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PREMIER LEAGUE

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set to start

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OOREDOO STARS LEAGUE

Another blow for Sadd after shock loss to Umm Salal

Guedes scores a brace as Al Rayyan back to winning ways after beating Al Shahania

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Umm Salal stunned 10-man Al Sadd 3-1 in the Ooredoo Stars League at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. Kenji Gorre (2nd minute), Antonio Mance (22nd minute) and Edidiong Essien (90+3 minute) scored for Umm Salal while Al Sadd's only goal came via a penalty strike taken by Hassan al-Haydos (70th minute). Making matters worse for Al Sadd was a second yellow card for Mohammed Waad in the 52nd minute when he brought down Oussama Tannane.

The Orange Fortress outclassed the defending champions for their second win of the league to move into fourth place with six points, while Al Sadd stay third at six points. It was Al Sadd's second loss of the league after being shocked in the opening round by Al Shamal.

Umm Salal caught the The Wolves by surprise after a Omar Yahya through ball from the left was cut off by Ahmed Suhail but it went to a running in Gorre, who chested it first before managing to kick it in. The second Umm Salal goal was realised after a Gorre kick was blocked by goalkeeper Saad al-Sheeb but Gorre retrieved it on bounce back before battling a defending Suhail and pushing the ball to Mance to score.

Al Sadd's challenge to launch a fight back then began but despite their best efforts the target remained elusive for long. Among their many close runs in the opening half was Haydos missing a crucial connect near the post, a Waad kick going just wide of the right post and a powerful Rafa Mujica kick missing the top right corner. At the same time, Umm Salal goalkeeper Landing Badji was at his best as he kept many attempted hits away including one from Akram Afif at the hour mark.

Both teams battled hard before Al Sadd were awarded a penalty after Marouane Louadri brought down Naim Abdurazq inside the danger area. A long VAR check confirmed the spot kick which was smoothly scored by Haydos to make the scores 2-1.



Umm Salal Kenji Gorre (second right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Al Sadd 3-1 during the Ooredoo Stars League match at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

In the 78th minute, al-Sheeb made a brilliant save to keep a shot from Umm Salal's Khalaf Saad away. Minutes later, Gorre was within striking distance but failed to beat al-Sheeb with Boualem Khoukhi in chase putting him off balance. Umm Salal however scored a superb celebratory third goal as Al Sadd substitute tried to cut off a free kick from the left but the ball went to a lurking Essien - who rattled the top of the net with a left-foot strike.

Elsewhere, Al Rayyan defeated Al Shahania 4-2 at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. The enthralling contest with all out attacking play from either side saw all but one goal being scored in the opening half. Mahmoud Hassan (fifth minute), Roger Guedes (ninth and 45+4 minutes) and Julien De Sart (15th minute) scored for Al Rayyan, while Mohammed Ibrahim (20th minute) and substitute Mohammed Ismail (90th minute) got Al Shahania's goals.

But unlike what the scoreline may sug-



Al Rayyan's Roger Guedes (left) vies for the ball with Al Shahania's Sven van Beek at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday.

gest, Al Shahania produced spirited play despite early setbacks attacking the rival den time and again. They also got the ball into the net a second time in second half, but it was cancelled after a VAR check.

This was Al Rayyan's second win of the league championship and took their tally to six points after two defeats in the previous rounds. Al Shahania stayed on two points. It was also The Lions' successive win over the same opponents whom they had also beaten in the first round of QSL

Cup recently.

Guedes not only scored two goals for the winners, he also provided a valuable assist in the opening goal and later had his two successful strikes turned down as he was found offside.

In the other match yesterday, Al Gharaifa and Al Shamal drew 1-1. Shamal went ahead after a own goal from Saif Fadlalla in the 11th minute, before Gharaifa also benefitted off a own goal from Mohammed Khaled al-Naumi in the 36th minute.

