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Hay smashes 99 as New Zealand clinch ODI series against Pakistan



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# GULF TIMES SPORT



MOTORSPORT

Former Red Bull driver Perez in discussions with teams about '26 return

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DIAMOND LEAGUE

## Barshim, Kerr to participate in Doha meeting

**R**eigning Olympic champion Hamish Kerr of New Zealand and former Olympic champion Mutaz Barshim of Qatar are the first names to be announced for what is shaping up to be an incredible high jump field at the Doha Diamond League Meeting on May 16.

The 28-year-old Kerr won the 2024 World Athletics Indoor Championships with a national record and Oceania best of 2.36m, upgrading his 2022 bronze. He matched that height in Paris, winning Olympic gold after a jump-off inspired by the Tokyo 2021 actions of Barshim and Italy's Gianmarco Tamperi, who, in contrast, chose to share the gold medal. The Commonwealth champion most recently finished second in the 2025 World Indoors.

"Things are building nicely for the year ahead and I'm excited to open my Diamond League season in Doha," said Kerr, who won his ninth national title with victory at the New Zealand Championships in March. "My confidence



has grown a lot over the last 12 months and it's an absolute privilege to have the opportunity to jump against such high-quality athletes. It's a big summer, and of course my focus is on Tokyo, but in order to grow and learn more

about yourself, it's important to put yourself out there and compete against the best."

Barshim, who finished third in Paris, is also a two-time Olympic silver medallist (2012 and 2016). A true championship performer, he



won an unprecedented third successive global title with victory at the World Athletics Championships in Eugene 2022.

A great ambassador for the sport and his country, the 33-year-old launched his own innovative event

in 2024 - the 'What Gravity Challenge' - bringing together a group of the world's best high jumpers at the spectacular Katara Amphitheatre in Doha. "High jump is my passion, and although I've made history, I still strive for more," said

the Qatar national record holder who has a best of 2.43m, the second highest jump of all time.

"After the Paris Olympic Games, I made the decision not to compete this indoor season. I've been in this sport a while now and I have to make sensible decisions. The World Championships in Tokyo is my main goal for the year and to perform at my best, I need to prioritise my competitions ahead of then. The 'What Gravity Challenge' and the Diamond League meeting in Doha will be my first two events of the year and I'm looking forward to opening up my season in front of a home support, it means a lot to me to be able to do that."

The Doha leg is the third meeting of the Wanda Diamond League. The series - which will pay out a record total of US \$9.24mn in prize money - comprises 15 of the most prestigious events in global track and field across four different continents, starting with Xiamen on April 26 and concluding with a single final across two days in Zurich (Aug 27-28).

doha.diamondleague.com

PREMIER LEAGUE

## Liverpool beat Everton as title looms, City win

ISAK TAKES GOAL TALLY TO 20 AS NEWCASTLE BEAT BRENTFORD 2-1

AFP  
London

**L**iverpool moved closer to the Premier League title with a 1-0 win in the Merseyside derby against Everton yesterday, while Manchester City beat Leicester 2-0 to bolster their bid to reach the Champions League.

With just eight games left, Liverpool sit 12 points clear of second-placed Arsenal, who beat Fulham 2-1 on Tuesday.

Arne Slot's side had lost their previous two games in the League Cup final against Newcastle and the Champions League last 16 against Paris Saint-Germain.

But they got back on track in their march towards a record-equalling 20th English title and first since 2020 in Slot's maiden season in charge.

Having gone over two months without a goal, Diogo Jota was Liverpool's hero as he ended his drought in the 57th minute, slotting home from Luis Diaz's flick. It was an especially sweet win for Liverpool after their stormy 2-2 draw at Everton in February, which featured a last-gasp equaliser for David Moyes' team.

At the Etihad Stadium, City coped just fine without Norway striker Erling Haaland, who will be sidelined for up to seven weeks after suffering an ankle injury in Sunday's FA Cup quarter-final win at Bournemouth.

Pep Guardiola's men took just two minutes to go in front against second-bottom Leicester, who have lost seven successive league games. Jeremy Doku and Savinho combined to carve open the Leicester defence before Jack Grealish slotted home from close range for his first league goal since December 2023.

Grealish's long-awaited goal was missed by hundreds of City fans, who stayed outside the stadium for the first nine minutes in protest at the club's deal with a third-party ticket resale



Liverpool's Diogo Jota (right) celebrates with teammate Curtis Jones after scoring a goal against Everton during the Premier League match in Liverpool yesterday. (Reuters)

company. The protestors did get to see City double their advantage in the 29th minute as Egypt forward Omar Marmoush lashed home after Leicester goalkeeper Mads Hermansen made a hash of dealing with Ruben Dias's pass.

City are up to fourth place, one point ahead of fifth-placed Newcastle and two in front of sixth-placed Chelsea, who face Tottenham in their game in hand on Thursday. The top four qualify for the Champions League automatically, while fifth place is likely to also provide a berth in Europe's elite club competition.

Newcastle beat Brentford 2-1 to maintain the party mood after the prolonged celebrations

of their first major trophy for 56 years.

Eddie Howe's side were back in action for the first time since beating Liverpool in the League Cup final. Alexander Isak met Jacob Murphy's cross with a typically predatory strike in first-half stoppage time at St James' Park for his 20th Premier League goal of the season.

Brentford levelled through Bryan Mbeumo's 66th-minute penalty after Newcastle keeper Nick Pope tripped Yoane Wissa.

