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Rohit ton in vain as Chennai beat Mumbai by 20 runs in IPL



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Leverkusen win first Bundesliga title, breaking Bayern's 11-year run



Monday, April 15, 2024
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SPOTLIGHT

U-23 Asian Cup critical to a player's growth: al-Haydos

With the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 underway, Qatar's legendary captain **Hassan al-Haydos** spoke about the importance of youth tournaments in the development of football talent. The talismanic striker made his mark on Qatar's football scene when he debuted for Qatar's U-23 side in 2007, scoring a goal off the bench.

"Youth tournaments are where players get a real sense of what it means to play for their country. Competitions like the under-23 Asian Cup are critical to a player's growth. Young players are challenged to play at a higher level, implement new tactics and push themselves to achieve something for their country," said al-Haydos, who recently retired from international football after a career that saw him lift the AFC Asian Cup twice.

The AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 will see 16 of the best under-23 teams compete for the 6th edition of the tournament. The top three teams will qualify automatically to the 2024 Summer Olympics, while the fourth-place team will take on an African team for a coveted spot at the Paris games.

"It was a dream of mine to represent Qatar at the Olympics. Sadly, I never qualified but I hope that this team will be able to make the most out of the tournament being played on home soil and book a spot for Paris. It's a dream for any player to represent their country at the Olympic games," added al-Haydos, who continues to play for Qatar Stars League side Al Sadd SC.

Recently, al-Haydos led Qatar to a second consecutive AFC Asian Cup, bring an illustrious international career to an end. He played a total of 183 matches for the national team, scoring 41 goals along the way. Most notably, al-Haydos played for Qatar in front of a home crowd during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

"The legacy of Qatar 2022 will be felt for generations to come. It goes beyond the world-class infrastructure that was built ahead of the tournament. The World Cup in Qatar fundamentally changed the way people viewed the region and corrected many of the misconceptions about the Middle East and Arab world," said al-Haydos.

He added: "For us players, the World Cup empowered us to play at a higher level, to demand more from ourselves, and to do more for our national team. I am sure this is something that is felt with younger players as well."

This will be the first time that the AFC U-23 Asian Cup will be played on FIFA World Cup stadiums. Al Janoub and Khalifa International stadiums, both Qatar 2022 venues, will be joined by Jassim Bin Hamad and Abdullah Bin Khalifa stadiums in hosting 32 matches over 19 days.

"Throughout my career, fans have always been a critical part of my success. Having good support in the stands is at times more important than the coach, or the players themselves. I really hope that our fans go out to matches and get behind our team on their way to the Olympics," added al-Haydos.

Drawn alongside hosts Qatar in Group A are Australia, Jordan and Indonesia, while Group B will bring together Japan, South Korea, United Arab Emirates and China. Group C contains title holders Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Thailand and Tajikistan, with Group D containing Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Kuwait and Malaysia.

Prices for group stage match tickets start at QR15 and can be purchased online through the Hayya to Qatar mobile app. Spectators from outside Qatar can also purchase tickets from the same platform. Disabled spectators can apply to purchase accessible tickets through accessibility@hayya.qa



FOOTBALL

Qatar U-23 coach Vale targets Paris Olympics qualification

Top three finishers will seal Olympic Games berths, with fourth-placed team going to a playoff

By Sports Reporter
Doha



Qatar U-23 players train yesterday at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, on the eve of their AFC U-23 Asian Cup Group A match against Indonesia. **PICTURES:** *Noushad Thekkayil*

Qatar's Under-23 head coach Ilidio Vale said the immediate target for his side is to seal the Olympic qualification, as the hosts open their AFC U-23 Asian Cup campaign with a match against debutants Indonesia today. Berths for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games are available to the top three finishers, with an additional opportunity for the fourth-placed team on offer via a Playoff against the Confederation of African Football (CAF) representative team Guinea on May 9 in Paris.

"The goal of this tournament is to qualify for the Olympics. It is good exposure to compete with the best teams in Asia, and I believe everyone should make the best of this time whether you're a coach, player or administrator," said Vale yesterday.

"The Qatar Football Association has provided us with everything we need from infrastructure to equipment. We are fully prepared and will be competing hard in this group stage. We may not be favourites to win, but we will give our best in every match," the coach added.

Vale hoped his young players will able to replicate the success of the senior team, who won their second successive Asian Cup title at home soil in February. "I hope the win of Qatar's senior national team will be a morale booster for the U-23 team, but I want to reassure everyone that there is no pressure on our team. It's a different competition, this AFC U-23 Asian Cup is with different teams and objectives. However, I would like the U-23 squad to achieve the same excellent results of their seniors," Vale said.

After missing the inaugural edition in 2013, Qatar have reeled off five consecutive qualifications and the home side will welcome Indonesia in the second Group A fixture at 6.30pm at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

A third-place finish in 2018 is the furthest Qatar have gone and also the last time they advanced past the Group Stage, while the Indonesians will aim to make waves on their bow after becoming the 25th different team in tournament history to qualify.