DIAMOND LEAGUE FINALS

Unbeaten Duplantis reigns supreme, Alfred dominates Richardson

AFP
Brussels, Belgium

Sweden's undisputed pole vault king Armand Duplantis brought the curtain down on an unbeaten season with another fantastic victory in the Diamond League finals in Brussels yesterday.

It was his 15th and final victory of a year in which he improved his own world record three times, up to 6.26 metres. The US-born Swede was again a world apart from the competition at the King Baudouin Stadium in cold conditions.

He vaulted only three times, at 5.62, 5.92 and 6.11m, the latter a new meeting record. Greece's Emmanouil Karalis was second with 5.82m on countback from home favourite Ben Broeders.

"My legs felt terrible tonight and I'm just really tired," admitted Duplantis, who was left ruing taking on hurdles star Karsten Warholm in a pre-event exhibition 100m race in Zurich last week.

"That took a lot more from my body than I expected. With 6.11 metre I got a good result, but the world record wasn't meant to be tonight."

Duplantis added: "Now it's time to celebrate my beautiful season!"

The opening session of the two-day finals of track and field's elite circuit was high-octane affair, with a large percentage of some of the 82 medal winners from the Paris Olympics on show. Olympic champion Julien Alfred scorched to victory in the 100m as US rival Sha'Carri Richardson



Sweden's Armand Duplantis reacts after winning the pole vault at the Diamond League finals in Brussels. (Reuters)

finished well down the field.

It had been Richardson who triumphed in Zurich last week, edging Alfred at the line. But the Saint Lucia sprinter turned the tables when it mattered, clocking 10.88 seconds for the win. Richardson eased off well before the line in the knowledge she had been well beaten, eventually finishing eighth in the nine-woman field in 11.23sec. "I am so happy, it feels amazing to finish my season on a good note and to take the



St Lucia's Julien Alfred (centre) gestures after crossing the finish line ahead of Britain's Dina Asher-Smith (right) and Sha'Carri Richardson of the US in the women's 100m event.

win," said Alfred.

American star Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone played her cameo to a tee. The 25-year-old, who improved her own world record when winning back-to-back Olympic 400m hurdles golds in Paris, had not competed at a Diamond League event this season and was therefore ineligible for the finals.

But organisers managed to lure

McLaughlin-Levrone, who won a second Olympic gold in Paris with the US 4x400m relay team, to Belgium to race in invitational 200 and 400m flat races as a way to "honour" her Olympic achievements. She won her 400m race in 49.11sec, which was better than world and Olympic champion Marileidy's winning time of 49.45sec in the 400m final proper.

Norway's Jakob Ingebrigtsen held off a

strong field for victory in the ever-competitive men's 1500m in 3min 30.37sec. The Tokyo Olympic champion missed out on the podium in the French capital, but has been keen to make amends, once again holding off Kenya's Timothy Cheruiyot and Paris Games winner Cole Hocker.

Ukraine's Yaroslava Mahuchikh, the world and Olympic champion and world record holder, notched up her eighth consecutive Diamond League win with a best of 1.97m, winning on countback from Australian Nicola Olyslagers.

But there was a rare defeat for Morocco's Soufiane El Bakkali, the double Olympic gold medallist and two-time world champion, in the men's 3000m steeplechase. Kenya's Amos Serem claimed the win in 8:06.90, with the Moroccan coming in second in 8:08.60.

Jamaica's Ackeem Blake strode home in the men's 100m, winning in 9.93sec ahead of Americans Christian Coleman (10.00) and Fred Kerley (10.01), the Olympic bronze medallist and 2022 world champion. Blake's teammate Tajay Gayle, the world bronze medallist, won the long jump with a season's best of 8.28m, Olympic champion Milatidis Tentoglou coming in third, 1cm behind Switzerland's Simon Ehammer (8.16m).

And there was a surprise win for Britain's Charles Dobson in the men's 400m, laurels taken in 44.49sec. American Valarie Allman won the women's discus with a best of 68.47m and echoed many athletes' sentiments after a long year of track and field. "Now it's off season! I really can't wait for your fries, waffles and chocolate!"

