

To subscribe  
**GULF TIMES**  
Newspaper  
Please call  
**444 666 35**



CRICKET | Page 2

Prabhsimran powers Punjab to IPL win over Lucknow



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Liverpool's Slot unfazed by Alexander-Arnold Real Madrid links

To advertise here,  
PLEASE CALL  
**444 666 21**

Wednesday, April 2, 2025  
Shawwal 4, 1446 AH

**GULF TIMES**

**SPORT**

TENNIS

Kasatkina looks ahead to new chapter under Australian flag

Page 3

PREMIER LEAGUE

# Saka scores on return as Arsenal beat Fulham 2-1

WOLVES EASE RELEGATION WORRIES WITH 1-0 WIN OVER WEST HAM

AFP  
London

**B**ukayo Saka marked his return from a lengthy injury absence with a goal as Arsenal beat Fulham 2-1 yesterday to cut the gap on Premier League leaders Liverpool to nine points.

Saka came off the bench to head in on his first appearance since December 21, after Mikel Merino's deflected effort had given Arsenal a first-half lead. However, victory came at a cost as key defender Gabriel Magalhaes limped off injured.

Rodrigo Muniz pulled a goal back in stoppage time, but defeat is a blow to Fulham's ambitions of European football next season.

The Cottagers remain in eighth, three points outside a top-five finish that would almost certainly secure Champions League football next season.

Just one week away from the Gunners' Champions League quarter-final, first leg against Real Madrid, the sight of Gabriel pulling up with a hamstring problem added to Mikel Arteta's injury woes.

However, the return of Saka is a massive boost to Arsenal's faint hopes of chasing down Liverpool and a shot at becoming European champions for the first time.

Arsenal's place in the top five is looking assured as they move 14 points clear of sixth-placed Newcastle. Arteta's men are on course to finish second for the third consecutive season given Liverpool's commanding lead.

But the Spaniard showed no sign of having one eye on a blockbuster Champions League tie against the holders with his team selection.

Gabriel would be a massive miss



Arsenal's Bukayo Saka celebrates scoring the team's second goal during the English Premier League match against Fulham at the Emirates Stadium in London yesterday. (AFP)

and the centre-back will now be a major doubt for that tie after pulling up inside the first 15 minutes.

Arsenal never got going as an attacking threat in a first half short on clear-cut chances, but Merino maintained his impressive record as a makeshift striker due to season-ending injuries to Kai Havertz and Gabriel Jesus. The Spanish international now has five goals in eight games in his new role, but had fortune on his side to break the deadlock.

Ethan Nwaneri was Arsenal's biggest threat in the first 45 minutes and his cross picked out Merino, who needed the benefit of a big deflection to see his shot loop into the far corner.

Saka's introduction was greeted with the biggest cheer of the night until that point at the Emirates Sta-

dium when he replaced Nwaneri 25 minutes from time. The England international took just eight minutes to net his 10th goal of the season.

Saka was in the right place to head in from close range after Gabriel Martinelli flicked on Merino's cross.

Muniz should have set up a grandstand finish when he headed wide a glorious chance to pull a goal back for the visitors 10 minutes from time.

The Brazilian made amends to net a consolation in stoppage time but it was too little, too late for Fulham as Arsenal maintained some pressure on Liverpool ahead of their Merseyside derby at home to Everton today.

Meanwhile Wolverhampton Wanderers striker Jorgen Strand Larsen scored the only goal of the game as they beat visitors West Ham United 1-0 yesterday to make it two wins in

a row and put some more daylight between them and the Premier League relegation places.

The win leaves Wolves in 17th spot on 29 points, 12 ahead of Ipswich Town in 18th and 19th-placed Leicester City, who are both in action today against Bournemouth and Manchester City, respectively.

West Ham's Evan Ferguson missed a good chance to give his side the lead and Toti Gomes hit the woodwork for Wolves before Norwegian Strand Larsen broke the deadlock with a deflected effort in the 21st minute.

The Hammers went on to dominate much of the second half but they failed to create good chances. The closest they came to an equaliser were a header off the crossbar by substitute Niclas Füllkrug and a late shot that Tomas Soucek fired just wide.

## Haaland ruled out for up to seven weeks: Man City boss Guardiola

Erling Haaland will be out of action for up to seven weeks after suffering an ankle injury, Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said yesterday.

The prolific 24-year-old Norwegian was forced off in Sunday's 2-1 FA Cup quarter-final win at Bournemouth after scoring his 30th goal of the season.

City said on Monday that the forward would see a specialist but anticipated he "will be fit to play a further part in the remainder of this season including this summer's FIFA Club World Cup".

Guardiola gave an update yesterday, on the eve of his side's Premier League match against struggling Leicester at the Etihad. "The doctors told me between five and seven weeks," he said.

"So hopefully for the end of season and FIFA Club World Cup he will be ready. Sometimes there are years where these kinds of things happen. It's happened all season." Premier League champions City have been hit hard by injuries in the current campaign, most damagingly losing Ballon d'Or winner Rodri for the bulk of the season.

Guardiola said City did not have another player with Haaland's attributes but would have to adapt as they chase a spot in the Champions League next season. City are currently fifth in the Premier League, which is likely to be enough to secure a place in Europe's top club competition after strong performances from English clubs in European competition.

They have nine games left in the Premier League season plus an FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest towards the end of April.

