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Milan pressure leaders Napoli as Lecce stun Lazio



Thursday, January 5, 2023  
Jumada II 12, 1444 AH

# GULF TIMES SPORT



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FOOTBALL

# Duhail cruise past Gharafa as QNB Stars League returns

THE WIN SAW DUHAIL MOVE TO THE TOP OF THE STANDINGS WITH 17 POINTS FROM EIGHT MATCHES

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**l Duhail eased past Al Gharafa 3-0 to go top of the standings as QNB Stars League made a return after three-and-a-half-month break yesterday. At the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium, Duhail took lead through Ferjani Sassi (31st minute), while Bassam al-Rawi (48th) and Nam Tae-hee (90+3') also found the target.

The win saw Duhail move to the top of the standings with 17 points from eight matches. Gharafa are fourth with 12 points from as many games while Al Arabi are second with 16 points from 7 matches, and Al Wakrah on 15 from same number of matches.

In what was a resounding win for Duhail. They displayed fine form and were on an attacking spree in the second half and could have scored many more but for the efforts of Gharafa goalkeeper Yousef Hassan.

While Gharafa, under Portuguese coach Pedro Martins, began cautiously and held on well, it didn't take long from Duhail to break through the gaps and launch offensive. The first success came through a corner kick taken by Khalid Mohamed. The ball flew into the danger area and an alert Ferjani Sassi moved clear and waited for the ball before heading it superbly into the net.

Post break, Duhail came back stronger and soon al-Rawi produced a brilliant set piece goal from almost 40 yards. Al-Rawi's kick saw the ball race over a two-man wall and beyond the stretched hand of goalkeeper Hassan.

Up 2-0, the Red Knights continued



Al Duhail's Bassam al-Rawi (second left) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Al Gharafa at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium yesterday.

to attack and menacingly. In the 64th minute, Almoze Ali ran down the right flank and was in the clear but shot wide. In the 70th minute, Sassi shot from top of the box but the curling kick was deflected by the outstretched hand of goalkeeper Hassan.

The action was followed on as Duhail

attacked again through Nam Tae-hee but his left footed kick was parried by Hassan. In the 78th minute, Michael Olunga's superb left-foot curling kick hit the top left corner of the goal post as Duhail were denied again.

Tae-hee's persistence paid in the added time when the South Korean

picked on an assist from Sassi to break into the 'D' and beat a sliding defender and goalkeeper Hassan for his first goal of the match and his third of the season.

For Gharafa, Yacine Brahimi was the lone bright star and produced some key moments including creating a chance for Ishak Belfodil in the 66th minute

but the latter hit straight to Al Duhail goalkeeper Salah Zakaria.

Two more matches will be played today - Al Rayyan take on Al Saliya, while Al Ahli host Al Arabi - while the other three was postponed.

A victory today would take Arabi right back to the top. The 'Dream Team'

has only lost once this season, to Al Duhail. However, Al Arabi overcame that setback in no time and beat Al Saliya 5-1 and played out a 1-1 draw with Umm Salal before the league took a long break for the FIFA World Cup.

Al Arabi coach Younes Ali relies on a number of outstanding players, such as Tunisian Yousef Msakni, who was in action at the World Cup, Aron Gunnarsson, Abdulaziz al-Ansari, Marc Martinez, Abdullah al-Marafi, Ahmed Fathi, Helal Mohamed and Omar al-Soma. "Our preparations were good ahead of the return to league competition and we played more than one friendly match during the break," said Ali yesterday. "Despite the long pause, the team played a good number of matches, whether in the Ooredoo Cup or the FIFA Referee Cup, in addition to some friendly matches. We played more than five friendly matches, through which the team prepared well for the resumption of the league."

Al Ahli are placed fifth with 10 points. Al Shamal and Qatar SC too have the same number of points, but are placed sixth and seventh respectively on goal difference.

The Brigadiers, coached by Nebojsa Jovovic, said yesterday: "We are ready against Al Arabi and will make every effort to make fans happy with a distinguished technical level from the Al Ahli club. Our goal is three points.

He added: "We respect Al Arabi as a team with great capabilities and well-known level. However, we have a distinguished and wonderful group of players who are looking to get the best results and we have all worked in the past period to be ready for the match."

DAKAR RALLY

# Loeb rebounds to win fourth stage, al-Attiyah stays in lead

AFP  
Hail, Saudi Arabia

**R**ally legend Sebastien Loeb at last had something to smile about after two nightmare days as the Frenchman won the fourth stage of the Dakar Rally yesterday.

The 48-year-old - who was crowned world rally champion a record nine times - had lost over an hour and a half on the previous two stages but he was back to his regal best for yesterday's 425 kilometres special raced around Ha'il. He denied his compatriot 'Mr Dakar' Stephane Peterhansel his 50th stage win in the ultimate test of motoring endurance - Loeb timing just 13 seconds faster. Loeb's hopes of going one better than last year's runners-up spot look forlorn but things are looking rosy for Qatar's defending champion Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah who tops the standings, 18 minutes ahead of Toyota teammate Saudi driver Yazeed al-Rajhi. "The race is really changing every day. The second week will be more interesting," said al-Attiyah, who finished fourth yesterday.

Loeb admitted afterwards it had been far from plain sailing for him in his Prodrive. "We lost the power-steering 20 kilometres from the end, so we had to finish the stage very slowly," he said. "I couldn't keep the car on the tracks. We span out at one point because I couldn't turn the steering wheel. It was very difficult to finish the stage, but at the end we still have the best time, so it's better than nothing."