CRICKET

Afghanistan-New Zealand Test ends without the toss

Coaches Jonathan Trott and Gary Stead express disappointment as teams leave without any action

Reuters
New Delhi

Afghanistan's one-off Test against New Zealand became just the eighth match in the format's history to be abandoned without a ball being bowled after rain washed out the fifth and final day in India's Greater Noida region yesterday.

The first ever Test scheduled between the sides looked doomed from the start due to steady rain for more than two weeks in the region.

It was also the first Test to be scheduled at the Shahid Vijay Singh Pathik Sports Complex near Delhi.

Afghanistan play their home matches abroad due to security concerns for touring teams.

The Afghan board preferred Greater Noida over two other venues in India because of its proximity to Delhi, which made travelling from Kabul easier.

"We're disappointed. We'd geared ourselves up, and we'd trained really well," Afghanistan coach Jonathan Trott told reporters. "What I hope it is a good learning case that things can crop up... everything has got to be checked out and made sure that it's ready for Test-match cricket."

"I think the ground staff have worked, obviously, very hard here. It just unfortunately hasn't materialised, and we've had a freakish amount of rain for this time of year."



Groundsmen remove the covers after the one-off Test between Afghanistan and New Zealand was called off at the Shaheed Vijay Singh Pathik Sports Complex in Greater Noida yesterday. **Right:** Afghanistan's coach Jonathan Trott (right) and New Zealand's coach Gary Stead attend a press conference. (AFP)

New Zealand coach Gary Stead was frustrated after they were denied an opportunity to get used to the sub-continent's conditions ahead of a busy schedule that includes five more tests in Asia in the next two months.

"The most disappointing part for us is that we lost the opportunity to be match-hardened and match-ready when we go into our

Test match (against Sri Lanka) next week," Stead said at the post-match press conference.

"The guys are really disappointed. It was an opportunity to play Afghanistan. It doesn't come around that often."

"They have some unique bowlers - it's always good to get your head around how you face them. The way they play is a little bit different to other countries. It's always learning what you can do when you get in those match situations"

"The guys are really disappointed. It was an opportunity to play Afghanistan. It doesn't come around that often."

"Even though it was fine for those two days, there were thunderstorms the nights before and the ground was just too soft and the umpires deemed that unfit to play on," he said. "So that is sort of out of the players' hands in a way as well."

"But we were frustrated. We have come here to play cricket and play a Test match and as Jonathan (Trott, Afghanistan head coach) said, Test cricket, certainly to our

group of players that is here, that's very, very dear to their hearts and every Test you get to play in is a big one."

"So regardless of whether it has World Test Championship points or not, that opportunity to get out there for five days, it looked a great surface. The whole block looked fantastic, so it would have been a great match of Test cricket."

New Zealand will fly to Sri Lanka today for a two-Test series in Galle from Sept. 18.

"We've been there (in Sri Lanka) once in the past, and we are des-

perate to get there again. So every test match we play will be an important one."

"The conditions that we face in Galle will be, I'm sure, different to Bangalore, Pune and Mumbai when we come back here again. So it's still about adapting to the different surfaces where I'm learning from those."

"But also banking the knowledge you have created in the past even though it's been a couple of [sessions of] trainings out there, we'd still bank on what we've learnt on those sort of pitches," Stead said.



ANNOUNCEMENT

Final report clears WADA over China swimmers who failed dope tests

AFP
Montreal

A final report has concluded that the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) did not show "favouritism" towards China in the case of 23 Chinese swimmers who were cleared to compete after testing positive for a banned drug.

But it did find WADA's anti-doping rules and administrative processes could be strengthened, which the agency itself acknowledged, and also criticised parts of the Chinese response to the positive tests.

The report's author, Swiss prosecutor Eric Cottier, said he found "WADA has done its work autonomously, independently and professionally, and that there is no evidence to the contrary."