A seven-week absence would rule Haaland out of most of the rest of the Premier League campaign.

The FA Cup final takes place on May 17, a day short of seven weeks after Haaland suffered the injury.

City's final Premier League game is at Fulham on May 25 while their first match in the Club World Cup in the United States takes place on June 18. Guardiola said his other players would have to adjust to playing without their predator, who has a remarkable goalscoring record since arriving in English football in 2022.

"We need players with other qualities and we have to bring more players close to the box," he said.

"Erling's numbers again have been exceptional and he is an incredible threat for many things with long balls and his sense of goal but we have to adjust.

"We will find a solution for the players that we have with different skills and qualities. We will find that."

Guardiola played down the challenge of qualifying for the Champions League.

"We had in the past much tougher than this one," he said. "When you have to win 16 or 17 games to win the Premier League don't tell me it's not a tough one.

"In the past except the first season we were together, and one season when Liverpool were extremely strong and we could not compete with them, all the time we were there to fight for the Premier League.

"This is the first time, along with the first season I was here nine years ago, that we have to fight to qualify for the Champions League. We have nine games left and we know what we have to do."



FOCUS

# Ticket sales for ITTF World Table Tennis Championships Finals Doha 2025 begin

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**he Qatar Table Tennis Federation has officially announced the launch of ticket sales for the upcoming ITTF World Table Tennis Championships Finals, which will be hosted in Doha from May 17-25, 2025.

This marks a historic return of the prestigious event to Qatar, which first hosted the World Championships in 2004, making it the first country in the Middle East to do so. Now, more than two decades later, Doha is gearing up to once again be at the heart of the international table tennis world.

Fans eager to attend the championships can now purchase tickets online through the popular Q-Tickets platform. The website provides an easy and convenient way for enthusiasts to secure their



seats for the thrilling matches, which will take place at two of Qatar's premier venues: Lusail Hall and Qatar University Hall. These state-of-the-art locations are set to host the world's top players as they compete for the coveted titles in men's and women's singles, men's and women's doubles, and

mixed doubles events.

The ITTF has expressed its anticipation, stating: "Tickets for the World Table Tennis Championships Finals Doha 2025 are now available for purchase through the official ticketing platform, Q-Tickets. We look forward to welcoming you to Doha!"

Preparations for the championship are well underway, with the Qatar Table Tennis Federation making extensive efforts to ensure the event's success.



The organising committee is committed to delivering an exceptional edition of the World Championships, building on Qatar's reputation for hosting world-class sporting events. As the first Arab and Gulf country to host the championship twice, Qatar possesses the infrastructure, organisational expertise, and world-class facilities needed to stage a successful tournament.

Thani al-Zarraq, a member of the Qatar Federation's Board of Directors and Chairman of the

National Teams Committee, confirmed that the federation is well-prepared to host the tournament in May.

"We have reached the semi-final stages and have completed approximately 90 percent of the tournament's preparatory tasks," al-Zarraq stated.

"We have selected five 5-star hotels for the delegations, and transportation arrangements have been made to ensure smooth travel for players and guests from the hotels to the competition venues." Al-Zarraq also mentioned that the tournament mascot would be revealed in the coming weeks, and the tournament draw would take place at the Mall of Qatar at the end of this month.

The tournament promises to feature some of the brightest stars in the world of table tennis, with top-ranked players from around the globe set to compete for the title. The list of participants will be

revealed in early April, just before the draw takes place.

As part of its preparations, the Qatar Table Tennis Federation has hosted several combined international tournaments in recent months, providing invaluable experience for its staff and volunteers. These events, including one held in January, have served as key rehearsals for the World Championships, ensuring that Qatar's organisational capabilities are fully tested and refined ahead of the main event.

The ITTF has expressed confidence in Qatar's ability to deliver a memorable and unique edition of the World Championships, different from any that have come before it. With meticulous planning, top-tier facilities, and a world-class organising team, the 2025 World Table Tennis Championships in Doha promises to be an unforgettable spectacle for fans and players alike.



CRICKET

# Australia selectors see a role in Ashes for discarded Marsh, Konstas gets contract

Agencies  
Melbourne

Dumped all-rounder Mitchell Marsh has the skills to trouble England and could break back into Australia's Test squad in time for the Ashes, selectors' chief George Bailey said yesterday.

Marsh was dropped after the fourth Test against India following a series of low scores.

He was then overlooked for the Sri Lanka tour while battling a lower back injury.

The 33-year-old barely bowled during the home summer, and while he has resumed playing in the Indian Premier League, he has been limited to batting for Lucknow Super Giants.

Marsh was nonetheless retained in Australia's list of contracted players released yesterday for the 2025/26 season in an endorsement by selectors.

"I don't necessarily think his red-ball career is over," Bailey told reporters.

"I don't think he was scoring the runs he wanted or we wanted when we left him out of the Test side, but there's still an incredibly exciting skill set there with the bat, the way



Australia's batsman Mitchell Marsh reacts after being bowled out by England's James Anderson in the fifth Test at The Oval, London, Britain, on July 28, 2023. (Reuters)

he can rip a game open.

"If you look ahead to a team like England and the way they play their cricket, the way they seem to be framing up their team, I think he's got a skill set there that could be helpful."

Marsh has played some of his best cricket against England, av-

eraging 47.07 in 10 Tests versus his modest career average of 28.53.

