Brisbane last year.

Earlier this season, he was in charge when the West Indies won a Test match in Pakistan for the first time in nearly 35 years. A dogged and disciplined opening batsman, Brathwaite has accumulated 5,935 runs in Tests with 12 centuries and 31 fifties but at an average of just over 33.

He is also renowned for feats of patience, batting for the best part of 16 hours over two innings to secure a draw with England at Barbados in 2022.

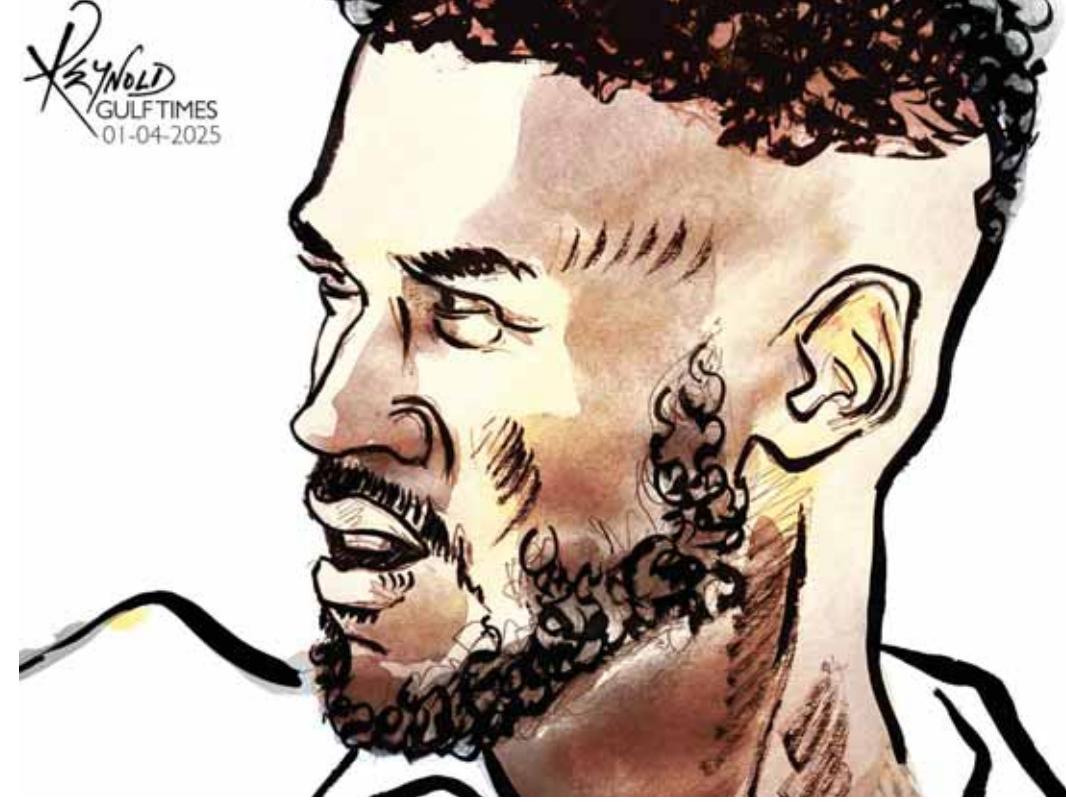
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has 17 centuries in ODI cricket. "Shai Hope's appointment signals a progressive shift for West Indies cricket," said head coach Darren Sammy.

TENNIS

Teenager Mensik shocks Djokovic to win Miami Open

'THERE IS NO HARDER TASK FOR A TENNIS PLAYER THAN TO BEAT YOU IN THE FINAL OF A TOURNAMENT'

AFP
Miami

Czech teenager Jakub Mensik upset Novak Djokovic 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/4) to win the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium on Sunday, denying the Serb his 100th career title.

The 19-year-old, ranked 54th in the world, claimed his first title on the ATP Tour with an outstanding display of powerful tennis.

The final was delayed by almost six hours due to heavy rain and when the players emerged it was clear that Djokovic had an eye infection. He used eye-drops during a changeover in the first set.