This matched his interim findings announced in July, ahead of the Paris Olympics, where 11 of the Chinese swimmers who tested positive for a banned heart medication competed.

Responding to Thursday's report, US Anti Doping Agency chief Travis Tygart, who has been an outspoken critic of WADA's handling of the affair, said the conclusions "only validates our concerns."

Cottier noted in the final report that some anti-doping rules were not followed by the Chinese



anti-doping agency (CHINADA), but added "it does not change the outcome of the cases and the acceptance of the contamination hypothesis."

China said yesterday it had a "zero-tolerance attitude" to doping.

In April, *The New York Times* and German broadcaster ARD reported that 23 Chinese swimmers had tested positive for trimetazidine (TMZ) at a domestic competition in late 2020 and early 2021.

It was determined by CHINADA they ingested the substance unwittingly from tainted food at their hotel and no action against them was warranted.

WADA accepted the argument of the Chinese authorities and did not sanction the swimmers, some of whom competed and won medals at the Covid-delayed Tokyo Olympics months later.

The case caused a global uproar when the news broke earlier this year, with US anti-doping authorities accusing WADA of a

cover-up, which it denied.

"While WADA management wants to close the book on this scandal regarding 23 positive TMZ cases by Chinese swimmers, the full report released today by WADA's investigator only validates our concerns and even raises new questions that must be answered," Tygart said in a statement.

"Clean athletes give their all to excellence and what this report shows is that the global anti-doping regulator did not give them the same in return."

Tygart called for a further investigation.

"The Cottier report itself speaks to the desperate need for this expanded investigation, noting, 'The sense of justice or injustice, however, goes far beyond the scope of this investigation,'" Tygart said.

Lessons to be learned
WADA director general Olivier Niggli welcomed the final report.

There are "certainly lessons to be learned by WADA and others from this situation," he said in a statement, while vowing to follow recommendations to strengthen the global anti-doping system for athletes.

This includes improving WADA's internal guidelines for managing doping cases; improving communications about alleged cases with national anti-doping agencies and athletes; and optimising a database called ADAMS to alert officials when there are delays in analysing tests, for example.

Recommendations sought
WADA said a working group has been asked to submit recommendations in December.

Tygart said USADA was "heartened" by the establishment of the working group which "has the potential to make critical strides in ensuring that the global anti-doping system has the controls and systems in place to evenly apply the rules and protect clean athletes' rights worldwide."

Separately, WADA said it was also placing seven national anti-doping organisations on a "watchlist," giving them four more months "to correct outstanding non-conformities" to a new anti-doping code.

They are Namibia, Pakistan, Panama, Samoa, Senegal, Uganda and Uruguay.

Activists join funeral march for Uganda Olympian Cheptegei

Eldoret, Kenya: The body of murdered Olympian Rebecca Cheptegei began its journey home to Uganda yesterday, as activists rallied against the latest case of gender-based violence in Kenya.

The 33-year-old athlete succumbed to her wounds last week after being attacked on September 1 by her Kenyan partner, who poured petrol over her and set her on fire.

It happened just weeks after she made her Olympic debut in the women's marathon in Paris, where she finished 44th.

Her funeral is planned for today in Bukwo, home to her family in Uganda, but relatives in Kenya paid their respects yesterday in the Rift Valley town of Eldoret, near where she lived.

Cheptegei is the third athlete to have died in Kenya as a result of gender-based violence since 2021, provoking a global outpouring of tributes and rage. Tony Sabila, Cheptegei's uncle,

described her as "a pillar to the family" and expressed his sadness over the loss.

As the body passed through the town of Eldoret, scores of activists lined the road with others walking alongside the hearse. At a rally the same day, many wore white T-shirts with an image of Cheptegei and carried white or red roses.

Others had signs reading "Being a woman should not be a death sentence" and "A house where a woman is not safe is not a home". Cheptegei was attacked outside her house in Endebess in Kenya. Local media reported that her young daughters and teenage sister witnessed the brutal assault.