Indonesia head coach Shin Tae-yong expects a tough encounter but the former South Korea manager expects the Southeast Asian side to produce their best despite the absence of several key players.

"Qatar, Australia and Jordan are extremely competitive," said Shin, who steered his native South Korea to the quarter-finals of the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

"The AFC U23 Asian Cup is not in the FIFA calendar, so I can't say that we have had the perfect preparation, but we have the mindset to improve, continue to develop ourselves and hopefully, we have a good performance."

Shin admitted Qatar, with home ground advantage, will start as favourites but was optimistic Indonesia can match their opponents based on their form in friendly matches against West Asian opponents.

"In Dubai, we had friendlies against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and we had a great experience. The level of our performance increased and with that, the players' confidence also increased. Those matches have been a great help for our team, especially for the matches against Qatar and Jordan."

In the tournament opener, Australia will start favourites against Jordan at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium. Jordan head coach Abdallah Abu Zema said he is hoping to build on his nation's run to the final of the Asian Cup Qatar 2023 as the country pursues a first-ever Olympic Games qualification.

Jordan reached the final of the AFC Asian Cup for the first time at the turn of the year, defeating Iraq, Tajikistan and South Korea in the knockout rounds before succumbing to hosts Qatar in the decider. "We are definitely proud as Jordanian athletes with the achievements of the senior national team in the Asian Cup, the performance of our team was very strong," said Abu Zema. "This gives us great motivation, it pumps up our confidence, our ability to make it to the Olympic Games. We hope to achieve our best result in qualifying for the Olympics."

Jordan have never qualified for the Olympic Games while Australia will be looking for a third ticket to the Finals since joining the Asian Football Confederation in 2006. The Olyroos featured in the most recent edition of the competition in Tokyo under Graham Arnold and current head coach Tony Vidmar acknowledged the impact of qualification both in itself and for the future development of the senior national team.

"We always understand the importance of an Olympic tournament," said the former defender. "The country is mad on the Olympic sports, so the football tournament has significant importance for, not only the country, but also the players individually. Going to a tournament like that increases the opportunities and exposure to top level football, which is important for our senior national team for the future."



FROM LEFT: U-23 coaches – Ilidio Vale of Qatar, Tony Vidmar of Australia, Abdallah Abu Zema of Jordan and Shin Tae-yong of Indonesia – attend a press conference in Doha yesterday.

SPORT

CRICKET

Rohit ton in vain as Chennai beat Mumbai in IPL

'Definitely, gettable. But they bowled well and Pathirana was the difference'



Chennai Super Kings' Matheesha Pathirana (left) celebrates with captain Ruturaj Gaikwad after taking the wicket of Mumbai Indians' Suryakumar Yadav (not pictured) as Rohit Sharma (right) reacts during the IPL match at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Mumbai

India's Rohit Sharma hit an unbeaten 105 but his Mumbai Indians fell 20 runs short as they tried to chase down a big target set by holders Chennai Super Kings in a battle of IPL heavyweights yesterday.

Set 207 for victory, five-time winners Mumbai finished on 186-6 even though Rohit raised his ton in 61 balls at his home in Wankhede Stadium.

"Our young wicketkeeper scoring three sixes down the order helped a lot and I think that was the difference," said CSK captain Ruturaj Gaikwad.

"To start off, on this kind of ground, you need 10-15 extra runs. We were looking at 215-220, but Bumrah bowled well. Bowling-wise, we were spot on with our execution. Even in powerplay, I would have taken six overs for 60. These kinds of venues demand both skills: batting and bowling," he said.

Gaikwad and the in-form Shivam Dube powered Chennai, who won their fifth title last year, to 206-4.

Gaikwad hit 69 and Dube smashed an unbeaten 66 before warhorse MS Dhoni smashed three successive sixes in the 20th over to take Chennai past 200. Dhoni came in to bat with four balls left and scored 20. He smashed Mumbai skipper Hardik Pandya for three sixes and finished with a two to end a 26-run over.

Sri Lanka quick Matheesha Pathirana then took four wickets to push Mumbai to their fourth loss of the season.

The two teams are on contrasting runs after changes of guard this season. Pandya replaced Rohit as Mumbai captain while Dhoni surprisingly handed over the Chennai leadership to Gaikwad.

Gaikwad had his fourth win as captain after he set the pace for his team with his 40-ball knock laced with five fours and five sixes.

He put on 90 runs with Dube before falling to Pandya, but Dube and then Dhoni's cameo ensured Chennai finished strongly. Mumbai started well with Rohit and Ishan Kishan putting together 70 runs for the first wicket before Pathirana hit back.

Pathirana sent back Kishan and then Suryakumar Yadav, for his second duck this season, in the space of three balls.