Mensik started strongly, breaking Djokovic's first serve game to go 2-0 up and the tall, big-serving Czech was dominating until, at 4-2 Djokovic broke back when Mensik found the net.

The set remained on serve from then on, but in the tie-break Mensik's powerful serve, with two aces, put him in charge from the outset. He opened up a 5-0 lead and although 24-time Grand Slam champion Djokovic fought back the youngster sealed the set with an overhead volley.

It was the first set that Djokovic had lost in the entire tournament. Twice he lost his footing and ended up on his back, and he changed his footwear between sets. Mensik had beaten Djokovic by the exact same margin in the first set of their only other meeting in Shanghai before losing in three sets.

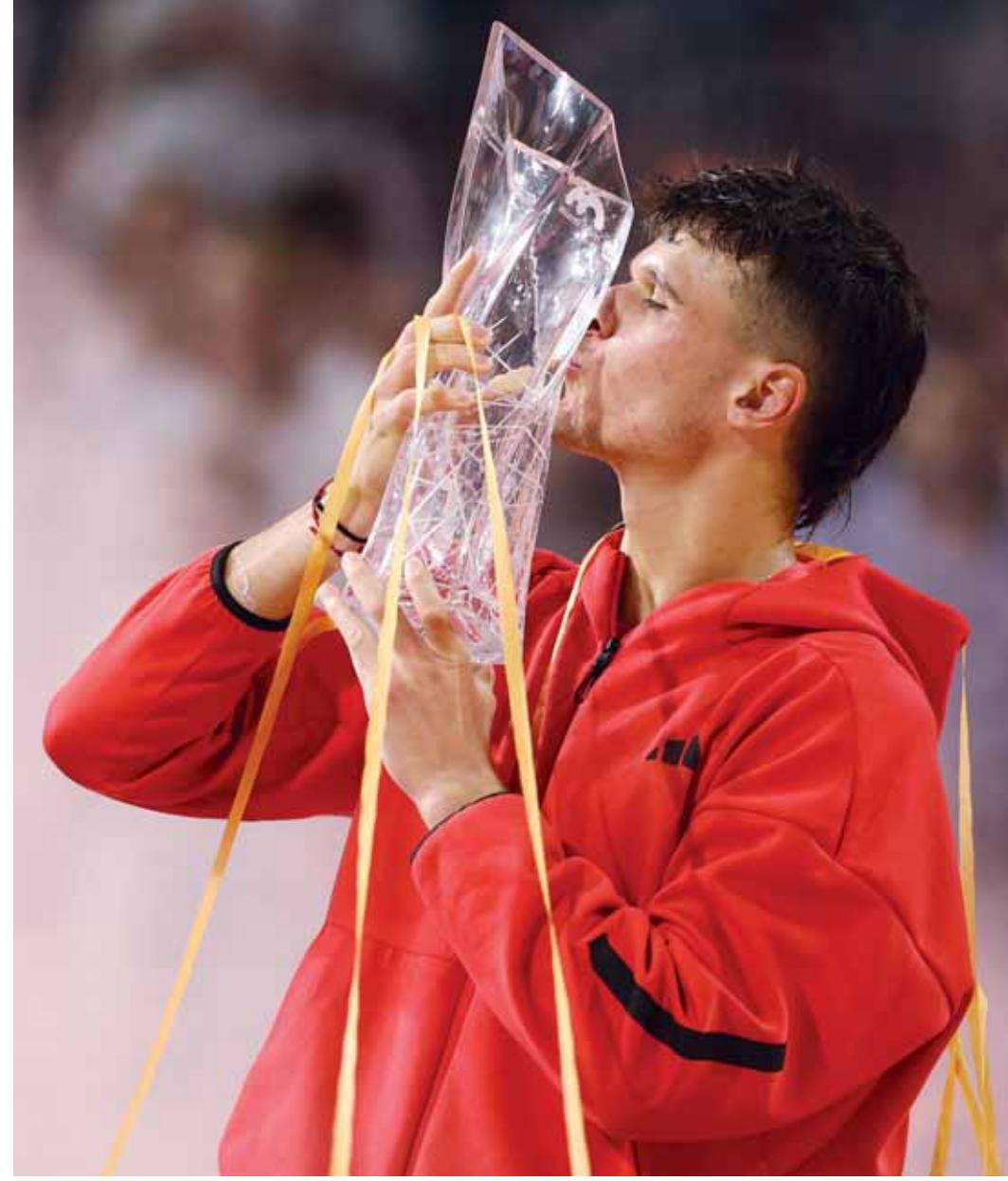
This time, however, the momentum appeared to be with him.