Her attacker, 32-year-old Dickson Ndiema Marangach, was also severely burned and died in hospital on Monday. A 2023 report by Kenya's National Bureau of Statistics found 34 percent of women had experienced physical violence since the age of 15.

SPOTLIGHT

Batsman Short gunning for Warner's vacant slot

Reuters
Cardiff

Matt Short has thrown down the gauntlet in the race to fill David Warner's opening batting slot in Australia's white-ball sides. Short blasted 41 off 26 balls against England in the first T20I and then 28 off 24 deliveries balls in the second T20I yesterday.

Last week Short missed the Australia vs Scotland series for the birth of his first child but was glad to slot in and perform against England.

"I only found out before this series," Short told reporters of his selection. "Obviously, with Davey Warner out, you sort of know that the spot's opened up."

"But then Jake Fraser-McGurk has been playing the last few games in Scotland, so you never know where you sit."

"But I'm glad I sort of took that opportunity tonight and played my role to help the team with a win tonight."

Fraser-McGurk was seen as the man most likely to take the opening spot, especially after Warner captioned a picture of himself and the young opener with: "All yours now champion" following his retirement in June.

However, Fraser-McGurk sandwiched a 16 between two ducks in Edinburgh in the three-match



series against the Scots. Short missed out on a place in Australia's squad at the T20 World Cup in the United States and West Indies, and the Southampton match was his first T20I since February. He said he was fixed on securing a regular spot in the Australia lineup.

"It's a personal sort of goal of mine. I've been in and out of the side recently over the last 12-18 months," said the Ballarat-born batter. "Now Dave is out, I'm really trying to take this opportunity and cement my spot in this side."

Warner's retirement also left a big hole in the Test side which was filled, unconvincingly, by Steve Smith against West Indies over the home summer and on tour to New Zealand. Head coach Andrew McDonald has said selectors were still weighing up the merits of retaining Smith as an opener for the five-Test series against India in the home summer.

RUGBY

Wallabies pair back from injury for All Blacks ties

AFP
Sydney

Australia's Fraser McReight and Hunter Paisami have returned from injury to make the squad named yesterday to play New Zealand next week, as the Wallabies regroup following their thrashing in Argentina.

Australia crashed to a 67-27 defeat away to Los Pumas in The Rugby Championship last weekend after a horror second-half display by the Wallabies, who threw away a 20-3 lead by conceding nine tries.

The Wallabies sit bottom of the championship table as they prepare to face New Zealand in a double header for the Bledisloe Cup.

Australia's only victory in the championship so far was a last-gasp 20-19 win over Argen-

tinia at the end of August following back-to-back home defeats to world champions South Africa.

"After getting a much-needed win in the first Test, then making a good start in the second Test, we had a very disappointing final 40 minutes in Argentina," Australia head coach Joe Schmidt said in a statement.

"The upcoming Bledisloe Test in Sydney offers a great opportunity to turn that poor finish around in front of what looks like being another big home crowd."

New Zealand to play in Sydney
Australia host New Zealand in Sydney on September 21 before travelling to face the All Blacks in Wellington a week later.

Flanker McReight returns to the 36-man Australia squad after a hand injury, while centre Paisami has overcome a painful knee

injury he suffered in the loss to South Africa in Perth. Wing Corey Toole and inside centre David Feliuai are the only two uncapped players named.

Australia squad
Forwards: Allan Alaalatoa, Angus Bell, Josh Canham, Matt Faessler, Nick Frost, Langi Gleeson, Tom Hooper, Isaac Kailea, Fraser McReight, Josh Nasser, Brandon Paenga-Amosa, Tom Robertson, Lukhan Salakaia-Loto, James Slipper, Carlo Tizzano, Taniel Tupou, Rob Valetini, Jeremy Williams, Harry Wilson
Backs: Ben Donaldson, David Feliuai, Josh Flook, Jake Gordon, Len Ikitau, Max Jorgensen, Andrew Kellaway, Marika Korobete, Noah Lolesio, Tom Lynagh, Tate McDermott, Hunter Paisami, Dylan Pietsch, Hamish Stewart, Corey Toole, Nic White, Tom Wright

FORMULA ONE

Leclerc bounces back from crash to go fastest in Baku

Perez a close second for Red Bull after 3 red flags in opening session

Reuters
Baku

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc crashed and then went fastest in practice for the Azerbaijan Grand Prix yesterday while champions Red Bull found some speed after a disappointing run of results.