He later dismissed Tilak Varma for 31 as Rohit attempted to keep up the charge in his 63-ball knock and his second IPL ton. Tushar Deshpande got Pandya out and the home crowd cheered in another sign of growing unpopularity of Mumbai's choice of captain.

"Definitely, gettable. But they bowled pretty well and Pathirana was the difference. They were smart with their plans and used the longer boundary well," Mumbai captain Pandya said.

BRIEF SCORES
Chennai Super Kings 206 for 4 (Gaikwad 69, Dube 64, Hardik 2-43) **beat Mumbai Indians 186 for 6** (Rohit 105*, Pathirana 4-28) **by 20 runs.**

FOCUS

Big bucks Starc, Salt help Kolkata thrash Lucknow in IPL

AFP
Kolkata

Phil Salt's rapid 89 and three wickets for Mitchell Starc helped Kolkata Knight Riders race to a crushing eight-wicket win over Lucknow Super Giants yesterday.

Starc's 3-28 kept Lucknow down to 161-7 at Kolkata's Eden Gardens, with the other Knight Riders' bowlers putting in disciplined performances after their side elected to field first.

The Australian left-arm quick became the most expensive buy in IPL history after Kolkata shelled out $2.98mn for his services.

Opener Salt then steered the two-time IPL winners to their target in 15.4 overs for their fourth victory in five matches this season.

It was the English wicket-keeper-batsman's second half-century in the current IPL edition after he scored 54 in his team's opening win last month.

Salt held the chase together despite Kolkata losing two wickets including opener Sunil Narine for six.

He put on 120 runs with skipper Shreyas Iyer, who made 38, smashing 14 fours and three sixes in his 47-ball knock.

Players have been jostling to impress their national selectors ahead of the upcoming T20 World Cup starting June 1 in the West Indies and the United States.

Starc started slowly, leaking 10 runs in his first over, but came back strongly and sent back Deepak Hooda in his third with the help of a diving catch at backward point from Ramandeep Singh.

Mystery spinner Narine choked the flow of runs and returned figures of 1-17 before Starc bowled the 20th over for just six runs and two wickets.

He got the dangerous Nicholas Pooran on the first ball, caught behind for 45, and finished with a yorker to bowl Arshad Khan.

Talking about his team's performance Kolkata Knight Riders captain Shreyas Iyer said he is happy. "Certainly I am happy. The way we played, it was a comprehensive victory. We bowled well under pressure and then finishing off the game, it was the icing on the cake."

BRIEF SCORES
Kolkata Knight Riders 162 for 2 (Salt 89*, Shreyas 38*, Mohsin 2-29) **beat Lucknow Super Giants 161 for 7** (Pooran 45, Rahul 39, Starc 3-28) **by eight wickets.**



Kolkata Knight Riders' Phil Salt plays a shot during the IPL match against Lucknow Super Giants at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday. *(AFP)*

SPOTLIGHT

Christie takes Asia badminton crown

AFP
Shanghai

Indonesia's Jonatan Christie cliched the Badminton Asia Championships crown yesterday, seeing off Li Shi Feng in two sets in China.

Christie defeated home favourite Li 21-15, 21-16 in the tournament finale in the Chinese city of Ningbo.

Earlier China's Wang Zhi Yi swatted aside compatriot Chen Yu Fei 21-19, 21-7 to claim the women's singles title.

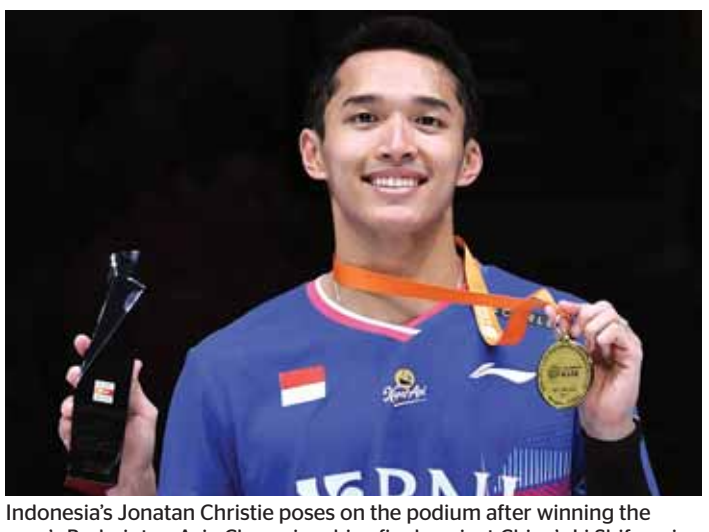
Wang's victory came after world number one, South Korean An Se-young, was dumped out in the quarter-finals on Friday by China's He Bingjiao.

An, the top seed in Ningbo, will still be favourite to win gold at this summer's Paris Olympics but she has been struggling with a knee injury.