He faces an uphill battle to break back into the Australian squad, though, with Cameron Green re-

covering from back surgery and another all-rounder, Beau Webster, impressing in Tests against India and Sri Lanka. Selectors will



Sam Konstas

pick a squad next month for the World Test Championship final against South Africa at Lord's in June.

While two-Test opener Sam Konstas earned his first Australia contract, no decisions have been made as to whether the 19-year-old will be recalled for South Africa after being dropped for the series win over Sri Lanka, said Bailey.

Konstas is battling several players for a spot in Australia's top six, including Marnus Labuschagne, Green and Josh Inglis.

Konstas was one of three players to earn their first national contracts, joining spinner Matt Kuhnemann and all-rounder Beau

Webster. White-ball all-rounders Sean Abbott and Aaron Hardie, and seven-Test spinner Todd Murphy made way for the new trio.

"In Sam we see promising upside in a young player who will continue to develop at first class level and in the international environment," Bailey said.

Kuhnemann's contract is another boost for the left-arm spinner who was recently cleared of having a suspect bowling action following his prolific tour of Sri Lanka.

Kuhnemann was reported for his bowling action after he was Player of the Series with 16 wickets in Sri Lanka.

Tasmania all-rounder Webster has had a strong entry into test cricket since his Sydney debut against India, scoring 150 runs at an average of 50.00 from his three matches along with three wickets with his medium pace.

"Matt was outstanding once again in Sri Lanka and we believe he can play a key role across the next 18 months," said Bailey.

"In Beau's case he proved more than comfortable at Test level with bat and ball, adds an additional dimension in the field and to the balance of the side."

With 20 out of 23 players retaining their contracts, selectors have

opted for continuity over change for an ageing Australian squad.

Pace bowler Jhye Richardson was retained despite nearly three years passing since his last international match.

Fringe pace bowlers Lance Morris and Xavier Bartlett also kept their contracts after barely featuring for Australia in the 2024/25 season.

Bailey suggested players who missed out against South Africa might get chances in the following three-Test series against West Indies in June-July.

"The way we frame that (WTC final) and potentially look at how we structure that team may be different than the West Indies tour," he said.

## AUSTRALIA CONTRACTED PLAYERS FOR 2025-26

Xavier Bartlett, Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Pat Cummins, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Sam Konstas, Matthew Kuhnemann, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Glenn Maxwell, Lance Morris, Jhye Richardson, Matt Short, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc, Beau Webster, Adam Zampa

## INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

# Prabhsimran the hero as Punjab crush Lucknow

'This is the start we required. Boys actually played their roles well'



Punjab Kings' captain Shreyas Iyer (right) and Prabhsimran Singh bump their fists during the IPL match against Lucknow Super Giants at the Ekana Cricket Stadium in Lucknow yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Lucknow

Wicketkeeper-batsman Prabhsimran Singh scored an explosive 69 off 34 balls as Punjab Kings cruised to an eight-wicket victory over Lucknow Super Giants yesterday for their second win this IPL.

Punjab chased down the target of 172 set by Lucknow with nearly four overs to spare, and captain Shreyas Iyer remained unbeaten on 52 off 30 balls.

"This is the start we required," Iyer said. "Boys actually played their roles well, they contributed to the best of their ability, and whatever we planned, they executed it to the fullest."

Playing their first home game of the season, Lucknow Super Giants started poorly, losing in-form opener Mitchell Marsh for a golden duck in the first over of the match to Arshdeep Singh.

Marsh's opening partner Aiden Markram

hit Arshdeep for three boundaries in his next over but fell for 28 off 18 soon after to New Zealand pacer Lockie Ferguson, who was playing his first match for the Kings.

Captain Rishabh Pant's stint at the crease was short-lived getting out for just two runs from five balls, leaving Lucknow reeling at 35-3 just prior to the end of the powerplay.

Nicholas Pooran and Ayush Badoni steadied the innings with a 54-run partnership for the fourth wicket, but Pooran eventually fell to spinner Yuzvendra Chahal in the 12th over after an entertaining 44 off 30 balls.

The attacking David Miller, who came in next, did not last long either, falling to fellow South African Marco Jansen for 19 off 18 deliveries.

Badoni (41) and Abdul Samad (27), both of whom were dismissed by Arshdeep in the last over of the innings, provided some late momentum to Lucknow, propelling them to a total of 171-7.

Skipper Pant conceded it was "not enough". "We were 20-25 runs short," Pant said yesterday.

"That is part and parcel of the game - our first home game, so still assessing the conditions."

In response, Punjab lost opener Priyansh Arya cheaply for eight runs off nine balls to spinner Digvesh Rathi in the third over.

But Lucknow's bowling attack only again tasted success in the 11th over when Prabhsimran fell, courtesy of a spectacular catch at the fence by Ravi Bishnoi.

By then, Iyer and Prabhsimran's quickfire partnership of 84 - powered largely by the latter - had taken the match away from Lucknow.

Left-handed batter Nehal Wadhwa (43) then teamed up with Iyer to take Punjab over the line without any further setbacks.

Rathi (2-30) was the only Lucknow bowler to be among the wickets.