But Sandro Tonali lashed home from Harvey Barnes' assist in the 74th minute. Aston Villa also remain in the hunt for a Champions League place after winning 3-0 at Brighton. Mar-

cus Rashford struck in the 51st minute, accelerating onto Morgan Rogers' pass for his third goal in his last two games. Marco Asensio killed off Brighton in the 78th minute and Donnyell Malen netted in added time to lift Villa into seventh place, two points behind Newcastle.

Southampton wasted a chance to avoid becoming the worst team in Premier League history after a 1-1 draw with Crystal Palace at St Mary's.

Ivan Juric's bottom-of-the-table side took the lead in the 20th minute when Nigerian striker Paul Onuachu converted Matheus Fernandes' cross with a powerful header from 12 yards.

But Matheus Franca rescued

Palace in injury time with his first goal for the club.

Southampton, 19 points away from safety, are still two points away from passing Derby's record low Premier League final tally of 11 in 2007-08. Saints will be relegated at the weekend if they lose at Tottenham and Wolves beat Ipswich. Third-bottom Ipswich kept alive their slender hopes of beating the drop with a 2-1 win at Bournemouth.

Nathan Broadhead's clinical finish in the 34th minute and Liam Delap's 60th-minute effort put Ipswich in control.

Evanielson got one back for Bournemouth, but Ipswich held on to move within nine points of safety.

**Match against Umm Salal worth six points, says Al Wakrah coach**

With six wins and ten losses so far in the Qatar Stars League, Al Wakrah are lurking near the relegation zone and feeling the heat. The Blue Wave will meet Umm Salal in their next clash at the Grand Hamad Stadium tomorrow and Al Wakrah coach Poya Esbaghi hoped that his players would continue to show focus.

Al Wakrah are in tenth place in the standings with 21 points while Umm Salal are 11th with 15 points facing relegation play-off. They are five points behind the bottom-placed Al Khor, with three rounds now remaining.

Speaking to the media yesterday, ahead of the crucial match, Esbaghi said: "I think everyone in the team understands the importance of this match. It's a classic six-point game, and I think the focus and determination the players showed during training was really good. So, we hope to show that in the match."

"I expect nothing but victory for my team in this match, although I admit that Umm Salal have a lot of quality, as is evident from the professional players they have, such as Oussama Tannane, Kenji Gorre, Jouri, and Victor Lekhal. When given the opportunity, they can make a difference."

He added: "We must be very careful and 100% focused, and if we can, eliminate their threats and show how good we are in attack, and we will have a good match. "Everyone in the Wakrah team is aware of our current situation, and therefore understands the importance of this match. We are still in a position where we have everything in our hands, and this always gives us a good feeling in such matches. If we get the result we want against Umm Salal, we will remain in a position where we do not have to look back anymore, we can only look forward. But first, we have to enter the match and make sure it is played with 100% focus to achieve the desired result."

Both teams would go into the battle looking for course correction and to overcome their losses in the previous round. While Umm Salal had lost to Al Khor 0-3, Al Wakrah went down by the same score to Al Sadd. Umm Salal's French coach Patrice Beaumelle will also aim for a win for his team to steer clear of the danger zone and would push his players in a manner required to achieve their goal in this match. A win for Al Wakrah would take their tally to 24 points, thereby keeping them clear from the spectre of the relegation zone for the two bottom-placed teams in the 12-team league.



Al Wakrah coach Poya Esbaghi speaks to the media yesterday.



CRICKET

# Hay smashes 99 as NZ clinch Pakistan series

The hosts have an unassailable 2-0 lead in the 3-match series

AFP  
Hamilton

Mitch Hay's rollicking 99 not out backed by some feisty seam bowling steered New Zealand to an 84-run win over Pakistan yesterday to take an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the one-day international series.

New Zealand made 292-8 and bowled Pakistan out for 208 in the 42nd over in Hamilton in the second of three one-day internationals.

Hay's lusty hitting snapped a mid-innings slump by the hosts as he raced to a career-best ODI knock, which included blasting 22 off the final over by Mohammad Wasim.

He downplayed his innings as "just swinging from the hip and hoping" but Hay's captain Michael Bracewell and rival skipper Mohammad Rizwan saw it as a match-defining performance.

"We lost a few wickets then the way Mitch batted at the end was outstanding, and throughout his whole innings, to get us through to a competitive total," Bracewell said.

Rizwan lamented his side's inability to handle the swing and bounce of the New Zealand bowlers.

"Mitch Hay, he played very well and that's why they put a good target on the board," he said.

Hay smacked seven fours and as many sixes in his 78-ball innings to steer New Zealand from a perilous 132-5 in the 27th over.

In reply, Pakistan were in early trouble when Will O'Rourke had Abdullah Shafique caught at first slip for one in the third over.



New Zealand's Mitchell Hay bats during the 2nd one day international between New Zealand and Pakistan at Seddon Park in Hamilton yesterday. (AFP)

Babar Azam and Imam-ul-Haq quickly followed, dismissed by Jacob Duffy, to leave Pakistan tottering at 9-3 midway through the sixth over.

Ben Sears, who finished with 5-59, took two wickets in his first over - Salman Agha for nine and Mohammad Rizwan for five - to reduce the visitors to 32-5.

Tayyab Tahir and Faheem Ashraf put on 33 off nine overs but when Sears removed Tahir and Wasim it was 72-7.

Haris Rauf on three was hit by a nasty blow to the helmet from a rising delivery from O'Rourke and had to retire hurt.

It was his concussion replacement, Naseem Shah, who began

to show some fight as he put on rearguard 60 stand with Ashraf.

Both posted maiden ODI fifties with Ashraf scoring 73 and Naseem 51.