The men's doubles title was claimed yesterday by Chinese pair Liang Wei Keng and Wang Chang, who dispatched Malaysian duo Goh Sze Fei and Nur Izzuddin 21-17, 15-21, 21-10.

South Korean partners Baek Ha-na and Lee So-hee took the women's doubles title by beating China's Zhang Shu Xian and Zheng Yu 23-21, 21-12.

The prestigious annual tournament was the final chance for Asian players to seal a spot at the Paris Olympics which will be held from July 26 to August 11.



Indonesia's Jonatan Christie poses on the podium after winning the men's Badminton Asia Championships final against China's Li Shifeng in Ningbo, China, yesterday. *(AFP)*



China's Wang Zhi Yi (right) poses on the podium after winning her women's Badminton Asia Championships final against compatriot Chen Yu Fei yesterday. *(AFP)*

SETBACK

Injured Marsh out of Indian Premier League

AFP
New Delhi

Delhi Capitals all-rounder Mitchell Marsh will return home from the Indian Premier League with a hamstring injury, a concern for Australia ahead of the T20 World Cup. Marsh, who is expected to captain Australia in T20's showpiece event in the West Indies and the United States starting on June 1, missed Delhi's previous two matches when he suffered a partial tear in his right hamstring.

A team source confirmed to AFP the 32-year-old Marsh has left for home but did not reveal the date or chances of his return to the T20 tournament.

Marsh was out for a two-ball duck in his last innings, which ended in a heavy defeat for his team against Kolkata Knight Riders. He has managed just 61 runs and claimed one wicket from four matches. Marsh's team, led by Indian star Rishabh Pant, remain ninth in the 10-team table with just two wins from six matches,

The ongoing 17th edition of the IPL will end on May 26 with the final in Chennai.

NAGEEYE WINS ROTTERDAM MARATHON

Dutch runner Adbi Nageeye, the reigning Olympic silver medallist, won the Rotterdam marathon yesterday, bettering his own national record by 11 seconds. The Somalia-born Nageeye clocked 2hr 04.45min, finishing five seconds ahead of Ethiopian Amedework Walelegn, with Birhanu Legese, also of Ethiopia, rounding out the podium. There was a victory in the women's race for Ethiopia's Ashete Bekere, whose winning time of 2:19.30 was enough to see her finish ahead of the Kenyan pair of Viola Kibiwot and Selly Chepyego Kaptich.



Adbi Nageeye of The Netherlands crosses the finish line to win the Rotterdam Marathon yesterday. *(AFP)*

TENNIS

Tsitsipas defeats Ruud for third Monte Carlo title

'I SHOWED SOME UNBELIEVABLE, RUTHLESS TENNIS'



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates with the Monte Carlo Masters trophy next to Prince Albert II of Monaco at the Monte Carlo Country Club yesterday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco

Stefanos Tsitsipas completed a Monte Carlo Masters trophy hat-trick yesterday, holding off Casper Ruud 6-1, 6-4 in a display of "ruthless" tennis. The 12th-ranked Greek, who will return to top 10 today, also won the title in the principality in 2021 and 2022.

Tsitsipas said a chat with his team the night before the final gave him the spark he needed against his Norwegian opponent.

"I told them I would go out and play fearless tennis and that's what I did. I couldn't let the team down. I wanted to make the most of it," said the 25-year-old who had stunned Australian Open winner and world number two Jannik Sinner in the semi-finals.

"I showed some unbelievable, ruthless tennis."

Tsitsipas produced 30 winners to the 20 of Ruud who had reached the final with victory over world number one Novak Djokovic on Saturday. He is the fifth man to win three or more Monte Carlo titles, joining Rafael Nadal (11) and Bjorn Borg, Thomas Muster and Ilie Nastase who won three apiece.

The Greek struck first with a break in the third game of the opening set, then saved three break points to lead 3-1.

Tsitsipas earned a double break for 4-1 and claimed the set as Ruud double-faulted after 36 minutes. In the second set, Tsitsipas got out of trouble in a 13-minute game, saving three break points at 3-3 after leading 40-0. He claimed the title three games later on a first match point, a forehand winner down the line. Tsitsipas explained that his 98-minute victory was more special than his first two title triumphs and cited a no-nonsense attitude heading onto the court.

"This is amazing, I want to thank family, friends and those who made this moment possible," he said. "(Completing) the trinity (hat-trick) is even more special than the first two."

He added: "This match was nerve-wracking – I really wanted the trinity and I got it today. I played cohesive tennis from start to finish."

Ruud, twice a French Open runner-up, apologised to the capacity crowd for not being able to mount a consistent challenge to his Greek opponent. "Congratulations to Stefanos for winning again, he's been playing so well all week," said 10th-ranked Ruud.

"You are now back where you belong (among the top players)."

Ruud added: "I'm sorry I could not put on a better performance today, hopefully I will be back with a better performance in another year. I couldn't get it this time, but hopefully I'm getting closer to these big titles.