## BRIEF SCORES

**Punjab Kings 177 for 2** (Prabhsimran 69, Shreyas 52, Rathi 2-30) **beat Lucknow Super Giants 171 for 7** (Pooran 44, Badoni 41, Arshdeep 3 for 43) **by 8 wickets**

## IOC'S TICKETING RULES HIT BY EU ANTITRUST COMPLAINT

**Brussels:** German online ticket marketplace Ticombo has filed a complaint about the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to EU antitrust regulators, alleging that the IOC's ticketing rules block rival resale platforms and are anti-competitive. Companies and athletes have increasingly turned to the EU antitrust watchdog with grievances about the power of sports-governing bodies in recent years, alleging that they abuse their dominance in breach of EU competition rules. Ticombo said the issue is what it alleges is the IOC's exclusive monopoly over the resale of tickets for major sporting events, including the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and the upcoming Milano-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics. "By restricting independent resale platforms, the IOC not only limits consumer choice but also undermines the natural balance

of the market," Ticombo said in a statement.

"Fans who can no longer attend an event are forced to use the IOC's exclusive resale platform, where strict conditions force tickets to be resold at face value plus a platform fee, even when demand is low," it said. Ticombo, which said it allows ticket sales below face value, alleged that the IOC policy unfairly excludes rival resale platforms and results in inflated prices. The European Commission - which acts as the competition enforcer in the 27-country European Union - said it had received the complaint and would assess it in detail under its standard procedures. The IOC said it has only seen the news in the media and would not comment on such reports. Ticombo last year filed a similar complaint about UEFA to the commission following Euro 2024.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

# Edwards named new England women's cricket team coach

AFP  
London

Former captain Charlotte Edwards has been appointed as the new head coach of the England women's team, the England and Wales Cricket Board announced yesterday.

Edwards, 45, was the favourite to take up the post after Jon Lewis was sacked as coach less than a fortnight ago following England's humiliating 16-0 Women's Ashes series loss in Australia earlier this year.

One of the outstanding batters of her generation, Edwards made more than 300 international appearances, winning two World Cups and lifting the Ashes five times across a 20-year playing career - 10 of which she spent as England captain.

Since retiring as a player in 2017, Edwards has built an impressive track record as a coach, both at home and abroad, winning several trophies with Southern Vipers, the inaugural Hundred title at Southern Brave and India's Women's Premier League with Mumbai Indians.

"I am so delighted to once again be part of the leadership of the England women's cricket team, and I cannot wait to take this team forward and drive us to success," said Edwards, who will now leave her role as Hampshire coach, in an ECB statement.

Clare Connor, managing director of England Women, described Edwards as a "proven winner" and the "outstanding candidate" to succeed Lewis.

"She has the experience, pas-

sion and expertise to lead this (England) team to success," said Connor. "The results she has achieved as a head coach in multiple environments, since retiring as one of the greatest ever England players, is testament to her relentless drive and the standards she sets for those around her."

One of Edwards's first major decisions as England coach will be the appointment of a new captain.

Heather Knight, who herself succeeded Edwards in 2016, stood down as skipper following an ECB review into the Ashes debacle.

England's women, who have not won a trophy since the 50-over World Cup in 2017, play white-ball series against West Indies and India before a 50-over World Cup in India later this year.

Edwards's first game as coach will be against the West Indies at Canterbury on May 21, with the ECB saying a new captain will be "announced in due course".

## Walter steps down as South Africa limited-overs coach

South Africa's limited-overs coach Rob Walter resigned, citing unspecified personal reasons, leaving behind a familiar feeling of what might have been for the team.

Walter was at the helm for two years and led the side to the final of last year's T20 World Cup, where they threw away a commanding position to lose to India in the decider. They also made the semi-finals of the 50-over World Cup in 2023 and at the recent ICC Champions Trophy in Pakistan and Dubai.

South Africa will co-host the next 50-over World Cup in 2027 with Namibia and Zimbabwe. CSA has not yet named Walter's replacement for Walter.



TENNIS

# Wawrinka posts his first ATP Tour win of the season

The 40-year-old takes 3 hours and 16 minutes to complete win

www.atptour.com  
Bucharest, Romania

Stan Wawrinka earned his first tour-level win of the season yesterday at the Tiriac Open presented by UniCredit Bank, where he defeated qualifier Timofey Skatov.

The Swiss, who turned 40 last Friday, recovered from squandering three match points in the second set to eventually triumph 6-4, 6-7 (5), 7-6 (1) at the ATP 250 event in Bucharest.

With his three-hour, 16-minute win, the former No. 3 in the PIF ATP Rankings recorded a tour-level victory in a 22nd different season (2003, 2005-2025), while he is just the third player aged 40 or over to win a tour-level match on clay since 1980, joining Jimmy Connors and Ivo Karlovic.

Wawrinka will play second seed Pedro Martinez in the second round.

Wawrinka is one of the most successful players of his generation and this year's Wild Card holder.

The Swiss has won three Grand Slam titles - Australian Open (2014), Roland Garros (2015) and US Open (2016) - defeating Big Four players in the finals.

He was ranked as high as No 3 ATP in 2014 and played a key role in Switzerland's 2014 Davis Cup victory alongside Roger Federer. Throughout his career, Wawrinka



Stan Wawrinka in action against qualifier Timofey Skatov at the Tiriac Open in Bucharest yesterday. Wawrinka, who turned 40 last Friday, won 6-4, 6-7 (5), 7-6 (1).

has won 16 ATP titles, distinguished by a powerful baseline game and a one-handed backhand considered one of the most spectacular on the circuit.