Peterhansel, who has a total of 14 Dakar wins to his name - eight on a motorbike and six behind the wheel - battled hard but had to settle for second which leaves him third in the overall standings. "There were a lot of dunes and camel grass," said the 57-year-old. "If we wanted to get a good time we had to push and take a lot of impacts on the car as well as the body. It's like fighting for four hours. But we did

it and I think it's a good result!"

Less fortunate than Loeb was fellow Prodrive team-mate Orlando Terranova, who returned to camp with a sore back and will consult the team physiotherapist. Spanish rider Joan Barreda took the honours in the motorcycling category winning his first stage of this year's race. Australia's Dominic Sanders, winner of Tuesday's stage, retains the overall lead, 3min 33sec ahead of the American Skyler Howes with Kevin Benavides of Argentina 4min 5sec adrift in third.

Sanders, though, worryingly for his fans said he was suffering from a sore arm after posting the eighth fastest time, over 10min off the winner. "I think for me now it's just a case of trying to get some recovery and take it easy for the next few days because my arm is pretty sore already and the elbow isn't 100 percent," said Sanders, who fractured his left elbow and wrist when he crashed in last year's race.

"We'll take it easy. It's a long race. I'm just trying to calm myself down every day. I said to myself and the family and friends back home that after the year off I'll be happy with a top 10 finish."

Barreda, on a Honda, timed 16 seconds faster than Chilean team-mate Pablo Quintanilla with the ultra-consistent Howes third, 1min 5sec off the pace. Howes's compatriot Mason Klein was the big loser on two wheels. He led for most of the stage until a fuel intake problem 20km from the finish cost him dearly, losing 12 minutes.

As a result he dropped from second overall to sixth. "I had to stop, take the tank off and pour it in the back," he said. "Then I couldn't get the skid plate bolt back in. I was getting very stressed. It's pretty disappointing because the day was going so well, but at least we made it here."

Chile's Jose Ignacio Cornejo earned plaudits in stopping to help injured Hero rider Joaquin Rodrigues, who ultimately had to retire from the race. Cornejo had the time lost for his act of

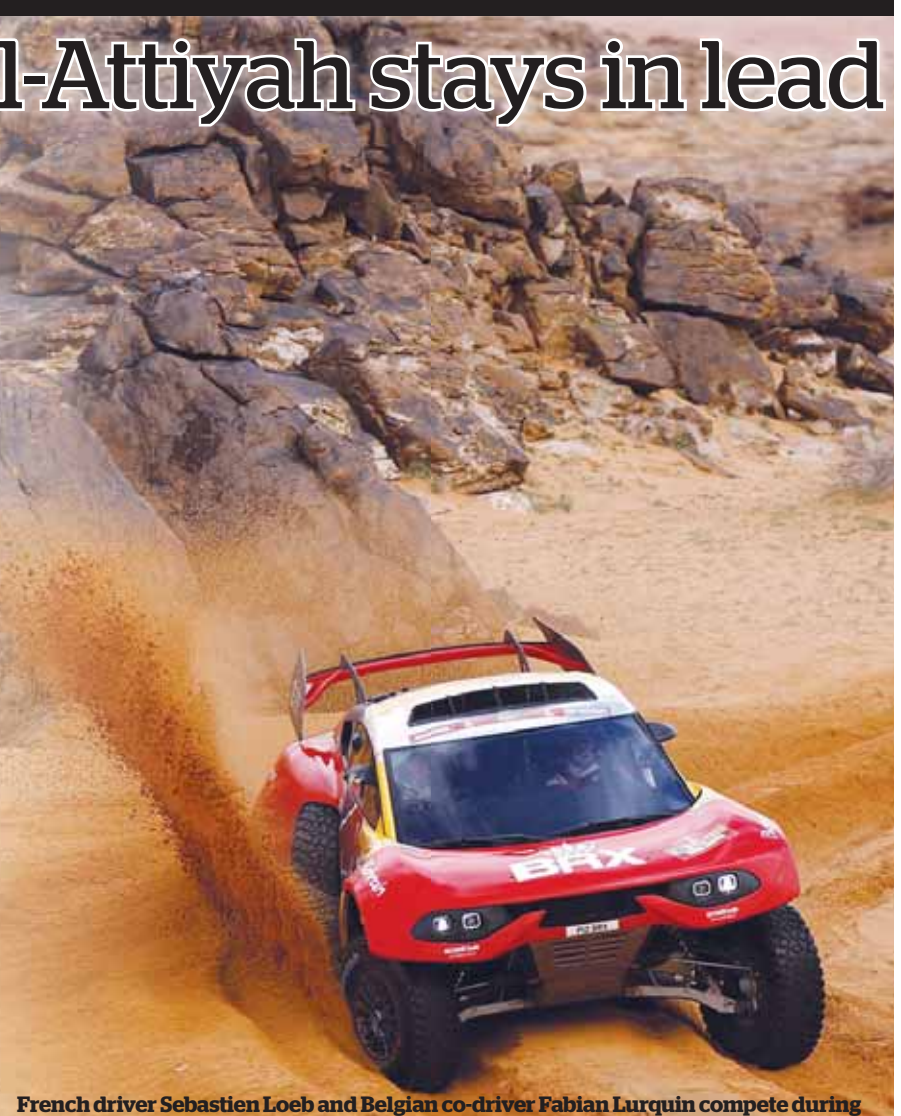
selflessness restored by the organisers.