"I want to break the barrier and win a big tournament like this."

MOTORSPORT

Vinales makes MotoGP history in Grand Prix of the Americas

AFP
Austin

Maverick Vinales overcame a horror start from pole on his Aprilia to claw his way back and win the Grand Prix of the Americas MotoGP in Texas yesterday.

Exciting teenaged rookie Pedro Acosta took second with Enea Bastianini completing the podium of the third race weekend of the season.

Vinales, who had dropped back to 11th after a disastrous grid getaway, wrote his name into motorcycling history as the first rider to win a MotoGP race with three different teams - Suzuki, Yamaha, and now Aprilia.

"Thank you guys, I was feeling everyone pushing me, here in America," Vinales told the fans at the circuit in downtown Austin.

"History made, thank you America, I'm super happy. We need to keep working, the pace was amazing."

In a race as exciting as any rodeo show in the Lone Star State there was high drama with 10 laps to go, Marc Marquez crashing to the ground seconds after taking the lead - the veteran Spaniard's chances of an eighth win at the track and a first for his new Ducati satellite Gresini team buried in the Texan dust.

Championship leader Jorge Martin came in fourth with defending world champion Francesco Bagnaia in his slip stream.



Maverick Vinales (centre) celebrates with second placed Pedro Acosta (right) and third placed Enea Bastianini after winning the Grand Prix of the Americas MotoGP in Texas yesterday. *(MotoGP)*

Athletic Bilbao's top-four bid hit by Villarreal draw

Athletic Bilbao's hopes of qualifying for next season's Champions League suffered a blow as Dani Parejo's injury-time penalty secured a 1-1 draw for 10-man Villarreal at San Mames in La Liga yesterday.
The hosts were playing for the first time since lifting their first major trophy in 40 years with victory last weekend over Real Mallorca in the Copa del Rey final on penalties.
It appeared as though fortune from the spot would be on their side again as Villarreal striker Gerard Moreno struck the post with an early penalty.
Visiting midfielder Santi Comesana was dismissed for a second yellow card in the first minute of the second half and Athletic took advantage when Oihan Sancet fired home in the 67th minute.
But a VAR review resulted in another Villarreal spot-kick in the fifth minute of added time, and Parejo made no mistake.
The Basque club now sit four points behind fourth-placed Atletico Madrid in the race to reach the Champions League with seven matches remaining.

CYCLING

British rider Pidcock sprints to snap up Amstel Gold victory

AFP
Valkenburg, Netherlands



Ineos Grenadiers' British rider Tom Pidcock (centre) crosses the finish line to win the Amstel Gold Race 2024 in Valkenburg yesterday. *(AFP)*

Tom Pidcock won a three-man sprint to finally seal his first victory at the prestigious Amstel Gold Race one-day cycling classic yesterday.

The Briton banished previous near misses as he edged Swiss rider Marc Hirschi at the line, with Belgian Tiesj Benoot rolling in third to complete the podium.

Last year Pidcock was third. In 2021 he lost in a long-delayed photo-finish to Wout van Aert, amid suggestions that the camera had not been aligned with the finish line.

"I was going to say 'It's great to win for the second time' but that might create some controversy," Pidcock said.

"It feels really good, this year's been so tough, I made big sacrifices at the start of the year, been away from home so much, so now to finally put it together, to get the hands in the air means a lot and this race I've always loved racing, it's pretty special."

The podium trio had been part of a quartet who escaped from a late breakaway and stayed just clear to the line.

Pidcock, who rides for Ineos, completed the twisty, hilly 253.6-kilometre run from Maastricht to Valkenburg in five hours, 58 minutes and 17 seconds.

The next 10 finishers were all credited with the same time. The fast-closing peloton was 11 seconds back. The Dutch one-day classic broke up the spring run of three of cycling's five super-long monuments.

Dutch rider Mathieu van der Poel dominated the last two Sundays with wins at the Tour of Flanders and Paris-Roubaix. He can add a third monument on April 21 at Liege-Bastogne-Liege.

When a dozen riders broke away on the Keutenberg climb with 30 kilometres to go, the Visma leader was content to wait in the pack. But the escapees nursed a small advantage to the line.

Pidcock said he was still feeling pain in his shoulder after a crash preparing for the Tour of the Basque Country, which he then skipped, and in his hand, after a fall in Paris-Roubaix.

"This week I was struggling to sprint, I had a lot of shoulder pain so I couldn't hold my bars properly so I was not so confident but it was how it was going to end up," he said. Last year's winner Tadej Pogacar is skipping the spring classics to focus on preparing for a Giro d'Italia-Tour de France double.

Earlier, Marianne Vos grabbed victory in a shortened women's race as Lorena Wiebes put her hands in the air to early, sitting up to celebrate before the finish.

Vos, who rides for Visma, exploited the error by her Dutch compatriot Wiebes of SD Worx to win the sprint.