The second set was a nip and tuck affair, though, with neither player able to break. Once again Mensik's power proved decisive in the tie-break and when Djokovic went long on a return to hand him victory he fell to his back in celebration.

"To be honest I don't know what to say. It feels incredible, obviously," Mensik said in his on-court interview. "It was probably the biggest day of my life and I did super, which I'm really glad (about), to show the performance and keep the nerves outside of the court before the match."

"I feel just super happy and I think that the feelings will come later," he said.

Mensik has made no secret of the fact that he grew up with Djokovic as his idol and after receiving the trophy he said that he started his career in the hope of



Jakub Mensik of the Czech Republic poses with the championship trophy after defeating Novak Djokovic of Serbia in the final of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

emulating the Serb.

"There is no harder task for a tennis player than to beat you in the final of a tournament," he said.

"I am pretty sure that this was just the first of many," Mensik added, before revealing that he had been close to pulling out of the tournament before his first match due to a knee injury before last minute physiotherapy produced the desired results.

NO EXCUSES

After the match Djokovic admitted he had not felt at his best.

"It's unfortunate for me. Two

tiebreaks, just very weird match, weird day with rain delay and all the things that (were) happening. Honestly, yeah, I didn't feel my greatest on the court, but it is what it is. Nothing to take away from his victory," he said.

Asked specifically about his eye problem, the Serb said: "I really prefer not to talk about - there are quite a few things, but I prefer not to... just congratulate him. That's it. I don't want to sound like I'm giving excuses here for my loss."

Djokovic said he had spotted Mensik's talent a few years ago and invited him to train at his club.

"I saw him play when he was 15 or 16 and invited him, we had some training blocks together. He was training at my club in Belgrade, and, you know, to see his development and evolution is really great, amazing," he said.

"Never really happy to lose, but he's one of the very few players that I would be happier to lose to, to be honest."

The match between the 37-year-old Djokovic and Mensik was the biggest age gap difference in a Masters 1000 final and the biggest age gap of any tour-level final since 1976.

Referee's lunch break saved Miami winner Mensik from early exit

Czech teenager Jakub Mensik, who stunned Novak Djokovic in the Miami Open final on Sunday, said had it not been for a referee taking a timely lunch, he would have pulled out of the tournament before his first match. Mensik, who won his first ATP tour title with the victory, said he suffered intense pain in his right knee during practice and could barely walk, let alone run. The 19-year-old said that he had filled out his withdrawal form ahead of his match with Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut and went to the referee's room - but the official was out for lunch. "I was like OK, well let's just visit the physios. I told them, 'my knee is hurting, I filled out the paper and I'm going,'" Mensik told reporters. "The physio said let's see and he started to do a couple of treatments, he took care of it for like 30 minutes. He said it is nothing serious and you can play with this pain and nothing will happen," he added.

But Mensik said, while the ref was eating lunch, he returned to the treadmill and was still in agony.

"I was really suffering. I took a different painkiller, switched it up a bit and started to feel a little relief. It was 30 minutes before the match, I thought 'I can walk, I can run, let's see.'

Mensik won the match in three sets, beginning a run at Miami which saw him beat Indian Wells champion Jack Draper and - in

the semi-final, world number four Taylor Fritz.

It was a tournament which showed the teenager's huge potential and Mensik, who said emulating Djokovic had been his motivation for starting his career, wrote on the camera lens "First of many" as he held the trophy.

"Of course, right now, it's the biggest win of my career so far, and I'm just super happy with that, but I know that this is not the end, I know that this is just the beginning for me, and I'm still 19 years old, so I have all my career in front of me," he said.