## STAGE 4 RESULT

- 1 Sebastien Loeb/Fabian Lurquin (Bahrain Raid Xtreme) 4h11m34s
- 2 Stephane Peterhansel/Edouard Boulanger (Team Audi Sport) +13s
- 3 Carlos Sainz/Lucas Cruz (Team Audi Sport) +1m50s
- 4 Nasser al-Attiyah/Mathieu Baumel (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +2m06s
- 5 Yazeed al-Rajhi/Dirk von Zitzewitz (Overdrive Racing) +7m04s
- 6 Henk Lategan/Brett Cummings (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +7m23s
- 7 Mattias Ekstrom/Emil Bergkvist (Team Audi Sport) +10m45s
- 8 Lucas Moraes/Timo Gottschalk (Overdrive Racing) +13m48s
- 9 Giniel de Villiers/Dennis Murphy (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +16m11s
- 10 Romain Dumas/Max Delfino (Rebellion Racing) +32m22s

## OVERALL STANDINGS

- 1 Nasser al-Attiyah/Mathieu Baumel (Toyota Gazoo Racing) 16h34m13s
- 2 Al-Rajhi/von Zitzewitz (Overdrive Racing) +18m18s
- 3 Peterhansel/Boulanger (Team Audi Sport) +18m52s
- 4 Sainz/Cruz (Team Audi Sport) +32m55s
- 5 Lategan/Cummings (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +45m25s
- 6 Moraes/Gottschalk (Overdrive Racing) +45m27s
- 7 De Villiers/Murphy (Toyota Gazoo Racing) +46m13s
- 8 Ekstrom/Bergkvist (Team Audi Sport) +50m00s
- 9 Martin Prokop/Viktor Chytka (Orlen Benzima Team) 1h14m43s
- 10 Erik van Loon/Sebastien Delaunay (Overdrive Racing) +1h15m40s



French driver Sebastien Loeb and Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin compete during the fourth stage of the Dakar Rally around Ha'il in Saudi Arabia yesterday. (AFP)

SECOND TEST

# New Zealand fight back after Shakeel's maiden century

'It was also great to have Sarfaraz alongside me because he gave me confidence'



Pakistan's Saud Shakeel plays a shot during the third day of the second Test against New Zealand at the National Stadium in Karachi yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Karachi

Left-hander Saud Shakeel hit a maiden century yesterday before New Zealand hit back to keep Pakistan to 407-9 at the close of the third day of the second Test in Karachi.

Shakeel was unbeaten on 124 and Abrar Ahmed yet to score after New Zealand took four wickets in the final session for 70 runs, leaving the hosts 42 runs shy of the tourists' first innings total of 449. Shakeel has kept his end intact for 488 minutes - batting all day Wednesday, and adding 83 for the fourth wicket with Imam-ul-Haq (83) and 150 for the fifth with Sarfaraz Ahmed

(78). But New Zealand spinner Michael Bracewell for a boundary and then took a sharp single to reach three figures in 319 minutes of stoic batting. Sarfaraz was stumped on 78 in the penultimate over before the break, having scored his third consecutive half-century of the series.

Shakeel said he was delighted to score a hundred on his home ground.

"It was also great to have Sarfaraz alongside me because he gave me confidence when I was in nineties," he said.

New Zealand wicketkeeper Tom Blundell believed the wicket was still good for batting.

"We have to get the last wicket (Thursday) and then, I guess, have to reassess because Pakistan are a good batting side, so

probably need a big total."

Earlier, Haq was snapped-up by Blundell off fast-bowler Southee after Pakistan resumed on 154-3.

On 74 overnight, Haq rebuilt the innings after being involved in skipper Babar Azam's run-out on Tuesday, but fell in the second hour of the session.

He edged a drive to Blundell, but was only given out after New Zealand challenged the turned-down appeal. Haq hit 10 boundaries and a six in his 244-minute knock. The two-match series is tied after the first Test - also in Karachi - ended in a draw.

**SCOREBOARD**  
New Zealand 1st innings 449  
Pakistan 1st innings (overnight 154-3)

A. Shafique c Patel b Henry 19  
I. Haq c Blundell b Southee 83  
S. Masood c Conway b Patel 20  
B. Azam run out 24  
S. Shakeel not out 124  
S. Ahmed st Blundell b Mitchell 78

A. Salman c Bracewell b Patel 41  
H. Ali c Conway b Patel 4  
N. Shah b Sodhi 4  
M. Hamza b Sodhi 0  
Abrar Ahmed not out 0

**Extras (lb7, nb3) 10**  
**Total (for 9 wks, 132 overs) 407**  
**Fall of wickets:** 1-27 (Shafique), 2-56 (Masood), 3-99 (Azam), 4-182 (Haq), 5-332 (Sarfaraz), 6-385 (Salman), 7-393 (Hamza), 8-397 (Naseem), 9-397 (Hamza)  
**Bowling:** Southee 25-7-62-1, Henry 28-9-58-1 (1nb), Patel 17-2-88-3, Bracewell 26-3-87-0, Sodhi 26-3-94-2 (1nb), Mitchell 10-6-11-1.

SPOTLIGHT

## Pant airlifted to Mumbai for surgery



AFP  
New Delhi

Indian cricketer Rishabh Pant was airlifted to Mumbai for surgery, the country's cricket board said yesterday, nearly a week after he suffered several injuries in a road accident.

