

Iranian Safdarian crowned at Ice Climbing World Cup



● PATRICK SCHWIENBACHER

Sports Desk

Iran's Mohammadreza Safdarian claimed a prestigious gold medal in the UIAA Ice Climbing World Cup in Cheongsong, South Korea. Representing the country in the men's speed event, Safdarian clocked 15.34 seconds in the final to edge Mongolian Kherlen Nyamdoo, who finished the race in 15.99 seconds, to the gold, with the host's Lim Hyeongsu taking the bronze. This was a second World Cup gold

for the 32-year-old Iranian following his historic lead triumph in Italy six years ago – a maiden top prize for the country in the history of the competition. Also a winner of five World Championships medals – including a combined gold in 2022 – Safdarian bagged a second World Cup medal in 2018, when he took the lead bronze in Switzerland, before winning a silver in the same category in the 2019/20 season in Changchun, China.

Tractor signs Honduran striker Quioto

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League club Tractor signed Honduran striker Romell Quioto as a free agent on a year-and-a-half long contract. Quioto, 32, is the first midseason signing for the Iranian club, which is fourth in the top-flight table with 28 points after 15 rounds of matches – four points adrift of league leader Esteghlal. Quioto spent the last four years with Canadian side CF Montréal, where he bagged 38 goals and 19 assists in 94 appearances across all competitions – including 33 strikes in the Major League Soccer. The Honduran is to join up with his new teammates in a training camp in Antalya, Turkey. Capped on 63 occasions for the na-



● DIEZ

tional team, Quioto has netted 13 international goals since his first game for the country in 2012. A U.S. Open Cup champion with Houston Dynamo in 2018, Quioto was part of the Honduras under-23 team in the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, scoring once in six outings to help the team reach the semifinals before falling to a defeat against Nigeria in the bronze-medal match.

Injured Berrettini withdraws from Australian Open



● USA TODAY SPORTS

REUTERS – Former world number six Matteo Berrettini has withdrawn from the Australian Open due to a foot injury, organisers said on Sunday. Berrettini was due to face Greek seventh seed Stefanos Tsitsipas in a high-profile first-round match today. "Matteo Berrettini has withdrawn from the Australian Open with a right foot injury. He will be replaced in the draw by Zizou Bergs. Wishing you a quick recovery," or-

ganisers said in a statement. Berrettini had an injury-riddled 2023 season, which was brought to an end when he was forced to withdraw from his second-round match at the U.S. Open after injuring an ankle. The 27-year-old, who also missed a few weeks of action in 2023 due to a tear in an oblique muscle, has dropped down to 125 in the men's rankings. The Australian Open runs from Jan. 14-28.

Iran facing Greco-Roman 77kg dilemma after Abdi's setback in Zagreb



Iranian 77kg wrestler Amir Abdi (blue) is seen in action in last December's Greco-Roman National Championships. ● IWF

Sports Desk

Iran's Greco-Roman head coach Hassan Rangraz is left with questions about who will be the country's 77kg wrestler at the upcoming Olympic qualifiers after Amir Abdi's early exit in the Zagreb Open Ranking Series event. With three-time world bronze medalist Mohammad-Ali Geraei serving a one-year ban by the UWW, Abdi looked to be the favorite to lead the line for Iran in chasing an Olympic berth following a gold-winning run in December's National Championships. However, a first-round 11-3 hammering by the host's Antonio

Kamenjasevic in the Croatian capital on Friday cast major doubts over his credentials for a place in April's Asian Olympic qualifiers in Bishkek. Abdi will be given a second chance in March's Yasar Dogu & Vehbi Emre tournament in Antalya, Turkey, where he will be joined by fellow-Iranian Amin Kavianinejad, who won a silver in the Asian Games last October, in the 77kg contests, with the best of the two securing a place in the Kyrgyz capital event. Iran has already guaranteed four Greco-Roman quotas for next summer's Paris Olympics – courtesy of medal-winning campaigns by Amin Mirzazadeh, Moham-

madreza Geraei, and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi, as well as Mahdi Mohsennejad's 60kg fifth-place in last year's World Championships – with the 77kg, and 87kg slots still up for grabs. Mirzazadeh defeated Turkish great Riza Kayaalp for the 130kg gold, while reigning Olympic champion Geraei and Saravi left Belgrade with a couple of consolation bronzes in the 67kg and 97kg competitions respectively. Alireza Mohmadi – an 82kg silver winner in Belgrade – will likely be the Iranian 87kg contestant at the Asian qualifiers, thanks to his victory over Nasser Alizadeh in the national final followed by a Zagreb Open silver.

Abdi will be given a second chance in March's Yasar Dogu & Vehbi Emre tournament along with fellow-Iranian Amin Kavianinejad.

Guardiola praises 'legend' De Bruyne's instant spark for City's title tilt

THE GUARDIAN – Pep Guardiola welcomed Kevin De Bruyne back to Premier League combat from a five-month absence and, after watching his playmaker turn potential defeat into a 3-2 victory at Newcastle, suggested the Belgian could turn the title race Manchester City's way. After stepping off the bench midway through the second half with City trailing 2-1 at St James' Park, De Bruyne swiftly equalised before creating Oscar Bobb's stoppage time winner. "Kevin is a legend," said Guardiola, whose second-placed side are now only two points behind Liverpool, the leaders. "He is loved by our people and, hopefully, in the last months he can help us be there to the end." City have, by their lofty standards, struggled at times since De Bruyne

injured a hamstring in August, necessitating surgery. "We need players like Kevin," said Guardiola, who will be without his key striker, Erling Haaland, until next month. "We need him to do something special in the final third. That is not tactical ability but talent, individual talent. "I think everybody agrees we made a really good performance today against such a physical team in Newcastle. They made good transitions and, after taking the lead [through Bernardo Silva], we conceded two goals but after that talent made the difference. At half-time I told the players: 'You are amazing, stick together and we will do it.' "It was really important to win because Liverpool are flying and we have to go to Anfield so it's better to be close



Kevin De Bruyne (R) scores Manchester City's second goal in a 3-2 victory over Newcastle United in St James' Park, Newcastle, Britain, on January 13, 2024. ● SCOTT HEPPELL/REUTERS

the them." It left Eddie Howe frustrated and his injury-hit side stuck in 10th after a run of six defeats in seven league games. "We have so

much promise, so much good about us but to be sat here with nothing is very painful for the players," said Newcastle's manager after seeing Alexander Isak and

Anthony Gordon score fine goals. "The first half was everything we wanted to be. We want to be front-foot but, in the second half, we couldn't manage that."