"Of course it feels really great to have this trophy next to me, but it's not just about the one title, one tournament."

"Now I will celebrate, rest, when I will get back home, I'm going back to work, and will try to get better and better, because still there is a lot of space for improvement in my game, so I and my team will do our best to lift these trophies more often," he said.

Mensik was not even born when Djokovic played in his first ATP Masters 1000 event, a fact that, when pointed out to him, led Mensik to put his head in his hands.

"And he's top five still. So it's just crazy and unbelievable what he's achieving in this sport during long period of the time," he said.

"Imagine me in 20 years from now, which I will be 39 playing the finals? I hope so, but it's crazy, to think about it like this." (AFP)



Jakub Mensik talks with Novak Djokovic (left) during the Miami Open presentation ceremony. (AFP)

FORMULA 1

Tsunoda targets podium finish in Japan after 'unreal' Red Bull move

AFP
Tokyo

Yuki Tsunoda has targeted a podium finish at his home Japanese Grand Prix this weekend after his "unreal" promotion to the Red Bull team in place of the axed Liam Lawson.

Tsunoda will race alongside four-time world champion Max Verstappen after Red Bull ruthlessly pulled the plug on underperforming New Zealander Lawson last week, just two races into the F1 season.

Tsunoda said it felt "unreal" to be driving for one of the top teams on the grid and set his sights on making an instant impact in front of the Japanese fans at Suzuka.

"I don't want to raise expectations too much but I want to finish on the podium at this Japanese Grand Prix," the 24-year-old said at an event with Red Bull partner Honda in Tokyo on Sunday. Tsunoda steps up from Red Bull's junior team, Racing Bulls (RB), with Lawson moving back down to RB, where he was last season.

Tsunoda said he did not expect to be racing for the team in Japan, after being passed over for Lawson when Mexico's Sergio Perez left Red Bull at the end of last season.

"It has all fallen into place and now I'm standing here, and that's thanks to the support of everyone," said Tsunoda.

Tsunoda has never finished on the podium in four full seasons in



F1 but he has shown pace on both race weekends this year.

He was 12th in the season opener at Melbourne and only finished out of the points at Shanghai because of RB's flawed two-stop pit strategy.

Tsunoda urged Japanese fans to get behind him at Suzuka for his Red Bull grand prix debut.

"The thing that I'm looking forward to most is that there couldn't be a more pressurised, challenging situation than this," he said.

"It's also my debut, so with all these things added up I think it's

going to be an unbelievably exciting race."

Lawson was knocked out at the first stage of all three qualifying sessions this season and has yet to score a point.

The New Zealander struggled to control the Red Bull but Tsunoda said he "didn't think it was that challenging a car to drive" after two days on a simulator.

"Everyone says the car is very responsive and I got that impression too, but it didn't seem to act in a strange, tricky manner," he said.

MOTORSPORT

Aston Martin to sell its minority stake in Formula 1 team

Reuters
London

Luxury carmaker Aston Martin Lagonda said yesterday it planned to sell its minority stake in the Aston Martin Aramco Formula One team to help turn around its loss-making core business.

At the same time, Aston Martin's main shareholder, the Yew Tree Consortium, plans to raise its stake in the group to 33 percent, a statement said.

Aston Martin, the model beloved by fictional British spy James Bond, added that the combined action will increase the group's liquidity by more than £125mn (\$162mn).

The consortium is led by Ca-

nadian Lawrence Stroll, whose son Lance Stroll drives for the Formula One team.

The company said that its long-term Formula One sponsorship deal will not be affected.

Aston Martin chief executive Adrian Hallmark said the new investment will "accelerate our progress into being a sustainably profitable company".

The company last month announced it would cut about five percent of its workforce as weak Chinese demand contributed to losses widening in 2024.

Hallmark began as chief executive late last year, replacing Italian national Amedeo Felisa.

The Briton is the fourth Aston Martin boss in as many years, having stepped down as CEO of German-owned luxury carmaker

Bentley. By increasing its stake above 30 percent, the consortium would be required to make a bid for all of Aston Martin, under British takeover rules - but Yew is asking for this to be waived.