In other action, defending champion Marton Fucsovics made a winning return to Bucharest, where he overcame Italian Luca Nardi 6-3, 6-1.

The Hungarian will play Mariano Navone in the second round in a rematch of last year's final.

Eighth seed Camilo Ugo Carabelli arrived in Romania fresh

off a run to the third round in Miami.

The Argentine defeated Radu Albot 6-4, 6-3 in the pair's first Lexus ATP Head2Head meeting and will next play qualifier Filip Misolic after the Austrian beat Alexander Shevchenko 6-3, 6-4.

There was also victory for Argentina's Francisco Comesana. Playing at a career-high No 64 in the PIF ATP Rankings, the 24-year-old rallied from a set and 1-4 to down Slovakian qualifier Martin Klizan 4-6, 7-5, 7-5.

Comesana, who won 80 per cent of his first serves according to Infosys ATP Stats, will take on fifth seed Roberto Bautista Agut in the second round following the Spaniard's 3-6, 6-2, 7-5 win against Buyunchaokete.

Bautista Agut has now earned 100 tour-level victories on clay, winning two titles on the surface.

Canadian Gabriel Diallo set a second-round clash with top seed Sebastian Baez after he eliminated Chun-Hsin Tseng 7-6(5), 7-6(2).

FOCUS

## Kasatkina looks ahead to new chapter under Australian flag

Reuters  
Sydney

Russian-born **Daria Kasatkina** said she was emotional and excited to begin a fresh chapter in her career under the Australian flag at the ongoing Charleston Open after being granted permanent residency last week.

The 27-year-old has been playing on the tour as a neutral athlete after Russian and Belarusian players were banned from competing under their own flags following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, for which Belarus has been a staging ground.

"It's my first official day as an Australian player," said Kasatkina, who dipped into Australian colloquialism and referred to reporters in Charleston as "mates" on Monday.

"Honestly, it feels different, I'm not going to lie. It's emotional for me. I have to get used to it. But I'm really happy to start this new chapter of my life representing Australia on the big stage."

Kasatkina, who was born in the western Russian city of Tolyatti, has not returned to the country in more than two years after being one of the few players to have publicly spoken out against the war. World number 12 Kasatkina, who lives in Dubai and trains in Spain, now plans to make Melbourne her home.

"With everything going on in my previous country, I didn't have much choice," Kasatkina said about her decision to switch her nationality.

Kasatkina received a first-round bye and plays either Lauren Davis or Jamie Loeb in the Charleston second round when the 2017 champion will be introduced as representing Australia for the first time on court.

"I have to get used to it a little bit, because for a couple of years I



didn't hear anything," Kasatkina said. "But it's something nice to get used to."

### Lopez to continue as Davis Cup tournament director until 2027

Four-times Davis Cup champion Feliciano Lopez will continue to spearhead the premier men's team competition as the tournament director of its knockout stage until 2027, the International Tennis Federation said yesterday.

The 43-year-old Spaniard oversaw the Final 8 in Malaga in 2023 and 2024 and will reprise his role during the next three editions to be held in Italy.

"I'm honoured that the ITF has put its trust in me for the event's long-term future and I'm excited to work on it in Italy for the next three years, starting in Bologna this November," former world number 12 Lopez said in a statement. "I'm sure that we will build on our success in Malaga, and I will give everything to continue the growth of the Davis Cup."

The 2025 Final 8 will take place from November 18-23, with hosts Italy targeting their third consecutive Davis Cup title.

They will be joined by seven countries following the second round of qualifying in September.

SPOTLIGHT

## Paolini says ciao to coach Furlan after decade-long partnership

Reuters  
Monte Carlo

**Jasmine Paolini** has called game, set and match on a decade with Renzo Furlan, ending a glittering partnership that peaked last year with Grand Slam finals, Olympic gold, and a Coach of the Year crown for her long-time mentor.

"After 10 amazing years together, I want to say a huge thank you to Renzo Furlan for everything he's done for me," the 29-year-old Italian wrote, announcing the end of "an incredible journey" on Instagram.

Paolini's rise under compatriot Furlan had been remarkable.

In 2024 she was French Open and Wimbledon runner-up, won doubles gold at the Paris Olympics and helped Italy lift the Billie



Jean King Cup en route to becoming world number four.

Furlan's efforts did not go unnoticed - he was crowned WTA Coach of the Year.

And yet, the curtain falls.

This season has been solid but less sparkling so far, with Pao-

lini bowing out in the Australian Open third round and reaching the semi-finals in Miami, where she lost to world number one and eventual champion Aryna Sabalenka.

"Renzo has been such an important part of my growth, both as a player and as a person," Paolini said.

"Everything I've learned from him will stay with me and continue to guide me in this new chapter, he'll always be an important person in my life." Paolini praised 54-year-old Furlan's dedication - "often far from home and his family" - and signed off with "so much respect and appreciation".

The split comes with the French Open approaching on May 25, leaving questions over whether Paolini can repeat last year's success without the coach who helped guide her there.