The national team wicket-keeper-batsman was driving his Mercedes SUV from New Delhi to his hometown Roorkee, a few hours north of the Indian capital, when it crashed into the median before dawn on Friday and immediately caught fire.

The 25-year-old was rescued by a bus driver and conductor on the highway and rushed to a local hospital for treatment before being shifted

to an advanced facility in Dehradun. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said Pant "will be brought to Mumbai in an air ambulance" and admitted to a leading private hospital.

"Rishabh will undergo surgery and subsequent procedures for ligament tears and will continue to be monitored by the BCCI Medical Team throughout his recovery and rehabilitation," the BCCI said. The player had damaged a ligament in his right knee, hurt his wrist, ankle, and had abrasion injuries on his back, the BCCI said in an earlier statement.

Pant was "recovering well", the director of Delhi and District Cricket Association (DDCA) Shyam Sharma told AFP.

## Zimbabwe pick former England batter Ballance for Ireland T20 series

Zimbabwe have included former England Test batsman Gary Ballance in a 15-man squad for three Twenty20 internationals against Ireland in Harare during January. The 33-year-old left-handed batter, who was born in the southern Africa country, represented England in 23 Tests and 16 one-day internationals. He scored 1,498 Test runs at an average of 37.45 and 297 ODI runs at an average of 21.21 during a five-year England career that began in 2013. After being released from county side Yorkshire with two years of his contract still to run, Ballance signed a two-year deal to play domestic and international cricket for Zimbabwe. Ballance admitted using racist language against Azeem Rafiq, a Pakistan-born player who triggered wholesale changes at Yorkshire after accusing the club of institutional racism. Ballance later apologised to Rafiq in person. "I'm thrilled to be joining Zimbabwe Cricket and cannot wait to start work with some great coaches and talented players," Ballance has said. "The opportunity to represent Zimbabwe has given me a new-found pas-

sion and excitement for the game." A notable absentee from the Zimbabwe squad is star batsman Sikandar Raza, who has been authorised to play franchise cricket in Bangladesh. The Pakistan-born all-rounder has been shortlisted for three 2022 International Cricket Council awards - Cricketer of the Year, ODI Cricketer of the Year and T20I Cricketer of the Year. There are four changes to the Zimbabwe squad that competed at the T20 World Cup last year in Australia, where a 31-run victory over Ireland helped them reach the Super 12 stage. The T20 series will be played in Harare on January 12, 14 and 15, and be followed by three ODI matches on January 18, 21 and 23. West Indies will play two Tests in Zimbabwe during February and the Netherlands are due in March for a three-match ODI series. **Squad:** Craig Ervine (capt), Gary Ballance, Ryan Burl, Tendai Chatara, Bradley Evans, Luke Jongwe, Innocent Kaia, Clive Madande, Wesley Madhevere, Tadiwanashe Marumani, Wellington Masakadza, Tony Munyonga, Richard Ngarava, Victor Nyauchi, Sean Williams.

FOCUS

# Nortje's double strike leaves Australia at 147-2

AFP  
Sydney

South Africa strike bowler Anrich Nortje claimed the key wickets of David Warner and Marnus Labuschagne yesterday to prise Australia's grip on the third Test in Sydney as rain plagued the opening day.

Nortje was the Proteas' star man as he removed Warner cheaply for 10 and late in the day denied Labuschagne (79) his 11th Test hundred.

As bad light and rain conspired to prematurely end the first day, Australia were 147 for two with Usman Khawaja, who averages 98 in Sydney Tests, unbeaten on 54 and Steven Smith yet to score. Nortje got the big breakthrough with a ripper, taking the edge of Labuschagne's bat to get him caught behind and end his 151-ball stay.

"I was trying to hit good areas, not trying to be fancy, just trying to keep it simple and try to hit the wicket as hard as I could," Nortje said of the crucial dismissal.

"Luckily I got something out of it. It wasn't really a big set-up, just more to try and stay consistent and luckily we got some nip and bounce there."

The pacer earlier struck in his second over of the day when he had Melbourne Test double-centurion Warner caught at slip by Marco Jansen for 10.

No sooner had Smith arrived at the wicket after Labuschagne's departure that the players left the field for bad light for the final time.

"Definitely very frustrated. Obviously, it always makes you very angry as a batter when you get out and then everyone walks with you off the field," Labuschagne said of his dismissal.

"But at the end of the day he bowled a



South Africa's Anrich Nortje celebrates with teammates after dismissing Australia's Marnus Labuschagne during the third Test in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

really good set there and that one obviously just kicked."

It is the sixth bedevilled Sydney Test out of the past seven to be affected by rain. There was controversy earlier in Labuschagne's innings when on 70 he edged Jansen to Simon Harmer at slip.

The on-field umpires referred the

decision with a soft signal of out, only for third umpire Richard Kettleborough to rule that the ball had touched the ground between the fingers of Harmer.

Nortje said of the decision: "All of us thought it was out. Simon was convinced that it went straight in and from the angles, to us it looked as though he

got his fingers underneath it... so unfortunately we didn't get that one."

Khawaja also survived a review straight after lunch on 25 as he reverse-swept Harmer and was given out leg before wicket, but replays showed the ball touching the glove.

The opening day was also marked by

Matt Renshaw, recalled for his first Test for Australia since April 2018, returning a positive Covid-19 test after the toss was taken and the team composition confirmed.

But team officials said he would continue to play in the match with his symptoms only described as mild.

Renshaw was transferred to a separate dressing room from his teammates where he will prepare for the rest of the match, and spent most of play sitting away from the team runners near the Australian dug-out.