"It's a shame for Lorena, but I'm happy with this victory," said Vos.

Norwegian Ingvild Gaskjenn was third. The race was held up for an hour, after an accident involving a police motorbike escorting the peloton.

The riders held an improvised picnic before setting off again on a shortened route that avoided the crash site.

SPOTLIGHT

Alcaraz's French Open build-up suffers blow with Barcelona withdrawal

AFP
Barcelona

Carlos Alcaraz's hopes of a third successive Barcelona Open title have been dashed as he withdrew from the tournament yesterday due to a right arm injury, organisers announced.

It is the same injury that forced Alcaraz to pull out of this week's Monte Carlo Masters and comes just weeks away from the French Open.

"Despite having tried until the last moment, he will not be in the Barcelona Open," read an organisers' statement.

Alcaraz will set his sights on the Madrid Open – it runs from April 24 to May 5 – which he has also won on the past two occasions. The 20-year-old is yet to add a French Open crown to his US Open (2022) and Wimbledon titles (2023), his best performance a semi-final last year.

The French Open begins on May 26. As top seed in Barcelona he would have had a bye into the second round – a luxury not afforded to his superstar compatriot Rafael Nadal.

The 37-year-old has been given a wild card invite on his return to the ATP Tour for the first time since a hip injury flared up in January. Nadal plays will play 63rd-ranked Flavio Cobolli of Italy in his opening match.

The 22-time Grand Slam champion has played just once, in an exhibition match against Alcaraz, since his quarter-final defeat by Jordan Thompson in the Brisbane Open.

Nadal missed virtually all of the 2023 season through injury and has dropped to No.646 in the world rankings.

The injury in Brisbane prompted his withdrawal from the Australian Open as well as Doha and Indian Wells, where he had first intended to make his comeback.

His one appearance since Brisbane came in an exhibition match against Alcaraz in Las Vegas in March where observers noted some discomfort in his back.

With this potentially Nadal's last year on tour, he will be desperate not to miss any more clay court preparation time as he seeks a record-extending 15th French Open title.

"I'm happy to be here, of course, Barcelona is a place that has brought me a great deal of joy, and where I have spent periods of my life," said Nadal at Saturday's draw ceremony.

Clement slams 'not good enough' Rangers' after shock Ross County losswithdrawal

Philippe Clement said Rangers had "not been good enough" after a shock 3-2 loss away to struggling Ross County yesterday dealt a huge blow to their Scottish Premiership title hopes
Ross County had managed just four draws – and 20 defeats – in 24 previous games against the Glasgow giants.
And it seemed normal service would be resumed when Rangers went ahead through a 15th-minute own-goal from home captain Jack Baldwin at Dingwall.
But two goals in three second-half minutes from Simon Murray and George Harmon turned the tide in County's favour.
Josh Sims then made it 3-1 to the home side in the 69th minute and although Rangers captain James Tavernier scored from the penalty spot a minute from normal time, Ross County held on for their first win over the Gers.
The result left Rangers four points behind leaders and arch-rivals Celtic with a game in hand, against Dundee at Dens Park on Wednesday. Even if they win that match, Rangers will still be a point behind and needing Celtic to slip-up if they are to win the title. "I'm very disappointed because we didn't play a good game," Rangers manager Clement told the BBC.
"We gave away easy goals, leading 1-0, not a good first half, not enough quality on the ball then you need to chase the game suddenly. With or without the ball it was not good enough today, so I'm very disappointed."

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal, Liverpool lose to hand City lead

AFP
London

Aston Villa struck twice late on through Ollie Watkins and Leon Bailey to inflict a huge blow on Arsenal's Premier League title challenge with a 2-0 win at the Emirates yesterday as Liverpool also stumbled in a shock 1-0 defeat to Crystal Palace.

Manchester City were the big winners of the day as the defending champions remain two points clear at the top of the table with six games remaining.

Arsenal had taken 31 from a possible 33 Premier League points in 2024 prior to Villa's visit, but former Gunners boss Unai Emery derailed his old club's charge towards the title.

"No one would have predicted our run since January. It's come to an end today. You need to reset," said Arsenal midfielder Declan Rice.

"I still think there will be plenty more twists and turns to go. We're in a three-horse title race with two unbelievable sides but, as you've seen with other results today, the Premier League can throw up anything."

Mikel Arteta's men were left to rue not making the most of their first half superiority as ex-Arsenal goalkeeper Emi Martinez produced a brilliant stop to deny Leandro Trossard the opener.

However, Villa had shown their teeth as Watkins and Youri Tielemans struck the woodwork before snatching all three points.

Bailey ghosted in to meet Lucas Digne's low cross six minutes from time. And Watkins then moved to within one of Erling Haaland's 20 in the race for the Golden Boot with a sumptuous finish on a counter-attack from an Arsenal corner.

Villa's victory puts them in pole position for a place in next season's Champions League as they move three points clear of fifth-placed Tottenham.