ATHLETICS

## Johnson hopes to bring 'Formula 1 of racing' with Grand Slam Track

Reuters  
Kingston, Jamaica

Four-times Olympic gold medallist **Michael Johnson** believes his Grand Slam Track can be the "Formula One of athlete racing", as the novel circuit that puts rivalries at the forefront kicks off in Kingston, Jamaica, from Friday.

The four-event start-up comes amid longstanding concern over athletics' popularity outside of the Olympics, as track and field is a regular attraction in Europe but struggles to compete against the "Big Four" of North American professional sport.

Johnson, a larger-than-life figure who won eight world championship gold medals during his career, told Reuters it was time to take the burden off the athletes to bring track into the limelight.

"The athletes themselves have been criticised a lot over the years for the sport not being more popular. And my position has always been, the athletes are doing their job," said Johnson, who will also host meets in Miami, Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

"It's up to someone else to go and create a structure that presents that to the world and commercialises that and markets it."

Grand Slam features head-to-head competitions with a roster of decorated stars including 400 metres hurdles world record-holder



Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone of the United States and British 1,500m world champion Josh Kerr.

The circuit, which does not include any field events, is missing a handful of notable names including Olympic 100m gold medallist Noah Lyles and double Olympic champion Jakob Ingebrigtsen.

Johnson, who won 200m and 400m gold at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 and held world records in both events, says taking Grand Slam Track to Europe and Asia is on the agenda should this year's competitions prove a success.

### BROADCAST DEAL

Grand Slam inked a broadcast deal in the United States two months before its launch, with the CW Network and streaming service Peacock to air the competitions.

On Friday, the circuit announced additional broadcast partners to give fans in 189 countries access.

"I'm going to try to bridge this gap between the sport and its cur-

rent position and what its potential is, which I think is immense," he said. "I think this could be the UFC and Formula One of athlete racing."

The circuit is a direct challenge to the Diamond League, long the standard-bearer for professional track worldwide, which hosts 15 meetings each year in cities from Xiamen to Zurich.

The league upped its total prize money this year to \$9mn, seemingly in response to the super-sized purse offered at Grand Slam, where \$12.6mn will be on the table this year. Diamond League CEO Petr Stastny said last week that he welcomed the competition but worried that looming calendar clashes could hurt competitors and organisers.

"Fans want to be entertained. They want to get to know the athletes. They want to see head-to-head competition," said Johnson. "They want to see the best against the best more often."

MOTORSPORT

## Cadillac to play safe with deadlines for first Formula One car build

Reuters  
London

Cadillac will be playing it safe with design deadlines as the General Motors-backed team prepares for a 2026 Formula One debut, according to executive engineering consultant Pat Symonds.

The 11th outfit on the starting grid had their entry formally confirmed last month but have been working for some time on the car.

They still face a race to be ready in time for pre-season testing, which next year is likely to start in Barcelona in late January with two further sessions expected in Bahrain in February.

Cadillac have brought in experience from other teams, Symonds involved in building some 40 cars in decades in the sport including winners with Benetton and Renault, and are well aware of potential pitfalls.

"We have taken what I think is a very conservative approach to

producing that car, and I think that's absolutely the right thing to do," Symonds, F1's former chief technical officer, told Reuters when asked about timelines.

"When you have everything established you try and push everything to the last minute so you get maximum performance from the car. I don't think that's the right thing to do in our situation."

"We all saw what happened with Williams a few years ago, and we cannot let that sort of thing happen. We have to be up and running, and we have to be running efficiently at our first test in Barcelona next year. So we've taken quite a conservative approach to what I would say is a well-known problem."

Williams, once-dominant former champions now fighting back from an extended period among the backmarkers, missed the first two and a half days of testing in 2019 following delays in the production of parts.

New teams have also been pushed to the limit in getting two cars ready in time.

Symonds said the team had

to create processes from scratch and cited the example of a recent design discussion about the difficulty of getting the car to the weight limit.

"Anyone who's got an existing car can say 'OK, well look, let's take this front upright. What can we do to get 10% of the weight out of it?' And you've got a starting point, you've got a target," he said. "We don't have that starting point, so things like that are difficult."

Symonds said the infrastructure around a team was complex, trucks had to be ordered a year in advance while hiring staff was complicated by long notice periods and the need for 'gardening leave' that delayed start dates.

"We've got lots of people who want to come and work for us. Lots of people in the pipeline. Really, really good people. People I'm really happy to employ. But I'm not going to see them until much later," said Symonds.

Cadillac's debut car will ultimately be American built at their new racing facility in Fishers, Indiana.

## TIGER'S APRIL FOOLISHNESS: PLAN TO PLAY MASTERS JUST A JOKE

**Miami:** Tiger Woods took to social media yesterday to play an April Fool's prank on golf fans, giving false hope he could overcome an injury to play in next week's Masters.

Woods, a 15-time major winner and five-time Masters champion, posted a message on X celebrating a miracle recovery from a ruptured left Achilles tendon. "I can't believe I am saying this, but a few weeks after rupturing my left Achilles, the sleeping in a hyperbaric chamber plus the explosive lifts my doctors and

trainers have me ready to play the Masters next week!" Woods wrote. "Can't wait! See y'all on the course."

For precious minutes there were some who believed the 49-year-old American superstar was all set for a shock return to Augusta National Golf Club.

Then came the follow-up message from Woods. "P.S. April Fools my Achilles is still a mess :)" Woods wrote.