"Exemptions have been granted in the past, yet it feels like a takeover would be a better outcome as it would mean the car company would be free to pursue a turnaround strategy out of the public spotlight," noted Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell.

"Time after time, Aston Martin has tapped investors for more money, yet the business is arguably going nowhere."

Mould added that offloading the stake in the Aston Martin Formula One team "screams of desperation".

Cycling adopts 23-team format for Grand Tours

The Giro d'Italia, Tour de France and Vuelta a Espana will involve 23 teams from this year, with the initiative rubber-stamped by the International Cycling Union yesterday. The extra teams come from extra wildcard invitations, an initiative proposed by the Professional Cycling Council. The total number of riders will shift from 176 under the 22-team model, to 184 with 23 teams.

"The UCI Management Commit-

tee has approved the request submitted by the PCC to increase the number of teams participating in the men's Grand Tours (Giro d'Italia, Tour de France and La Vuelta a Espana) to 23," the UCI said. The expansion aims to support second division teams, while enabling organisers to strengthen the line-up for their race and give riders from the additional teams the opportunity to compete in a Grand Tour.

All 18 top-tier World Tour teams take part in the Grand Tours, with extra invitations given to teams from the second-tier Pro Tour.

Tour de France organisers immediately announced their full line-up for the 2025 race with the top two Pro-Tour teams Lotto and Israel Premier Tech, plus three wild cards in Total Energies, Tudor Pro Cycling and Uno X Mobility.

(AFP)

FOCUS

'Different energy' at Man Utd after mini-revival: Amorim

I'M REALLY CONFIDENT. I FEEL THAT THE PLAYERS ARE MORE CONFIDENT, THE ENERGY IS DIFFERENT'

AFP
London

Ruben Amorim says the "energy is different" at Manchester United after a mini-revival but admits their confidence is fragile as they prepare to return to action following the international break.

United, who travel to face high-flying Nottingham Forest today, are a lowly 13th in the Premier League, 12 points off the top four with just nine games to go.

But they are unbeaten in seven matches in all competitions, though they exited the FA Cup on penalties at home to Fulham during that sequence. Amorim, whose injury crisis is easing, was asked on Monday whether his team could pick up where they left off before the internationals.

"I'm really confident. I feel that the players are more confident, the energy is different," said the Portuguese manager, who took charge at Old Trafford in November.

"But I also know that this could change with the results. So we are focused on maintaining the energy. We worked on some things that we have a lot to improve."

"Even winning the games, we can acknowledge that we have a lot to improve. But we are in a different moment, more confident and ready for this final two months of the season."

United have seven games in April, including a season-defining Europa League quarter-final against Lyon and tough Premier League matches against Manches-

ter City and Newcastle. Defenders Harry Maguire and Lenny Yoro are available again and Amorim said Ayden Heaven's injury was not as bad as first feared.

"It's really important to have all the players available for them to fight, for us to rotate during matches," said the United boss. "Different characteristics give us different opportunities to win football matches."

"But I think it's a very good moment in our season. I know that we will have at least three games in the Premier League now that are really tough. But I think the team is prepared to face those games."

Amorim was cagey when asked about the form of Marcus Rashford, who is on loan at Aston Villa after he fell out of favour at Old Trafford. The England winger scored his first goals for Villa on Sunday, striking twice as Unai Emery's men beat Preston 3-0 to reach the FA Cup semi-finals.

"I'm focused on my team and my players," said Amorim. "Rashford is not my player at the moment. But every player that performs well on loan is good news for our club. So we are happy with that."

'No excuses' for tired Forest against Man Utd'

Nuno Espírito Santo says high-flying Nottingham Forest will adopt a "no-excuses" policy for their clash with Manchester United today after a draining FA Cup quarter-final at Brighton. Forest won Saturday's match at the Amex on penalties after the match finished 0-0 to set up a last-four

meeting with Manchester City. Forest boss Nuno revealed that every player in his squad is being assessed ahead of the visit of United, but whoever is available he expects the push for Champions League football to continue without pause.