"We are not being consistent in every match like I want, but today we were fantastic," said Emery.

Liverpool running out of steam

It was a similar story for Liverpool at Anfield as Jurgen Klopp's men appear to have run out of steam at the business end of the campaign.

The Reds have now won just three of their last eight games in all competitions as a glorious goodbye for Klopp is at risk of fizzling out.

Liverpool had not lost in any competition at Anfield for 14 months prior to Atalanta's 3-0 rout in the Europa League on Thursday and suffered their first Premier League defeat at home since October 2022.

Eberechi Eze gave Palace a deserved lead on 14 minutes and only an incredible goal-line clearance by Andy Robertson denied Jean-Philippe Mateta a second.

Liverpool were much improved after the break but were guilty of missing a number of big chances.

Darwin Nunez fired straight at Dean Henderson, while Curtis Jones, Mohamed Salah and Diogo Jota should all have salvaged at least a point.

"I am not dumb," said Klopp on the ramifications for the title race.

"The answer is pretty easy: if we play like we did in the first half, why should we win the league? If you play like in the second half, we can win football games.

"So if we can win football games then we will see how many we can win. We have to be around when the other guys now struggle, if they struggle."

However, the advantage has swung firmly into City's favour as they look to become the first side to ever win four consecutive English top-flight titles.

West Ham's hopes of a fourth consecutive season in European competition were hit by a 2-0 home defeat to Fulham.

Andreas Pereira scored both goals for the Cottagers, who move up to 12th.


Aston Villa's Ollie Watkins (right) scores past Arsenal's goalkeeper David Raya during the Premier League match at the Emirates Stadum in London yesterday. *(Reuters)*

BUNDESLIGA

Leverkusen claim maiden title with win over Bremen

'It's impossible to describe. Personally I can't quite grasp what we did'

AFP
Leverkusen, Germany

Bayer Leverkusen lifted the Bundesliga title for the first time in their 120-year history yesterday, a 5-0 victory over Werder Bremen breaking Bayern Munich's 11-year stranglehold on the German top flight. Xabi Alonso's Leverkusen knew victory would secure the title with five games to spare, and there were no signs of nerves in a dominant performance.

A hat-trick from Florian Wirtz and goals from Victor Boniface and Granit Xhaka extended their unbeaten run to a stunning 43 games in all competitions. Leverkusen's maiden title, coming after five second-place finishes in their history, keeps their dream of a remarkable treble alive while shedding their unwanted 'Neverkusen' nickname for good.

With 10 minutes to go, the long-suffering fans began making their way to the sidelines and a few jumped the gun, storming the pitch with the match still ongoing.

Leverkusen's players ushered the fans back and some obliged, albeit briefly, with the stands swiftly emptying on the 90-minute mark as tearful supporters made their way onto the turf to celebrate with the players.

Leverkusen are now on 79 points – the best tally after 29 games in German league history – and are 16 clear of second-placed Bayern and third-placed Stuttgart.

"It's impossible to describe. Personally I can't quite grasp what we did. I needed to go back to the changing room to clear my head," Wirtz told DAZN.

"We've already started the party with the supporters."

Wirtz, who moved from neighbouring Cologne at the age of 16 and grew up just 20 minutes away in Pulheim, told DAZN he "could not imagine what we would achieve at the start of the season".

"It was when we started winning some matches, with a dominant style of play, that's when I realised we could do a little better than just making the Champions League."


Bayer Leverkusen's coach Xabi Alonso celebrates with a mock-up of the Bundesliga trophy with his players after the match against Werder Bremen in Leverkusen, Germany, yesterday. *(AFP)*

SEA OF RED AND BLACK

The Leverkusen bus arrived at the stadium 90 minutes before kick-off, wading through a sea of fans clad in black and red on the way to the 30,000-capacity BayArena.

Normally known as Bismarck Street, fans had stuck temporary signs saying 'Xabi Alonso Street' along the main road in honour of the club's coach.

Alonso looked ahead to Thursday's Europa League trip to London to face West Ham, making seven changes to his starting XI and benching stars Wirtz, Jeremie Frimpong and Alex Grimaldo, the latter for the first time in the league this season.

Piero Hincapie, Grimaldo's replacement, had an early effort at goal saved but it would be the fit-again Boniface, making his first start since mid-December, who put the home side in front.

With 22 minutes gone, Jonas Hofmann was felled in the box by Bremen's Julian Malatini, with the referee pointing to the spot after VAR urged him to view the contact again on the monitor.

Boniface stepped up and nervelessly slotted the penalty past a helpless Michael Zetterer to send the home fans into raptures.

Hofmann was almost the provider again shortly before half-time, his pass finding Amine Adli who fired against the crossbar.

Bremen started the second-half strongly but their hopes of spoiling the party were snuffed out on the 60-minute mark, Boniface finding Xhaka who unleashed a long-range rocket before slapping his badge in front of the ecstatic home fans.