Earlier, novice Black Caps openers Nick Kelly and Rhys Mariu put on 54 after being asked to bat by Rizwan.

Kelly was caught behind for a hard-hitting 31 which included four fours and two sixes and debutant Mariu made 18.

Henry Nicholls and Daryl Mitchell took New Zealand past 100 in the 16th over.

Mitchell was stumped by Rizwan off Sufyan Moqim for 18 and Nicholls went for 22 in the following over.

Michael Bracewell and Muhammad Abbas trod water to add only 30 runs in 10 overs until Bracewell was caught behind off Wasim for 17.

Pakistan-born Abbas and Hay set about restoring the innings with a patient 77-run partnership until Abbas went for 41.

Moqim was the pick of the Pakistan bowlers with 2-33.

The third and final match is at Mount Maunganui tomorrow.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**New Zealand 292 for 8** (Hay 99\*, Abbas 41, Mueqem 2-33) **beat Pakistan 208 all out** (Ashraf 73, Naseem 35, Sears 5-59) **by 84 runs**

COMMENT

## Punjab reaping rewards of working with Ponting

Reuters  
Bengaluru

Punjab Kings batsmen Nehal Wadhwa and Prabhsimran Singh said new coach Ricky Ponting had already made a big impact with his positive approach after the team continued their winning start to the new Indian Premier League season.

Punjab appointed the Australian on a four-year contract in September after finishing ninth last season under Trevor Bayliss, and the former Delhi Capitals coach has guided his new team to two straight victories.

Wadhwa scored an unbeaten 43 after Prabhsimran posted 69 to help Punjab chase down 172 with 22 deliveries to spare on Tuesday and the duo said Ponting's influence was obvious.

"He's one of the best coaches

I've ever worked with," said Wadhwa, who was inserted by Ponting as an impact player.

"I've never heard any negative talk from him and that's the best thing about him.

"He talks positive, and when a coach gives you such positive remarks, that automatically boosts your confidence."

Prabhsimran said Ponting and his staff had already instilled a winning mentality in the Punjab ranks as they eye their first title in the 18th edition of the competition.

"They're legends," he added. "Whenever they speak, it's always positive. There's no such thing as 'if' (in their thinking). They ask us to go with just one mindset, and that is of winning. They have asked us to back our game."

Punjab, who trail table-toppers Royal Challengers Bengaluru on net run rate, face Rajasthan Royals on Saturday.

ANNOUNCEMENT

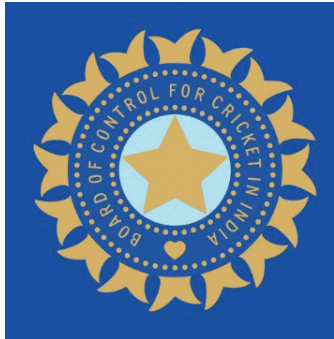
## India plan series against West Indies, South Africa

AFP  
New Delhi

India will host the West Indies for two Tests in October followed by a series across formats against South Africa, the country's cricket board said yesterday. The West Indies Test tour to India begins on October 2 with the opener at the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

Kolkata's iconic Eden Gardens will host the second Test from October 10-14. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said the upcoming international home season "promises thrilling encounters" as they announced the schedule in a release.

South Africa will play two Tests in India starting November 14 in New Delhi. The second match will be in Guwahati - the venue to host its first-ever Test - starting November 22. The two teams will then clash in three one-day internationals and five T20 matches across different venues in India.



**SCHEDULE**  
**West Indies tour of India**  
**Oct 2-6** 1st Test Ahmedabad  
**Oct 10-14** 2nd Test Kolkata  
**South Africa tour of India**  
**Nov 14-18** 1st Test New Delhi  
**Nov 22-26** 2nd Test Guwahati  
**Dec 9** 1st ODI Ranchi  
**Dec 3** 2nd ODI Raipur  
**Dec 6** 3rd ODI Visakhapatnam  
**Dec 9** 1st T20I Cuttack  
**Dec 11** 2nd T20I New Chandigarh  
**Dec 14** 3rd T20I Dharamsala  
**Dec 17** 4th T20I Lucknow  
**Dec 19** 5th T20I Ahmedabad

## 'DETERMINED' BUTTLER LEADS GUJARAT TO IPL WIN OVER BENGALURU

**Bengaluru, India:** England's Jos Buttler hammered an unbeaten 73 to lead Gujarat Titans to a thumping eight-wicket win over Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the Indian Premier League yesterday. Chasing 170 for victory, Gujarat depended on a 75-run second wicket stand between Buttler and opener Sai Sudharsan, who hit 49, to achieve the target with 13 balls to spare in Bengaluru. Pace bowler Mohammed Siraj set up Gujarat's second successive victory with figures of 3-19 from his four overs to help restrict Bengaluru to 169-8. It was Bengaluru's first defeat of the season after two wins as home fans left the M Chinnaswamy Stadium disappointed. Siraj, who played seven seasons in the red of Bengaluru, was named player of the match against his former franchise. Buttler also shined after his performance with the bat more than made up for his missed chances with the gloves, including when he dropped Phil Salt in the first over off Siraj. "I don't know, pretty embarrassed," Buttler said