Two-time European champions Forest have not played in Europe's top club competition since 1980 but they are third in the Premier League, five points clear of fourth-placed Chelsea with just nine games to go.

It is almost certain that a top-five finish will secure a place in next season's Champions League.

"No excuses. Don't give anyone excuses," Nuno said yesterday. "We're going to go. We'll assess the players, we'll prepare for the game and we're going to compete."

"It's very difficult on the players but they are recovering well. They are always being positive so we are confident we can perform against a good team."

"These short turnarounds are all about recovering and fortunately the match is in the evening so it will give us the day to finalise the details, so we will be OK."

Prolific striker Chris Wood missed the victory over Brighton because of a hip injury sustained on international duty for New Zealand and he remains a doubt against Ruben Amorim's United.

"He is improving. He's getting better day by day. We have to assess him day by day," Nuno said.

"It's all about him being pain-free and then getting back to fitness. He has a big contusion. It's very painful."



Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim. (Reuters)

COMMENT

Mbappe can be Real 'legend' like Ronaldo, says Ancelotti

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said yesterday superstar striker Kylian Mbappe is capable of becoming a legend at the club like all-time top goalscorer Cristiano Ronaldo.

Mbappe idolised Ronaldo while growing up and after joining Madrid from Paris Saint-Germain last summer, has equalled the Portuguese striker's tally of 33 goals in his first season at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"What I wish for Mbappe is that he is capable of achieving what Ronaldo did at Real Madrid - and I think that he can do it," Ancelotti told a news conference.

"That means he will be a legend at Real Madrid, like Cristiano Ronaldo is."

Ronaldo joined Real from Manchester United in 2009 and departed in 2018 as the club's top scorer with 450 goals.

The 40-year-old, now at Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia, scored 33 goals in 35 games in his first campaign with Real Madrid.

Mbappe, 26, notched a brace against Leganes in La Liga on Saturday and said it was "very special" to match Ronaldo.

"We know what he means for



Real Madrid's forward Kylian Mbappe celebrates after converting a penalty to score their first goal during the La Liga match against Leganes at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid. (AFP)

Real Madrid and me, we speak, he gives me a lot of advice," Mbappe told Real Madrid TV.

With Madrid still competing on three fronts this season Mbappe has plenty of time to increase his tally. Ancelotti's side host Real Sociedad today in a Copa del Rey

semi-final second leg clash, holding a 1-0 lead from the first leg in San Sebastian. Should Madrid go on to win the cup, Ancelotti would become their first coach to lift it on three occasions.

"To be close to a final motivates me, it motivates the players and

it motivates the club," said Ancelotti.

"It's an achievement to play in a final in any competition, so to be so close, to have a small advantage, and because we'll have the support of our fans obviously motivates us even more."

Arsenal, Tottenham to play pre-season North London derby in Hong Kong

Arsenal will play Tottenham in a pre-season friendly in Hong Kong, the first North London derby to be held outside the United Kingdom, the clubs said yesterday, while Liverpool will meet AC Milan. The London rivals will clash at the southern Chinese city's new 50,000-capacity Kai Tak Stadium on July 31, just over two weeks before the start of the Premier League season. Former Spurs and England defender Ledley King said it would give Hong Kong fans "a glimpse of what a North London derby is like". "We're obviously neighbours back home so it's going to be strange to come all the way across the other side of the world to play your neighbours, but it's fantastic for the fans in Asia," he said. "It's a pre-season game, but there's no friendlies when these two teams play each other," he added. Liverpool will play Serie A giants Milan at the same stadium on July 26. It

will be a re-run of the classic 2005 Champions League final, which the Reds won on penalties after being 3-0 down at half-time. Arne Slot's Liverpool are likely to head to Hong Kong as Premier League champions - they are currently 12 points clear with nine games left. After Hong Kong, Liverpool will travel to Japan for the first time during pre-season, the club said, without giving dates.