Wirtz, who came on at half-time for Adli, replicated Xhaka's effort eight minutes later from almost the same spot on the pitch.

Wirtz added another with seven minutes remaining before sealing his hat-trick in the 90th minute as Leverkusen rid themselves of their nearly men tag in style.

Earlier on Sunday, a 36th-minute goal from Ritsu Doan took Freiburg to a 1-0 win at Darmstadt, pushing the last-placed hosts closer to immediate relegation. Winless since October and with only two victories all year, the loss leaves Darmstadt dead last, eight points from second-last and 13 points from safety with five games remaining.

QATAR CUP FOOTBALL TO START FROM MAY 1

The Qatar Stars League (QSL) yesterday announced the dates for Qatar Cup 2024, featuring the top four clubs in 2023-2024 season Expo Stars League standings. Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium and Khalifa International Stadium will host the semi-final matches on May 1, 2024, where the first-placed team will play against the fourth-placed team and the second-placed team will play against the third-placed team. Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium of Al Duhail club will host the final match on May 4, 2024. The kick-off will be at 7pm. The semi-final teams and rest of the details will be announced after the end of league championship, of which the final standings will determine the four competing clubs. It may be noted that if the teams are tied at the end of regular time, penalty kicks will be resorted to directly without extra time.



SERIE A

AC Milan held in Sassuolo thriller as Inter close in on title

AFP
Milan

Inter Milan moved to within touching distance of the Serie A title after their closest pursuers, AC Milan, were held to a spectacular 3-3 draw at Sassuolo yesterday.

Play in Roma's match at Udinese was abandoned after defender Evan Ndicka collapsed.

On a hot spring day in Reggio Emilia, Noah Okafor salvaged a hard-fought point for Milan in the 84th minute. The dropped points mean Inter could clinch the Scudetto as the away team in the upcoming Milan derby.

Should Inter beat Cagliari at the San Siro in late game, the champions-elect would only need to draw with Milan on Monday week to secure their 20th league crown. That would be a bitter pill for Milan, who have not been in the title race as Inter have charged off into the distance since the turn of the year.

At Sassuolo, Milan twice came from two behind with Rafael Leao netting a sublime individual goal and Luka Jovic finishing from close range.

"We created more opportunities than in any match this season, if we'd had scored five or six goals no-one could have said anything," said Milan coach Stefano Pioli. "But we have to be better because our coming matches demand a higher level of performance."

Pioli made a raft of changes in the wake of a first-leg defeat to Roma in the Europa League quarter-finals and his team were two goals behind after less than 10 minutes following early strikes from Andrea Pinamonti and Armand Lauriente.

Frenchman Lauriente's second, seven minutes after the break, ultimately ensured the point that lifted second-from-bottom Sassuolo within two points of safety.

Milan visit Rome on Thursday trying to overturn a single-goal deficit, ahead of the Milan derby and a trip to third-placed Juventus the following weekend.

"I believe 100 percent in my team, we have men of quality, we are a really good team," said goalscorer Okafor.

"Now have to focus... for sure we are going to Rome to win."

NDICKA COLLAPSES

Ndicka dropped to the ground with an apparent chest problem in the 70th minute in Udine with the teams level at 1-1 after Roma striker Romelu Lukaku levelled Roberto Pereyra's first-half opener in the 64th minute.

Roma later confirmed Ivory Coast defender Ndicka, who was taken off the field on a stretcher, was conscious as he left the Bluenergy Stadium.

Ndicka raised his thumb as he was carried into the tunnel, before referee Luca Pairetto decided to abandon play following discussions with Roma coach Daniele De Rossi his Udinese counterpart Gabriele Cioffi.

The capital club added that the player "has been taken to hospital for checks" for what Italian media reported could have been a heart attack.

Serie A told AFP that the final minutes of the match will be played at a later date, yet to be confirmed, leaving Roma on 55 points in fifth place.

Daniele De Rossi's side are in a strong position to reach next season's Champions League as they are five points ahead of sixth-placed Atalanta.

A top-five finish will almost certainly yield a spot in Europe's top club competition thanks to Serie A teams' performances on the continent.

Napoli's slim chances of finishing in that five were dealt another blow after a 2-2 home draw with struggling Frosinone left the ailing champions six points behind Roma in eighth.

Walid Cheddira's first brace in Italy's top flight earned a point for Frosinone, who were on target through Matteo Politano and Victor Osimhen.

Frosinone stay just inside the bottom three and level on 27 points with 17th-placed Verona, who are outside the relegation zone on goal difference and face Atalanta today.

Eusebio Di Francesco's team have only won one league match since late November but successive draws with Genoa, fourth-placed Bologna and now Napoli have boosted their hopes of staying up.


AC Milan's Noah Okafor celebrates scoring against Sassuolo during the Serie A match at the Mapei Stadium in Reggio Emilia. *(AFP)*