Skipper Pat Cummins won his fifth successive toss and decided to play an extra spinner with left-armers Ashton Agar, and Renshaw coming in to bolster the batting, squeezing out in-form pacer Scott Boland on a dry cracking Sydney Cricket Ground pitch.

South Africa did likewise, with off-spinner Harmer ousting Lungi Ngidi while Heinrich Klaasen replaced Theunis de Bruyn at number three.

The Australians have already wrapped up the three-match series after hammering the Proteas by an innings and 182 runs in Melbourne following a six-wicket rout in the opener in Brisbane inside two days.

**SCOREBOARD**

**Australia 1st innings**  
U. Khawaja not out 54  
D. Warner c Jansen b Nortje 10  
M. Labuschagne c Verreynne b Nortje 79

S. Smith not out 0  
**Extras (lb2, nb1, w1) 4**  
**Total (2 wks, 47 overs) 147**  
**Fall of wickets:** 1-12 (Warner), 2-147 (Labuschagne)

**Bowling:** Rabada 12-1-45-0 (1nb), Nortje 11-3-26-2, Jansen 10-2-23-0 (1w), Maharaj 9-0-35-0, Harmer 5-1-16-0.

## BCCI invites bids to own teams in women's IPL

India's cricket board has invited bids to own teams in the inaugural women's Indian Premier League (IPL), which could become one of the biggest money-spinners in women's sport. The glittering IPL is the world's top Twenty20 league, with leading global stars including Virat Kohli, Ben Stokes and David Warner playing for different franchises. It was set up in 2008 and consultants D and P Advisory estimated it was worth \$10.9bn last year. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) announced the formation of a women's version last year when BCCI secretary Jay Shah hinted that five or six teams could be involved. No putative bidders have so far confirmed their interest, but media reports suggest that the IPL's Rajasthan Royals could seek a women's franchise. Team backers in men's IPL include Nita Ambani, wife of multi-billionaire Mukesh Ambani, the world's eighth-richest man according to Forbes, who owns the Mumbai Indians, the richest and most successful side in IPL history with five titles to their name.

SPOTLIGHT

# Djokovic set to miss events as US extends Covid rules

Reuters  
Adelaide

**N**ovak Djokovic is set to miss the Indian Wells and Miami Open ATP 1000 events this year if he remains unvaccinated against Covid-19, after United States authorities said non-nationals will need to have taken their shots to enter the country.

A statement from the Transportation Security Administration yesterday said the requirement for foreign air travellers to be fully vaccinated against the disease would be in place until April 10.

Indian Wells runs from March 6-19 and the Miami Open from March 20-April 2 and Djokovic risks missing the two important hardcourt tournaments if he does not take the vaccine.

The 35-year-old Serb was unable to defend his Australian Open crown last year after being

deported from that country on the eve of the hardcourt major due to his unvaccinated status.

Djokovic, who has won 21 Grand Slam titles, was also not able to travel to New York for the 2022 US Open without proof of vaccination, the same reason that had forced him to miss tournaments at Indian Wells and Miami. The nine-times Australian Open champion is currently warming up for the 2023 season in Adelaide for the Jan. 16-29 Australian Open, after his three-year travel ban for the country was waived in November.

That decision opened a path for him to target a 10th title at the Grand Slam and tie Rafa Nadal's mark of 22 majors.

Djokovic, who previously stated he would miss Grand Slams rather than have the Covid-19 vaccine, said last week that he would never forget how it felt to be deported from Australia but hoped to move on from the incident. "What happened 12

months ago wasn't easy to digest for some time but at the same time, I had to move on," Djokovic said last week in his first news conference since landing in Australia.

"I have to say, I'm glad to be back in Australia, thank you all for coming out," Djokovic said after his win over Constant Lestienne on Tuesday.

**'THANK YOU FOR GIVING ME THE WELCOME'**

"Thank you for giving me the welcome I could only wish for."

"... If I have to pick one country where I've had the most success, which treated me in the best way in terms of tennis, it's here. I won my first Grand Slam here in 2008 and I have nine Australian Open titles - I've had some epic matches."

"Australia has been the place where I play my best tennis and I look forward to coming here. The circumstances last year were as they were and it wasn't easy

for anybody but I'm happy to be here, focus on tennis and enjoy my time with you guys."

The Serb told reporters he did not have any expectations about Melbourne where the Australian Open will be played from Jan 16-29.