of his spill behind the stumps. "We know Salt is a dangerous player. I barely got a glove on it and it hit me in the chest, so was determined to score some runs. As a team, we fielded poorly." Gujarat began their reply cautiously against a disciplined bowling attack, and seamer Bhuvneshwar Kumar dismissed skipper Shubman Gill for 14 in the fifth over. The left-handed Sudharsan hit regular boundaries, and along with Buttler, put on a quickfire stand to get the Titans' chase back on track. Australia pace bowler Josh Hazlewood denied Sudharsan his fifty but Buttler kept calm, and partnered by impact substitute Sherfane Rutherford (30), steered the team to victory in an unbeaten stand of 63. Buttler never allowed the pressure to mount on the visitors as he hit five fours and six sixes, including a reverse ramp that went behind the wicketkeeper in his 39-ball knock. West Indies left-hander Rutherford hit the winning six to cap off a dominant show in their third match of the season. Bengaluru were invited to bat first but lost regu-

lar wickets and, despite England batter Liam Livingstone's top-score of 54, fell short. Star batsman Virat Kohli was the first to go when left-arm quick Arshad Khan got the opener caught at long leg for seven. Siraj soon took charge and bowled Devdutt Padikkal and then Salt, who fell for 14 one ball after he hit the bowler for a six. Veteran Indian seamer Ishant Sharma dismissed Bengaluru skipper Rajat Patidar, causing the batting team to slip to 42-4 in 6.2 overs. "After three wickets, the way Jitesh (Sharma), Liam and Tim (David) (batted) was amazing to see and the positive from this match," said Patidar. "We are very confident about our batting unit - the way they are showing intent, that is a positive sign."

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Gujarat Titans 170 for 2** (Buttler 73\*, Sudharsan 49, Rutherford 30\*, Bhuvneshwar 1-23) **beat Royal Challengers Bengaluru 169 for 8** (Livingstone 54, Jitesh 33, David 32, Siraj 3-19) **by eight wickets**



Gujarat Titans' Jos Buttler in action against Royal Challengers Bengaluru during their IPL match in M Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bengaluru, India, yesterday. (Reuters)

ATHLETICS

## Tebogo says he and Lyles are friendly rivals after 'arrogant' remark in Paris

Reuters  
Manchester

Botswana's Olympic champion Letsile Tebogo said he and Noah Lyles have a friendly relationship, clarifying remarks he made about his American rival being "arrogant" after beating him for gold in the 200m at last year's Paris Games.

Tebogo, who captured Botswana's first Olympic title, raised eyebrows in his post-race press conference when he said he could not be the face of athletics because he was not "an arrogant or loud person like Noah" who embraces being a showman.

"When you get onto the track, it's all about business," Tebogo said in a video call yesterday. "(But) when we finish, you can be friends, life goes on.

"But the 'arrogance'.. he's good to sell our sport.

"But with me, I'll always shy away from doing that because that's me."

Tebogo blazed to a time of 19.46 seconds in the Paris 200m final, making him the fifth fastest man in history.

Three-times world 200m champion Lyles had been the favourite, but moments



Letsile Tebogo of Botswana celebrates with his national flag after winning gold following the Men's 200m Final at the Paris 2024 Olympics on August 8, 2024. (Reuters)

after he crossed the finish line third, the American revealed he had Covid-19.

With Lyles aiming to reassert his dominance over the distance, Tebogo was asked about running with a target on his back

this season. "Everybody who's there on the lineup, it's a rival. You cannot eliminate somebody because he didn't perform well at the 2024 Olympics or 2023 World Championships," Tebogo said.

"It's a new year, new beginnings, new goals. It's a rivalry on the track, and then off the track, we are human beings at the end of the day."

GLOBAL AMBASSADOR

Tebogo is encouraging kids to participate in sport and yesterday the 21-year-old was named World Athletics' global ambassador for the federation's Kids Athletics program. Growing up in a rough neighbourhood in Botswana, Tebogo said that had it not been for sport he very likely would have wound up a criminal.

"Sport has really helped me a lot, because in the neighbourhood that I was growing up in, there were a lot of criminals, so we thought that was the only way to survive," Tebogo said.

"But with sport I knew I had to go to school (and then) training and you are tired, you don't have time to roam the streets.

"So once I discovered that I pulled in a few friends of mine, and they are now playing football, and we always talk about how, if this didn't work out, where would we be?"

Kids Athletics was launched in 2002 to inspire children around the world to be

more active. About 1,000 children joined Tebogo, who was named the 2024 World Athlete of the Year for men's track, at his former primary school in Gaborone to be a part of yesterday's announcement.

Being a positive example is a role Tebogo - who initially played football as a left-winger before athletics coaches spotted his obvious speed - wears gladly.

'ALL ABOUT PUSHING MYSELF'

"It's all about pushing myself to the maximum limits to try and take those kids from those unlawful behaviours and show them they can do something in sport, either basketball, football or whichever sport," he said.

"So, it's for them to really see that a criminal life is limited, because you never know when it's your day... when you're not dead you can live more years than being a criminal."

Tebogo is coming off a second-place finish in the 400m at last Saturday's Maurie Plant Meet in Melbourne, a distance he ran for endurance training.

He will race in the Botswana Continental Tour meet in Gaborone on April 12, his first competitive appearance at home since his Olympic victory.



MOTORSPORT

# Perez talking to teams about a return in 2026

‘I’M ONLY COMING BACK IF THE PROJECT MAKES SENSE’

Reuters  
London

**S**ergio Perez’s absence from Formula 1 may not be a long one. Speaking to F1’s official website yesterday, the former Red Bull driver and 14-year veteran of the circuit said he is talking to multiple teams about returning to racing in 2026 as he spends this year away from the circuit.

“I’ve been approached by a few teams since Abu Dhabi,” the 35-year-old told *F1.com* while speaking from home in Mexico.

“Right now, the season has started so a few things will open up in the coming months.

“We are talking to a few parties out there. Once I know all my options, I will make a decision. What is very clear to me is that I’m only coming back if the project makes sense, and it’s something I can enjoy.”