Leclerc, winner of the previous round in Italy and on pole for the past three years in Baku, bounced back with a late lap of one minute 43.484 seconds to lead second practice after missing half of the first session when he hit the wall.

Red Bull's Sergio Perez, twice winner in Baku and the driver with the best record around the city circuit, was a mere 0.006 slower.

"The pace was there today, but between the incident in FP1 (first practice) and a problem we had in FP2 with the steering, we didn't complete too many laps," said Leclerc.

"It will be important for us to have a smooth FP3 (final practice) and get ready to extract the most out of qualifying tomorrow."

Perez's teammate and Formula One leader Max Verstappen had been fastest in the three-times halted first practice session with a lap of 1:45.546, but dropped to sixth in the later one when he had understeer and visor problems.

"We learnt quite a bit and now it's just about tidying up the things that we tried, but I think so far we have been more competitive this weekend so that's positive," said Verstappen, who has a 62 point lead over McLaren's Lando Norris.

Norris was fourth fastest in practice one and 17th in the second after looking quick but was then blocked by Alpine's Pierre Gasly.



Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc steers his car during the first practice session ahead of the Azerbaijan Grand Prix at the Baku City Circuit yesterday. (AFP)

"We're quite a long way off," the Briton told *FTV*.

"I'm having to push way too much to try and get a lap time out of it."

"I think we have quite a lot to find, honestly."

"Compared to Mercedes, Ferrari and Red Bull, they're all very similar and then there's a good three, four tenths (of a second) gap back to us. So a lot of work for us to do."

Seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton ended the day third fastest for Mercedes, 0.066 off the pace, after setting the second best time in opening practice.

His teammate George Russell was delayed in the second session by a precautionary power unit

change but was ninth quickest. Red flags were waved in practice one – first for a marshal to collect debris and then after separate crashes involving Leclerc and Williams' Argentine rookie Franco Colapinto.

Leclerc hits the wall
Leclerc hit the wall at turn 15 with 33 minutes remaining, the Monegasque taking too much speed into the corner and locking up.

Colapinto also hit the barriers, at turn four with 18 minutes to go, with the back end snapping around and smacking the wall.

The Argentine was starting his second race weekend after replacing dropped American Logan Sargeant until the end of the sea-

son. That session resumed with 11 minutes remaining and ended with Verstappen fastest at the finish as the team's floor upgrade appeared to be paying off as Red Bull seek to recover their brilliant early season form.

British teenager Oliver Bearman made his Haas debut as replacement for the suspended Kevin Magnussen, lapping 11th fastest and 0.162 quicker than teammate Nico Hulkenberg in practice one.

Bearman was 10th in the second session, with Hulkenberg eighth.

Alpine's Esteban Ocon reported a loss of power early on, with his first session ending early. The Frenchman was 19th in the later stint.

Title-chasing Norris, McLaren 'a long way' off the pace in Baku

Baku: Championship-chasing Lando Norris conceded he and McLaren were well off the pace yesterday after he struggled to 17th place with teammate Oscar Piastri fifth in second free practice at the Azerbaijan Grand Prix. Both drivers were left well adrift of Ferrari's Charles Leclerc who outpaced Red Bull's Sergio Perez to set the fastest time, prompting title-challenger Norris to admit he and his team faced much overnight homework to find a solution.