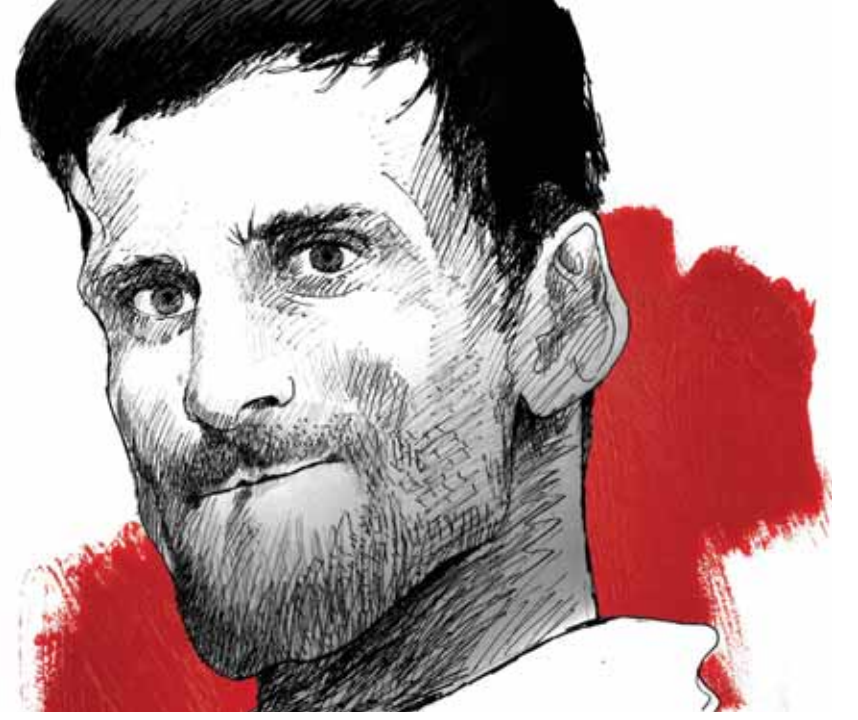
"Now my focus is here, on Adelaide, try to do well in this tournament," Djokovic told reporters after he outclassed Lestienne in his first singles match since returning.

"Obviously Melbourne, Grand Slam, it's different ... so many players, both on the women and men's side."

"I'll be there also a week before my first match, as I normally do, training, getting used to the difference in the conditions and the speed of the court ... let's see. I hope I'll be received well."

Djokovic is looking to capture a record-extending 10th Australian Open crown that would bring him level with Rafa Nadal on 22 Grand Slam titles.

*Raymond*  
GULFTIMES  
05-01-2023



TENNIS

# 'Happy' Medvedev breezes through

'I'm not sure there were easy opponents from the first round, so really happy to be through'

AFP  
Adelaide

**F**ormer world number one Daniil Medvedev locked in an all-Russian Adelaide International quarter-final with Karen Khachanov yesterday, while Aryna Sabalenka stormed back to book her place in the last eight.

Medvedev, runner-up at the last two Australian Opens, blew away the new year cobwebs with a 6-0, 6-3 romp over Serbian Miomir Kecmanovic.

It came a day after the 2021 US Open champion had to save nine set points against first-round opponent Lorenzo Sonego before the Italian retired hurt.

"I think it was a great match. Miomir is a tough opponent, a high-ranked player so there are no easy guys left in Adelaide," third seed Medvedev said of the 29th-ranked Serb. "I'm not sure there were easy opponents) from the first round, so really happy to be through, happy with my level," he said.

The world number seven dropped just 12 points in a whirlwind 28-minute opening set before closing out the match comfortably. Next up is eighth seed Khachanov, who eased past Britain's Jack Draper 6-4, 6-2.

Rising Japanese star Yoshihito Nishioka also went through. Having dispatched fifth seed Holger Rune in the first round, he backed up to beat American Mackenzie McDonald 6-4, 6-3. His reward is a last eight clash with qualifier Alexei Popyrin. The Australian, who stunned second seed Felix Auger-Aliassime on Monday, defeated American Marcos Giron 4-6, 6-4, 6-3. World number five Sabalenka came back from 1-5 down in the first set to fight past dogged Russian Liudmila Samsonova 7-6 (10/8), 7-6 (7/3) and make the quarter-finals.

She will meet Marketa Vondrousova for a place in the last four after the Czech player's dominant 6-0, 6-4 dismissal of Estonian Kaia Kanepi.



Russia's Daniil Medvedev in action during his second round match against Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic at Memorial Drive Tennis Club in Adelaide yesterday. (Reuters)

"When you're 1-5 down there's nothing to lose and you just go for your shots without thinking," Sabalenka said of clawing back against a player who collected trophies in Tokyo, Cleveland and Washington last year to crack the top 20. "That really helped me to stay in the set, keep fighting and trying. She's an incredible player with a huge serve, so (it) was tough." She lost to the 20th-ranked Samsonova in three sets in Guadalajara

last October before rounding out a stellar season, which included a run to the US Open semi-finals.

Sabalenka had a first-round bye but notched a pair of doubles wins alongside Lidziya Marozava to kickstart her Adelaide campaign.

Vondrousova was keen to move on from a disjointed 2022 in which she missed six months due to a wrist injury, making her first quarter-final since reaching the last

four in Dubai almost a year ago.

"I'm just so happy to be back playing. It was a very tough time when I didn't play, so yeah, I'm just very happy to be playing at this level," she said.

Russian world number nine Veronika Kedermetova also progressed, beating Canada's Bianca Andreescu 6-4, 6-0, while Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk overpowered Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina 6-7 (5/7), 6-2, 6-3.

**Qatar weightlifters shine**



Qatar national team achieved 13 medals (9 gold and 4 silver) on the closing day of the Men's West Asian weightlifting Championship and 17th Men's and Women's Qatar Weightlifting Cup. The two events were organised by the Qatar Weightlifting Federation over four days with the participation of 100 weightlifters representing 15 countries.



**US to meet Poland in United Cup semis**

Frances Tiafoe battled past Briton Dan Evans 3-6 7-5 6-3 to put the United States into the semi-finals of the United Cup mixed team tournament yesterday as Poland and Greece also advanced.

The three countries who won their "city finals" to progress were joined in the last four by Italy, the runners-up with the best record in the \$15mn event which replaced the short-lived ATP Cup to open the 2023 season. The US will play Poland for a place in the final while Greece meet Italy. Tiafoe gave the Americans an unassailable 3-1 lead with his third straight victory of the season after Jessica Pegula downed Harriet Dart 6-2 6-0 in 57 minutes.