After the season finale in Abu Dhabi in December, Perez and Red Bull announced they were cutting ties despite Perez having two more years left on his contract.

After finishing second in the standings to teammate Max Verstappen in 2023, Perez struggled last season. He failed to win a race for the first time since 2019 and had only four podium finishes. (He had 20 over the two previous seasons.)

In 281 career races, Perez has six wins, 39 podium finishes and four top-five finishes in the standings. A majority of that success (including three of the top-five finishes) came in his four seasons with Red Bull.

“Everything happened really late in the season,” Perez told *F1.com*.

“I wasn’t really expecting it to happen. It only became clearer once we were in Qatar, and we started to discuss and negotiate my exit of the team. It all happened very quickly.”



Sergio Perez, the former Red Bull driver, is spending a year away from Formula One racing.

Among the teams rumoured to be speaking with Perez is American manufacturer Cadillac, which will enter F1 competition next season.

New Zealander Liam Lawson, Perez’s replacement at Red Bull this season, has struggled enough that he was replaced after just two races. Yuki Tsunoda will take his place at the Japanese Grand Prix on Sunday.

One commonality between Perez’s struggles last season and Lawson’s so far this season is the RB20 car designed by Red Bull and first used in competition by Perez last season.

“Especially last year, I didn’t get to show what I’m able to do as a driver,” Perez said. “Now, all of a sudden, people realise how difficult the car is to drive.”

FOCUS

## Tsunoda embracing pressure of debut at home Japanese GP



Red Bull Racing’s Japanese driver Yuki Tsunoda speaks during a talk session as part of the F1 Tokyo Fan Festival in Tokyo ahead of the Japanese Grand Prix in Suzuka. (AFP)

AFP  
Tokyo

**Y**uki Tsunoda is relishing the pressure of making his Red Bull debut in front of his home fans at the Japanese Grand Prix, saying yesterday: “I’m never going to have this experience again.”

Tsunoda will be the centre of attention at Suzuka this weekend after replacing Liam Lawson as Max Verstappen’s teammate two races into the F1 season.

The 24-year-old Japanese driver steps up from sister team RB, with Lawson moving the other way to the team he drove for last year.

This year’s Grand Prix will also be Red Bull’s last in partnership with Japanese engine supplier Honda, with the team set to race in a special commemorative red and white livery.

“I’m never going to be in a situation like this again,” Tsunoda said after a Red Bull fan event in Tokyo.

“There’s the pressure of swapping teams, of racing at my home grand prix and of it being the last year of the partnership with Hon-

da. “There are lots of pressures and challenges but I’m never going to have this experience again so I want to enjoy it.”

Axed Lawson

Red Bull axed Lawson last week after the New Zealander’s disastrous start to his debut season with the team, which saw him fail to score any points in the first two race weekends.

Tsunoda said he had no hesitation when the call came to replace him.

“You don’t get offers to race for the top team very often,” said Tsunoda, now in his fifth full season in F1.

“I knew I wouldn’t get many chances like this in my life so I quickly said yes.”

Tsunoda’s highest finish at a race is fourth in 2021 at Abu Dhabi for RB, then called AlphaTauri.

He has targeted a place on the podium at Suzuka.

“My mindset is a little different now,” said Tsunoda, who previously had a reputation for his outbursts over the radio.

“I have been able to race more calmly this year.”

SPOTLIGHT

## Swiatek withdraws from Billie Jean King Cup tournament

Reuters  
London

**W**orld number two **Iga Swiatek** has pulled out of the upcoming Billie Jean King Cup qualifying tournament in her home country of Poland, she said on social media yesterday.

The 23-year-old said that she needed more time to focus on herself and would not be playing for the national team against Switzerland and Ukraine on April 10-12 in the city of Radom.

“I know that this is not the information that fans, especially Polish ones, wanted, nevertheless it is the right decision for me for now,” she said.

“Now it’s time for more balance, focusing on myself and my training. I keep my fingers crossed for the girls and the whole team.”

The five-time Grand Slam champion was recently eliminated from the Miami Open in the quarter-finals by 19-year-old Alexandra Eala from the Philippines.

Swiatek was playing the match with added security after being verbally abused by a spectator during an earlier practice session.

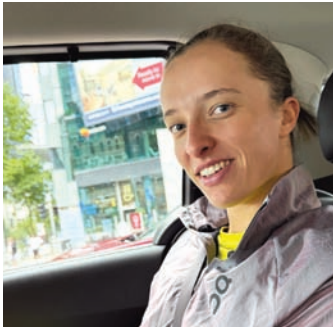
Britain’s Jones says altitude sickness led to collapse

Briton Francesca Jones said playing in Bogota without acclimatising to the high altitude led to her collapse mid-serve at the Colsanitas Cup, where she was taken off court in a wheelchair.

Jones, 24, was losing 6-2 5-7 5-3 to Argentina’s Julia Riera when the Briton suddenly staggered after tossing the ball up to serve before collapsing on the court as tournament officials rushed to her side.

Bogota is over 2,600 metres (8,500 feet) above sea level and can cause altitude sickness.

“After winning the event in Brazil on Sunday, our total trip took over 24 hours, with minimal rest and recovery from a long week. Bogota is renowned for its altitude and often takes a few days to adapt,” Jones said on Instagram yesterday. Jones added that she had been unable to practise be-



fore her match due to rain. “As the match went on, I worked hard to give myself the opportunity to stay competitive while trying to get used to the conditions but progressively struggled; blurry vision eventually leading to collapsing, with no cramp having occurred.”