Hong Kong officially opened a major \$3.85bn sports park this month with the futuristic Kai Tak Stadium as its centrepiece of it. The stadium saw its first major event at the weekend when it hosted the Hong Kong Rugby Sevens, with more than 110,000 spectators attending over three days. It is all part of efforts to restore the city's image, which took a battering after political protests and a Beijing-imposed national security law. Visitor numbers to Hong

Kong also plummeted during almost three years of strict Covid curbs and have only recently begun to recover.

ITALY'S GATTI SUFFERS CALF BONE FRACTURE

Federico Gatti will miss Juventus' clash with top four rivals Roma next weekend after the Serie A club announced yesterday that he had fractured his left calf bone. Juventus said that tests on Monday morning "revealed the presence of a compound fracture to the diaphysis of the fibula" in his left leg. Gatti was forced to leave the field in the first half of Juve's 1-0 win over Genoa on Saturday, which was also interim coach Igor Tudor's first match in charge following the sacking of Thiago Motta. Juve did not say for how long Gatti would be out of action but media report that the defender is set to be sidelined for a month.

PREVIEW

Cannes eye place in French Cup final

AFP
Paris

The French Cup is a tournament with a reputation for producing upsets and Cannes are the latest name dreaming of a shock result when the fourth-tier club play host to top-flight Reims in the semi-finals tomorrow.

Paris Saint-Germain have unsurprisingly dominated the competition in recent years and are favourites to retain the trophy as they prepare to take on Dunkerque of Ligue 2 in the first semi-final today.

However, Cannes are following the example set by numerous other clubs from the lower leagues in recent years.

Les Herbiers and Quevilly, both from the third division, each got to the final in the last decade, losing narrowly to PSG and Lyon respectively.

More recently, fourth-tier clubs Versailles and Rumilly-Vallières have made the semi-finals in the last four seasons.

The ultimate example, however, is Calais, who in 2000 emerged from the fourth tier to get to the final, where they were unlucky to lose to Nantes.

Nevertheless, the Channel port of Calais does not have quite the same glamour as Cannes, the Côte d'Azur resort better known for its annual film festival than its football team.

ZIDANE'S FIRST CLUB
And yet Cannes are a historic name in the French game. They won the French Cup in 1932 and were a fixture in the top flight for a time in the 1980s and 1990s, even making it to the UEFA Cup.

Zinedine Zidane began his career in the Cannes youth academy and was handed his debut aged 16 in 1989, while a few years later Patrick Vieira was given his senior bow in a Cannes shirt.

But the club slipped out of the professional leagues and disappeared practically into oblivion, being expelled to the depths of the seventh tier in 2014 due to financial problems.

They have slowly been working their way back up the divisions, and in 2023 were taken over by the US-based Friedkin

Group which is involved in the film industry but also owns Roma and recently bought Everton. A world away from Serie A and the Premier League, Cannes have an operating budget of five million euros (\$5.4m), and a total wage bill of one million euros, the club's general manager Félicien Laborde told AFP in February.

Of the Friedkins, Laborde told sports daily *L'Equipe* that "they delegate completely, just like they do at Roma and Everton, with whom there is no collaboration".

"The difference in level is too great and they respect the different characteristics of each club," he said. He was speaking ahead of the quarter-final against Guingamp, who became the third Ligue 2 club eliminated in the semi-final today.

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Cannes currently find themselves in the National 2, France's fourth tier which is split into three regionalised divisions, each comprising 16 teams.

The side finishing top of each group wins promotion, although Cannes are third in Group A, eight points behind leaders Le Puy with seven games left.

"The Cup has given us a taste of the top level, as well as the desire to get back there," admitted Laborde, who insisted promotion was the priority over the Cup. However, after going five months unbeaten, Cannes have lost their last two matches, and it looks like that is going to prove costly in terms of promotion.

Now Reims stand in their way in a Cup tie which Cannes will host at their Stade Pierre de Coubertin, a few kilometres west of the Croisette.

Two-time European Cup finalists in the 1950s, Reims are themselves hoping to reach the French Cup final for the first time since 1977 amid a difficult season in Ligue 1.

"They are a Ligue 1 club, so if they want to take us they will take us. It all depends on them," admitted Cannes coach Damien Ott, subtly nudging the pressure onto the opposition.