Madison Keys had earlier put the U.S. ahead after rallying past Katie Swan 2-6 6-3 6-4. The

inform Cameron Norrie had put Britain level at 1-1 with a 6-4 5-7 6-4 win over world number nine Taylor Fritz, who later teamed up with Pegula to beat Dart and Evans.

Poland's players and staff broke into dance after their heavyweight mixed doubles pair of Iga Swiatek and Hubert Hurkacz won the final rubber against Italy's Lorenzo Musetti and Camilla Rosatello 6-1 6-2 to wrap up a 3-2 victory. Swiatek and Magda Linette won their singles matches to twice draw Poland level after Hurkacz and Daniel Michalski were beaten by Musetti and Matteo Berrettini to set up a thrilling finish under the roof at Pat Rafter Arena in rain-soaked Brisbane. The semi-finals begin in Sydney tomorrow, with the final two days later.



Alberto Sanna rides Al Shaqab Racing's Meethag to victory in the Umm Al Zubar Cup during Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) 25th Race Meeting at Al Rayyan Racecourse yesterday. The seven-year-old mare - trained by Eric Lemartiniel - outpaced Hidalgo Du Croate, ridden by JP Guillambert by over one length to win the feature for Purebred Arabians. Soufiane Saadi rode Baker De Saularie to third place in the 1700m feature race. Also yesterday, Pranil Arvind Kharat guided Ahmed Kobeissi-trained Ietibar to Local Purebred Arabian Conditions win while Doghnan under Ivan Rossi raced to Local Thoroughbred Handicap victory. **PICTURES: Juhaim**

**Al Shaqab Racing's Meethag wins Umm Al Zubar Cup**



Connections of Meethag celebrate after the victory.

## QATAR SQUAD ARRIVES IN BASRA FOR THE 25TH ARABIAN GULF CUP



Qatar squad arrived in Basra, Iraq, yesterday for the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup, which will be held from tomorrow till January 19. The 23-man Qatar squad consists of fresh faces with the Asian champions having rested many senior players, who took part in the FIFA World Cup at home. Qatar, who will be coached by Portuguese Bruno Pinheiro in the tournament, will open their campaign against Kuwait on Saturday. They will also meet defending champions Bahrain on January 10 and the UAE on January 13 in other Group matches. Hosts Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Oman are in Group A.

Meanwhile, the Iraq Football Association said yesterday ninety percent of the tickets for the tournament have been sold electronically. The association's president Adnan Dirjal said that all preparations have been completed for the event and promised that the opening ceremony would be a major attraction. He said companies and teams from Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and other nations would participate in the opening spectacle, to showcase Iraq's rich history. Dirjal also confirmed that all stadiums are equipped with the latest technology, including VAR, which will be applied for the first time ever at the Arab Gulf Cup in conjunction with 43 Iraqi, Arab and foreign referees.



Qatar Football Association president Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani with Iraq Football Association chief Adnan Dirjal in Basra yesterday.



### SERIE A

# Milan put pressure on leaders Napoli as Lecce stun Lazio

Pasalic snatches a last-gasp 2-2 draw for Atalanta at Spezia with a late leveller

AFP  
Milan

AC Milan closed to within five points of Serie A leaders Napoli with yesterday's 2-1 win at Salernitana while Lazio slumped to a 2-1 defeat at promoted Lecce. First-half strikes from Rafael Leao and Sandro Tonali in Salerno moved champions Milan up to 36 points, closing the gap on Napoli who were facing Inter Milan at the San Siro in the day's big match as Italy's top flight gets back underway.

Milan will stay second regardless of results elsewhere and will be hoping for a Napoli slip-up ahead of the upcoming weekend round of fixtures in which they host sixth-placed Roma, 1-0 winners over Bologna on their return to action.

Stefano Pioli's side are also five points ahead of third-placed Juventus. Milan should have run out bigger winners at the Stadio Arechi but a combination of wasteful finishing and a superb display from Salernitana's new goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa denied Milan the goals they display deserved. Veteran Mexico international Ochoa moved to Salernitana, in 14th on 17 points, after the World Cup and made his presence felt in the absence of injured Luigi Sepe. The 37-year-old pulled off a superb double save from from Olivier Giroud and Charles De Ketelaere with eight minutes left which allowed Federico Bonazzoli to lash in Lassana Coulibaly's deep cross and give the home side some hope in the final minutes.

Six points behind Milan are Lazio, whose defeat at Lecce came after Ciro Immobile had given them a half-time lead with his 189th Serie A goal, which took him above Alessandro De Piero and Beppe Signori in the all-time scoring charts. However they came unstuck af-



AC Milan's Olivier Giroud (centre) and Salernitana's Federico Fazio in action during the Serie A yesterday. (Reuters)

ter the break at the Stadio Via del mare in Italy's deep south, missing the chance to go third above Juve and being caught on 30 points by local rivals Roma.

Gabriel Strefezza levelled for Lecce just before the hour mark after Federico Di Francesco's shot was saved by Ivan Provedel. And Di Francesco was again key when the hosts took the lead, his brilliantly volleyed cross finding Lorenzo Colombo for a tap-in which moved his team up to 12th, nine points clear of the

relegation zone.