Jones said they conducted multiple tests which concluded her “heart worked a little too hard” but that there was no long-term impact on her health.

Serena and husband bid on NFL flag football venture

Retired tennis great Serena Williams and her husband, Alexis Ohanian, have submitted a bid as potential investors to the NFL’s planned pro flag football men’s and women’s leagues, *Front Office Sports* reported.

A league spokesperson confirmed the bid to the league’s request for proposal. The bid comes on the heels of Williams’ attendance at the NFL owners meetings last week as part of a panel conversation on women’s sports.

*FOS* reported that the NFL is looking to invest in the leagues but have other partners operate them. The NFL eyes selling media rights for the leagues once they’re operational. Ten companies so far have approached the NFL about investing in the venture, per *Sports Business Journal*.

“It’s clear that there’s a lot of interest in a pro flag league,” NFL commissioner Roger Goodell told reporters. “We’ve been getting bids on people who want to invest in that either financially or invest in the operations of that. So, we’re hard at work, and I expect there’ll be progress soon.”

## Rahm ‘feeling good’, ready to tame Blue Monster

**Augusta, Georgia: Jon Rahm** tackles the Blue Monster this week as he prepares to chase a second green jacket. The Spaniard spoke to reporters yesterday ahead of the LIV Golf Miami tournament at Trump National Doral, which earned its colourful nickname for its demanding 7,701-yard length and plentiful water hazards. “Obviously Augusta is a whole different level and so is the Blue Monster, but that’s why I like this week,” Rahm said. “It’s such a good prep for a major coming up. I’m looking forward to this week to hopefully see some of those improvements and come into next week with a clear mind of what to do.”

Rahm, 30, has finished top six in each of the first four events on the LIV Golf calendar, including a T2 at the season-opening tourna-

ment in Riyadh. The Legion XIII captain ranks No. 2 in the individual standings behind Chile’s Joaquin Niemann, while his team ranks No 2 behind Fireballs GC. “I’m feeling good, yeah,” he said. “I’ve been able to have a lot of good finishes, but I would say it hasn’t been what I would consider playing my best. I think I’ve scored really, really well but with some level of discomfort in some parts of my game that I kind of need to get over to accomplish bigger things, right, especially talking about major championships.

“I think I’m very close to that if not over that. I think especially the last few weeks, I’ve been playing really good golf, feeling really comfortable.”

Rahm tied for fourth at Miami last year, finishing 8-under par and three strokes behind winner

Dean Burmester, who defeated Sergio Garcia in a playoff. Rahm heads to Augusta next week for the Masters, where he followed up his 2023 victory with a disappointing tie for 45th place last year.

Although he has not won a tournament since LIV Golf Chicago in September, the two-time major winner (2021 US Open) is not short on confidence.

“I’m always just absolutely blindly confident in my abilities,” Rahm said. “I think all of us up here, every time we tee it up, we think we’re going to win, and that’s why they have accomplished a lot of what they have and everything that they have. I’m looking forward to seeing those changes that I’m talking about that have been there for the better part of a year and a half. I just haven’t gotten over that.”



CYCLING

## Powless fools Visma team to win Across Flanders

AFP  
Waregem, Belgium

**A**merican **Neilson Powless** won the Across Flanders cobbles classic yesterday, leaving Wout van Aert and his Visma team with egg on their faces.

The Dutch outfit broke as a team with Van Aert, Matteo Jorgenson and Tiesj Benoot breaking away in the final hour.

But Powless grimly held on to the yellow-shirted trio and began his sprint early on the run into Waregem to outwit the three riders and win the 184.2km loop around Flanders with its 10 climbs and seven cobblestone sections.

The debacle represents a second disaster here in two seasons for the 30-year-old Van Aert, who suffered a fall on this race last season that scuppered much of his year.

American Jorgenson won in Van Aert’s absence in 2024 and came home fourth yesterday.

The ecstatic Powless told reporters it was “the win of my life” at the finish line as he celebrated with his teammates.

“I just can’t believe it, I sprinted for second place never thinking



Neilson Powless celebrates after winning the men’s elite race ‘Dwars Door Vlaanderen’, 184.2km from Roeselare to Waregem, yesterday. (AFP)

I’d beat Wout,” said the 28-year-old Powless.

Jorgenson said Visma followed team instructions to wait for the sprint rather than attack Powless over the final 50km. But the dejected Van Aert admitted the decision had really been his.

“It was me who made the call for the sprint. I was confident

I could win, but in the sprint I cramped completely,” he said.

“I wanted the victory so bad, especially after all the criticism I’ve been through and all the bad luck I’ve been through.”

Van Aert crossed the line with his head very low in a state of dejection before slumping to the ground.

Without a win since claiming the 10th stage in the Vuelta a Espana last August, he goes into the season’s two hottest one day races - the Tour of Flanders and the Paris-Roubaix - in the next 10 days nursing a bruising near miss.

Doctor linked to Quintana guilty of doping offences

Colombian doctor Fredy Gonzales Torres was given a six-month suspended sentence and fined €15,000 by a French court yesterday for doping infringements at the 2020 Tour de France.

He was found guilty of possessing an intravenous drip and using it for banned practices on cycling brothers Nairo and Dayer Quintana, who rode for the Arkea Samsic team that year.

The apparatus was discovered when a search was conducted at the Arkea Samsic team hotel on September 16 2020 during the Covid delayed Tour de France. Neither of the Quintana brothers tested positive for any doping products. The court also described the doctor as a “Guru like guide” using magnets, nocturnal body rubs with lemon, garlic and coffee while also promoting the use of numerical mantras to be repeated for mental rest.