Woods announced last month he suffered the injury and underwent tendon repair surgery while train-

ing in advance of the Masters. He has given no timetable for when he might truly return to playing PGA events and majors. Woods announced the death of his mother, Kultida Woods, in February and skipped the Genesis Invitational later that month, saying he was not yet prepared to compete in the PGA event his foundation hosts.

"I did my best to prepare, knowing it's what my Mom would have wanted, but I'm still processing her loss," Woods wrote in February.



FOCUS

# Liverpool's Slot unfazed by Alexander-Arnold Real links

'We are all looking so much forward to the upcoming nine games'

AFP  
Liverpool

Arne Slot says Liverpool remain laser-focused on their Premier League title challenge despite reports Trent Alexander-Arnold is closing in on a move to Real Madrid.

The England defender has long been linked with a free transfer to the Bernabeu and talks between the 26-year-old and the Spanish giants are understood to be making progress.

Alexander-Arnold is one of three marquee players out of contract at the end of the season, along with Mohamed Salah and Virgil van Dijk.

All three have been able to discuss terms with overseas clubs since January.

Slot's side, who are red-hot favourites to win the Premier League, host local rivals Everton today following the international break.

"His situation is, unfortunately, that he is injured, otherwise people would have probably spoken about him that he had one or two brilliant performances for the England team," the Liverpool boss said yesterday, referring to Alexander-Arnold.

"But he's injured and for him that means he is fully focused on his recovery and for us that means we are trying to help him to be back as soon as he can.

"For the rest, of course, for eight months it went a bit up and down maybe, with all kinds of talks about him, Virgil or Mo. But we have never been focused on those talks, we have always been focused on what we have to do.

"For Virgil and Mo that is trying to win the Merseyside derby, and for Trent it is making sure he is can get fit as soon as he can."

Slot, whose team are 12 points clear of second-placed Arsenal with just nine games remaining in the Premier League, said he was relaxed despite the ongoing speculation.

"It's a situation that is there for eight or nine months now and all these three players have performed so well under these circumstances so it doesn't affect me at all," he said.



Trent Alexander-Arnold

Liverpool's match against Everton is their first outing since they lost the League Cup final to Newcastle, a result that followed a Champions League exit to Paris Saint-Germain on penalties.

"We are all looking so much forward to the upcoming nine games," said Slot. "The players are refreshed in my opinion.

"But it wasn't all negative. We have played a final against a very good Newcastle team and we had one great game and the other game we defended really well against Paris Saint-Germain... we got beaten by a very, very, very good team but what a game we played as well."

Slot will be back on the touchline in the Premier League after a two-match ban he received following a red card during chaotic scenes at the end of a 2-2 draw at Everton's Goodison Park ground in February.

"I'm hoping I will act differently next time, but I can't promise," he said.

"But what I'm also sure about is that I would be so surprised if I ever would experience eight minutes of so many controversial decisions to our disadvantage again."



Arne Slot

## Gulf between Everton and Liverpool has never been bigger, says Moyes

Everton boss David Moyes believes the gap between his side and Premier League leaders Liverpool has never been bigger as the Toffees prepare to travel to Anfield for today's Merseyside derby. Liverpool are cruising towards a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title with a 12-point lead at the top of the table. Everton are down in 15th, 36 points behind their local rivals, despite a nine-game unbeaten Premier League run since Moyes returned to the club for a second spell in January.

"We might be further away from Liverpool than we have ever been at the moment," Moyes said at his pre-match press conference yesterday.

"By the time I had left here maybe 10 years ago we were much closer to Liverpool, we were competitive, competing around the same areas of the league at the time.

"I think at the moment it is the biggest gulf between the two clubs."

Even when the clubs were closer together in the league table, Moyes endured a miserable record at Anfield. In 21 attempts as manager of Everton, Manchester United, Sunderland and West Ham, the Scot has failed to win away to Liverpool, drawing on seven occasions. "I would be lying if I said I look forward to going to it all the time because it has been such a hard place to get results," added Moyes.

"It's nothing to do with the surrounds, nothing to do with the pitch, nothing to do with anything else, it is to do with them (Liverpool) always producing good teams.

"I think every team in the Premier League, when they go to Anfield, has a game on their hands."

Liverpool will be without Trent Alexander-Arnold due to injury in what may well be the last Merseyside derby before his expected move to Real Madrid. Mohamed Salah and Virgil van Dijk, meanwhile, could be facing

Everton for the final time, with their contracts expiring at the end of the season. Salah has scored eight times in 12 derby appearances and Moyes said he and most of the Evertonian faithful will be delighted should the Egyptian leave Liverpool.

"We will enjoy taking him to the airport and getting him out the plane and getting him out!", he joked.

### Southampton boss desperate to avoid 'worst team' tag

Southampton manager Ivan Juric has challenged his beleaguered players to prove they are not the worst team in Premier League history as they brace for an immediate return to the Championship. Saints, who host FA Cup semi-finalists Crystal Palace on Wednesday, have collected a miserable nine points from their 29 games so far.

Rock bottom of the table, they are a whopping 17 points from safety, with just two wins all season. The south-coast side are in danger of mustering fewer points than Derby's total of 11 in 2007/08. Relegation to the second tier looms but Juric, who replaced Russell Martin as manager in December, expects total commitment over the Saints' final nine games.

"The team has to be competing and try to do our best. We have to be really motivated," the 49-year-old Croatian said yesterday.