Mario Pasalic snatched a last-gasp 2-2 draw for Atalanta at Spezia with a stoppage-time leveller to complete a comeback from two goals down. Spezia were leading with 13 minutes remaining thanks to first-half finishes from Emmanuel Gyasi and M'Bala Nzola, but young gun Rasmus Hojlund pulled one back and Pasalic bundled home the leveller with seconds remaining.

Gian Piero Gasperini's side, who lost

striker Duvan Zapata to injury, are seventh on 28 points while Spezia stay one place above the relegation zone. Spezia are five points ahead of Sampdoria, who claimed their second win of the season, 2-1 at Sassuolo, thanks to Manolo Gabbiadini's spectacular bicycle kick in the 25th minute and a Tommaso Augello strike shortly afterwards. Verona stay bottom of the division on six points despite snapping a 10-match losing streak with their 1-1 draw at Torino.

## ARSENAL COULD REACH 100 POINTS, SAYS GUARDIOLA

**Manchester:** Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola has warned that Arsenal will be tough to catch in the Premier League title race and that 100 points could be required to retain their crown. Arsenal, managed by Guardiola's former assistant Mikel Arteta, could have moved 10 points clear of the champions on Tuesday but drew 0-0 at home to Newcastle United.

City, who were held by Everton on New Year's Eve, can close the gap to five if they win at Chelsea today and Guardiola

says his side can ill-afford many more slip-ups if they are to claim a fifth title in six years. "The way you have to reduce the gap is play good and win games," Guardiola told a news conference yesterday. "It's not for the fact (Arsenal) have an average that they will do more than 100 points the way they have done so far. If they continue in that way, we will not catch them. We have to be almost perfect from here and hope they drop their performance - yesterday they were excellent against Newcastle - and see

what happens."

Arsenal, bidding for a first title since 2004, sit top with 44 points from 17 games played with City 36 from 16 - two points less than at the same stage last season. Most people would have expected Chelsea to be part of the title race, but City visit Stamford Bridge with Graham Potter's side languishing in the 10th place in the standings.

Guardiola, however, is expecting as tough a battle as usual. Asked for his thoughts on Chelsea's struggles, the

Spaniard said: "It's the Premier League, everyone is tough. That's why the predictions at the start of the season always my answer is I don't know. Nobody knows. We will see what happens, after the World Cup many things are going to happen. It doesn't matter the position you are when you travel (to Chelsea), it's always difficult."

Guardiola said he will decide late on whether defender Aymeric Laporte will be able to face Chelsea but central defender Ruben Dias will not be available.

### ROUND-UP

## World Cup winner Messi returns to club duty with PSG



Lionel Messi is given a guard of honour by his PSG teammates and club staff at the training ground yesterday.

Seventeen days after guiding Argentina to an epic World Cup final victory over France, Lionel Messi reported back to work yesterday, his French club Paris Saint-Germain announced. The 35-year-old seven-time Ballon d'Or winner reported back to the club's training ground as they prepare for Saturday's French Cup tie at third tier side Chateauroux.

Messi scored twice as Argentina drew 3-3 with France in the Qatar final, before prevailing in the penalty shoot-out. Since then he has been celebrating in Argentina and spending time with his family. Yesterday, he was given a guard of honour by his teammates at the training ground, before being presented with a small trophy by PSG's sporting director Luis Campos, according to images posted by the club on its Twitter account.

Messi's teammates Kylian Mbappe, who scored a hat-trick in a losing cause in the final, and Morocco's Achraf Hakimi returned to club duty just three days after the final with Brazil's Neymar checking in a day later. Messi is unlikely to play this weekend, more probably making his return in the home Ligue 1 match against Angers next Wednesday.

**FIFA BOSS INFANTINO IN PELE WAKE SELFIE ROW**  
FIFA chief Gianni Infantino insisted yesterday he would never be disrespectful to Pele as he came under fire over a photo call at the Brazilian legend's wake. Infantino took a selfie with some of Pele's old teammates on Monday right beside the open coffin of the three-time World Cup winner.

The Swiss said he took the photo as Pele's friends seemed unable to operate their mobile phones. "I took the phone of one of them and took the photo of all of us for him," Infantino

insisted. "If being helpful to a teammate of Pele creates criticism I'm happy to take it and will continue to be helpful wherever I can to those having contributed to write legendary pages of football. I have so much respect and admiration for Pele and for that ceremony yesterday that I would never do anything that would be disrespectful in any way whatsoever," Infantino said.

Brazil gave Pele a powerful send off starting with a day-long wake at the Santos stadium. Santos said more than 230,000 people had attended his 24-hour wake in the Vila Belmiro stadium. At the funeral a more sombre tone was set as Pele's tearful widow Marcia Cibebe Aoki was embraced by the equally moved newly-sworn in president Lula. Pele died last Thursday at age 82 after a battle with cancer.

### LEWANDOWSKI BAN UPHHELD AHEAD OF BARCA TRIP TO ATLETICO

Barcelona striker Robert Lewandowski's three-match ban was upheld by Spain's sports court yesterday and he will miss the visit to Atletico Madrid on Sunday in La Liga. Barcelona had the punishment suspended by another Madrid court last week, which allowed him to face Espanyol on Saturday.

Lewandowski was hit with a suspension after a red card against Osasuna in November before the World Cup break. The decision to suspend his ban meant the Polish forward, La Liga's top goalscorer, could play in the Catalan derby on December 31, but he failed to score in the 1-1 draw.

Espanyol were angered by the court decision and their president and board refused to attend the match against Barcelona.

Lewandowski will now miss the league leaders' fixtures against Atletico, Getafe and Girona.