FRENCH CUP

# PSG survive scare against Dunkerque to reach final

AFP  
Lille, France

Holders Paris Saint-Germain survived a major scare by coming from two goals down to beat second-tier outsiders Dunkerque 4-2 in the semi-finals of the French Cup on Tuesday, sealing their place in next month's final.

Ousmane Dembele scored twice on the night for PSG to take his tally for the season to 32 goals in all competitions, while captain Marquinhos and Desire Doue also found the net for the capital side in a game played in Lille.

In the final at the Stade de France on May 24, PSG will face the winners of second last-four tie between Reims and fourth-division Cannes.

Dunkerque, who are fifth in Ligue 2 and were playing in their first French Cup semi-final in 96 years, had been dreaming of pull-

ing off one of the competition's all-time great shocks as they found themselves 2-0 up against PSG after 27 minutes.

Having already eliminated three top-flight teams on their run to the last four, Dunkerque went ahead in the seventh minute when a free-kick from the left was headed on by Alec Georgen for Vincent Sasso to score via the underside of the crossbar. They doubled their advantage before the half-hour mark as PSG were undone by a route-one approach, Gaetan Courtet heading on a long kick by the goalkeeper for Saudi Arabian winger Muhanad al-Saad to run through and finish.

The Dunkerque fans, who had made the trip to Lille from the North Sea port city to watch the game because the club's own stadium was not deemed suitable for the occasion, could probably not believe what they were witnessing. However, PSG launched their comeback bid as Achraf Hakimi

cut the ball back for Dembele to lash in on the stroke of half-time.

They equalised three minutes after the restart when Marquinhos headed in a Dembele cross following a short corner, although Dunkerque were left furious as they felt the officials were wrong to award a corner in the first place.

Naatan Skytta almost headed the second-tier side back in front moments later, but instead new France international Doue played a one-two with Bradley Barcola before scoring with a deflected shot just past the hour mark.

With Dunkerque committing players forward, Dembele then burst clear to make it 4-2 deep in injury time.

Luis Enrique's PSG side will be confirmed as Ligue 1 champions on Saturday if they avoid defeat at home to Angers.

The Parisians then face Aston Villa next Wednesday in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final tie.



PSG's French forward Ousmane Dembele celebrates after scoring his team's fourth goal during the French Cup semi-final against USL Dunkerque at the Pierre-Mauroy stadium in Villeneuve-d'Ascq, northern France. (AFP)

FOCUS

# Chelsea's Maresca non-committal over Sancho's future

‘For me, Jadon’s situation doesn’t change’

Reuters  
London

Chelsea boss **Enzo Maresca** yesterday admitted Jadon Sancho “could do better” but was non-committal over the forward’s future at Stamford Bridge.

Reports last week said Chelsea were willing to sign the winger on a permanent deal from Manchester United despite a £5mn (\$6.5mn) clause that would allow them to cancel the agreement.

Sancho moved to Stamford Bridge on loan in August in a deal that reportedly included an obligation for Chelsea to buy the player for between £20 and £25mn. But after a promising start to life at the club the 25-year-old’s form has dipped and details have emerged of a way out for the London club if they paid a cancellation fee.

With just two goals in all competitions and none since December, Sancho has struggled to hold down a regular place in Maresca’s side as they chase qualification for next season’s Champions League.

Maresca, whose fourth-placed team host Tottenham today, was asked at his pre-match press conference whether he wanted to sign Sancho permanently.

“All the players that are with us, I love all of them,” he said. “But in this moment, it’s the moment to finish well and then it’s not the moment to think about next season. I’m completely focused about nine games, two months to go. I’m completely focused about that. Then what happens in summer, we’ll see.”

The Chelsea manager was



pressed on what Sancho needed to do to prove himself. “For me, Jadon’s situation doesn’t change,” he said.

“He’s exactly the same. For sure, in terms of numbers, he could do better, no doubt.

“But it’s not just about Jadon. I think we have more players in the same situation. Now, I don’t need to give Jadon a message because I speak with Jadon every day.

“I had a conversation yesterday with him. He has just to continue to give his best until the end.”

The Italian, in his first season at Stamford Bridge, played down the significance of his decision last week to cancel a day off after his senior players lost to the under-21s in training.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “Since I joined the club, I always demand high standards. International break, no official game, not many players here. The day after off, sometimes it’s normal to be a little bit relaxed, but because I don’t allow this we decided the day after to train. But it’s nothing strange or

nothing new.”

Maresca said a win against struggling Tottenham would be a boost for the final stages of the season, with just nine league games to go.

“From that win, probably you can build momentum until the end. But from now on, they are all important games,” he said.

Attacking trio Cole Palmer, Noni Madueke and Nicolas Jackson are all available for selection again after missing recent matches because of injury.

COPA DEL REY

# Real Madrid hold Sociedad in 8-goal thriller to final

AFP  
Madrid

Real Madrid edged into the Copa del Rey final with a thrilling 4-4 draw against Real Sociedad after extra-time on Tuesday, securing a 5-4 aggregate semi-final victory.

Antonio Rudiger decided the pulsating tie with a header in the 115th minute, with Madrid to face Barcelona or Atletico Madrid in the final.

Real Sociedad, trailing 1-0 from the first leg, took the lead through Ander Barrenetxea, but Endrick’s fine chip pulled the 20-time winners level.

A David Alaba own goal and Mikel Oyarzabal’s deflected effort helped La Real open up a lead on the Spanish champions but Madrid battled back with goals from Jude Bellingham and Aurelien Tchouameni.