"I don't want it to be that we are the worst team in the history of Premier League. If we can be not the last on the table, we have to do our best, so in this moment, this is our goal."

Juric's own future remains uncertain even though he was given an 18-month deal.

The former Torino and Roma boss said he was focused on immediate challenges.

"I think if you want to create something, you have to have people with a strong idea, knowing what they want and start to build up something, start to create something," he said.

## Spain legal body backs court that overturned Alves' conviction

Barcelona: Spain's judicial supervisory body yesterday defended the court that overturned former Brazil international footballer Dani Alves' rape conviction, a ruling criticised by the government and women's groups.

Alves, who won the Champions League three-times with FC Barcelona, was convicted last year of raping a young woman in the in the VIP bathroom of a nightclub in Barcelona in 2022 and sentenced to four-and-a-half years in jail. But a Barcelona appeals court on Friday overturned the lower court's ruling, saying Alves' trial had inconsistencies and contradictions, and there was insufficient evidence to prove he was guilty.

Deputy Prime Minister Maria Jesus Montero said on Saturday it was a "shame" that the testimony of a rape victim "is still being questioned" and that the "presumption of innocence is said to take precedence over the testimony of young, brave women".

Hundreds of people rallied in Barcelona on Monday against the appeal court ruling, in a demonstration organised by feminist groups.

The General Council of the Judiciary, which ensures the independence of both courts and judges, weighed into the debate yesterday, saying the two courts that had dealt with the case had its "full support".

"The review by higher courts of decisions handed down by lower courts is part of the normality of the rule of law," it added in a statement. "Protecting and supporting victims, particularly of crimes against sexual freedom, does not mean renouncing the presumption of innocence, which is a fundamental right."

Alves, now 41, was kept in jail since his arrest in January 2023 until March 2024, when he was released pending his appeal after he posted the one million euros (\$1.1mn) bail set by the courts.

## PREVIEW

# Trophies are what count: Barca's Flick before Atletico cup clash

AFP  
Barcelona

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said yesterday his team will be judged on what silverware they win this season, regardless of how entertaining their football is.

The Catalan giants are fighting for a potential quadruple, after winning the Spanish Super Cup in January and are playing with the flair and style they have lacked in recent seasons.

Barcelona face Atletico Madrid today in a Copa del Rey semi-final second leg clash, sitting first in La Liga and in the Champions League quarter-finals.

"I think my team, the players, can be very proud about what they're doing," Flick told a news

conference. "I think the team improved a lot, so this is also what I said to them, I appreciate that about (our path) until now.

"But it's football, and you know in the end what counts is your position, the titles if they are possible."

Barcelona have scored four goals or more in 20 of the 45 matches they have played across all competitions this season.

They drew 4-4 with Atletico in the first leg of the Copa semi in February and Flick said Raphinha and Pau Cubarsi were fit to play after resting against Girona in La Liga on Sunday.

Goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen returned to training this week after a long injury lay-off following knee surgery, although it will be some time before he can compete with Wojciech Szczesny

for the gloves. "He was on the pitch today and we will see, step by step, it's normal, we have to wait," said Flick.

"It's not the time to make a decision or say anything about that... the good news is that he's in a good moment, everything goes in the right direction."

Atletico coach Diego Simeone said losing against Barcelona would not count as a failure for his side. The Rojiblancos were knocked out of the Champions League by Real Madrid and are nine points behind Barca in La Liga, with the Copa representing their last realistic chance of silverware this season. "Failure would be not trying, he who tries, does not fail," said Simeone.

"For me it's been a very good season, we're in the Copa del Rey semi-finals"



Barcelona coach Hansi Flick (right) with Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

# Coach Howe targets Champions League return for Newcastle

AFP  
London

Newcastle manager Eddie Howe is targeting a "game-changing" return to the Champions League after the club ended their painful 56-year trophy drought.

Around 300,000 fans turned out in Newcastle at the weekend to celebrate last month's victory in the League Cup final against Liverpool. But the focus has already turned to Wednesday's Premier League clash with Brentford at St James' Park and the race for the top four. Sixth-placed Newcastle, who played in the Champions League last season for the first time in two decades, are in a scrap with a big group of clubs.

Bournemouth, in 10th place, are

just three points behind the Magpies, who have a game in hand over their rivals.

A strong season by English sides in European competitions means it is almost certain that a top-five finish will secure a place in next season's Champions League.

"It could be game-changing in terms of revenue and also in terms of what it means and the competition, and then of course the changes that you have to make to be ready for Champions League football," Howe said on Tuesday.

"That changes everything - as we found last year to our cost to some degree with the extra games - so there's a lot to think about."

But the Englishman said the run-in would be tough.

"It's one of the tightest Premier Leagues that we've seen in recent times, very little between the

teams competing for those places, so it's going to come down to who is the most consistent," he said.

Newcastle beat runaway Premier League leaders Liverpool 2-1 in the League Cup final at Wembley but Howe said consistency was a problem, with three defeats in their past five home games in all competitions.

"That is the big question: Can we be that team that we were against Liverpool? You can't be there every game, but you can still reach a standard and win the game. That is what we have got to try to do," he said.

"We have done it - we played West Ham before the final, didn't play great, but won the game through defensive steel, really.

"We have to find ways to win games when we are not at our best."