Oyarzabal grabbed his second in stoppage time to force extra-time but his side could not hold off Madrid until penalties, with Rudiger’s header the final word.

Ancelotti brought Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo Goes back into his starting lineup, leaving Kylian Mbappe on the bench to rest, with Endrick taking his place in an all-Brazilian attack.

The 18-year-old wonderkid striker who netted the only goal in the first leg, was active in the opening phases, sending a dangerous overhead kick narrowly wide of Alex Remiro’s far post.

Bellingham also threatened for the hosts but it was Real Sociedad who took the lead.

Barrenetxea broke in behind Lucas Vazquez to reach Pablo Marin’s flick-on and drilled a low finish home to put the Basques level in the tie.

Real Madrid soon found their equaliser. Vinicius played a sensational through ball down the left flank with the outside of his foot, sending Endrick in on goal.

The youngster, top scorer

in the Copa del Rey, produced a gorgeous lobbed finish over Romero for his fifth in the competition.

Real Sociedad appealed for a penalty before the break when Takefusa Kubo went down in the box after being held by Vinicius, but the referee did not concur.

Ancelotti brought on Mbappe for Endrick, looking for a goal to shut the tie down for good. However it was the visitors who were creating the better chances.

Madrid goalkeeper Andriy Lunin made a superb save to deny Martin Zubimendi and Oyarzabal wastefully fired the rebound wide.

Real Sociedad moved ahead on the night when Alaba deflected Marin’s cross through Lunin’s legs and into his own net after 72 minutes.

The Austrian defender, who returned from a long-term injury in January, was also involved in Real Sociedad’s third, deflecting Oyarzabal’s shot past Lunin.

It sparked Madrid in to action, with Vinicius turning his marker brilliantly, driving forward and crossing for Bellingham to strike in the 82nd minute.

Four minutes later and Los Blancos pulled level on the night with Tchouameni’s header badly fumbled by Remiro into his own net.

Just when it seemed Real Sociedad were out they managed to force extra-time, with Oyarzabal heading home Sergio Gomez’s free-kick in the 93rd minute.

Remiro saved well from Bellingham before the end of the regulation 90 minutes, with the pace slower, inevitably, as the game restarted.

Real Sociedad’s Jon Olagasti was booked for hacking down Vinicius as he threatened to escape on the left, with the visitors working hard to hold off the European champions.

With five minutes remaining Rudiger sent Madrid through to the final with a fine header from Arda Guler’s corner past the helpless Remiro.

BOTTOMLINE

# Postecoglou hopes Pochettino gets Spurs return wish

AFP  
London

**Ange Postecoglou** says he does not feel “disrespected” by former Tottenham boss Mauricio Pochettino’s stated desire to manage the club again one day.

Pochettino, currently in charge of the United States’ national men’s team, enjoyed a successful five-year spell as Spurs boss, taking them to the 2019 Champions League final, which they lost to Liverpool. Recently the Argentine, who has also managed Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea, expressed his desire to one day return to the north London club.

Postecoglou, the present Spurs’ manager, was asked about Pochettino’s comments yesterday, on the eve of Tottenham’s Premier League match against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge. “I mean Mauricio, if he wants to come back one day, I



hope it happens for him. We all have dreams and aspirations,” said the Australian. “If that’s what he wants, then... you’re suggesting he is trying to put pressure on me?”

“Well, I don’t feel disrespected. I think if you ask Mauricio that question directly, you would get a pretty clear answer as to what his intent was. ‘Again, nothing for me

to be consumed with. I’m more focused on making sure we try to win tomorrow night.”

A 2-0 loss at Fulham on March 16 was Tottenham’s 15th defeat of the Premier League campaign and led to more speculation about Postecoglou’s future during the recent international break.

“I know what my responsibilities are and I am sure if the club decide to go in a different direction, there are some outstanding candidates for it,” said the 59-year-old.

“And you know what, maybe someone will think, ‘Ange Postecoglou is not a bad coach, maybe we’ll take a punt on him!’

“Mate, it doesn’t rock my world. It doesn’t consume me. I am here, I am passionate about what we’re doing. I was brought in to change the way the club plays, rejuvenate the squad and bring success. I am focused on that and that is what I’ll keep doing.”

**‘I’LL BE BACK,’ VOWS HAALAND AFTER INJURY BLOW**

Erling Haaland promised “I’ll be back” after the Manchester City striker learned he will be sidelined for seven weeks with an ankle injury. Haaland limped off during the second half of City’s 2-1 win at Bournemouth in the FA Cup quarter-finals on Sunday.

The Norway star had missed a penalty and scored his 30th goal of the season before being hurt in a challenge with Bournemouth midfielder Lewis Cook.

City boss Pep Guardiola on Tuesday revealed Haaland would miss the majority of the remainder of the season, saying: “The doctors told me between five and seven weeks, so hopefully for the end of the season and the Club World Cup he will be ready.”

Haaland responded to his injury blow on Instagram on Wednesday, posting a message that read: “I’ll be back” - a quote made famous by Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character in the Terminator movies - accompanied by a flexed biceps emoji.

The post also featured a photo of the 24-year-old with his left foot in a protective boot and each arm raised holding up a crutch.

Haaland’s absence is a major setback to City’s hopes of securing qualification for the Champions League.

Haaland will miss Sunday’s derby at Manchester United in the Premier League, as well as the FA Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest on April 26 or 27. The FA Cup final takes place on May 17, a day short of seven weeks after he suffered the injury.

City’s final Premier League game is at Fulham on May 25, with their first match in the Club World Cup against Wydad Casablanca being played on June 18.