"We're quite a long way off," he said, drawing only slight consolation from seeing Max Verstappen, Red Bull's three-time champion and series leader, wind up sixth behind Piastri. "I'm having to push way too much to try and get a lap time. Where Oscar is, that is kind of more where I think we are. So, I think if we nail it, we're just about there, but I'm sure they're not even close nailing it yet."

"Honestly, I think we have quite a lot to find." Norris, who is 62 points behind Verstappen in the drivers' title race with eight races remaining, plus three sprint races, said he did not blame an incident with Alpine's Pierre Gasly, on a hot lap, for his poor showing.

"Probably not his fault," said Norris. "It's just that here, you don't deploy the power until very late so he's clearly misjudged it. It didn't matter. I'd done my lap already."

McLaren said on Thursday that they intended to introduce team orders to support Norris's title



bid during the remaining races, but he made clear he did not want to rely on anyone else in his bid to beat Verstappen.

Assessing the team's pace, he said: "Mercedes, Ferrari and Red Bull, they are all very similar. And there's a good three or four-tenths gap back to us. So, we have a lot of work to do."

"Ferrari are very quick here. And Mercedes will be quick with these track conditions. It's very 'slidey' out there. We perform well on the higher grip circuits. We're finding it difficult, but we'll work hard tonight."

Piastri said he had a "decent day" but added that it was "hard to know at the moment" where McLaren were as the track was "evolving" so much.

Along with many other drivers, he noted that the circuit conditions were dirty and slippery, particularly early in the day.

"Ferrari look strong and Red Bull are quick," he said. "But our long runs look competitive."

TENNIS

US, Germany, Australia and Spain reach Davis Cup final

AFP
Paris

France crashed out of the Davis Cup yesterday when world No.3 Carlos Alcaraz beat Ugo Humbert (18th) 6-3, 6-3 in the second rubber in Valencia.

Earlier, the defeat of Arthur Fils to Roberto Bautista 2-6, 7-5, 6-3 put France 1-0 down and Humbert was unable to revive the French against a solid Alcaraz in front of a home crowd.

Since the reform of the Davis Cup in 2019, France has never managed to get beyond the group stage.

Spain and Australia with two successes each have booked their ticket for the Final 8 in Malaga at the end of November and will compete for the head of this group B tomorrow.

The United States booked their ticket to final eight series with a 3-0 win over Slovakia in Zuhai earlier yesterday, with Germany also advancing.

Mackenzie McDonald beat Lukas Klein 6-4, 6-3 in the opening singles rubber before Brandon Nakashima eased past Jozef Kovalik 6-3, 6-3 to give the Americans an unassailable 2-0 lead.

Austin Krajicek and Rajeev Ram then teamed up in the doubles to battle past Klein and Norbert Gombos 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/4), 10-1.

Bob Bryan's US team, playing without top players including US Open runner-up Taylor Fritz and semi-finalist Frances Tiafoe, also beat Chile 3-0 earlier this week.

The US victory meant Group C rivals Germany also qualified for the Final 8 which will



Mackenzie McDonald of the US celebrates winning his Davis Cup match against Slovakia's Lukas Klein at Hengqin International Tennis Center, Zhuhai, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

be held in Malaga in November 19-24. Germany and the US will go head-to-head for top spot in their final group game on Saturday which will determine their seeding for Malaga.

Sixteen countries are competing in the group stage finals in four cities with the top two from each group advancing to the eight-team final.

"It means a lot," said 40th-ranked Nakashima.

"To be able to be in this position right now,

to be clinching that spot, it's very important for us."

The US, 32-times tournament winners, most recently in 2007, failed to progress out of the group stage finals last year after defeats to the Netherlands and Finland.

McDonald, ranked 149, has been returning from an injury-plagued season.

"I'm really proud of myself for performing well today and putting the team on the board," he said.

GOLF

'Job done' for McIlroy as he eyes Irish Open glory

AFP
London

Rory McIlroy said he had achieved his target for the opening two rounds of the Irish Open by avoiding a repeat of his 2015 showing at Royal County Down when he failed to make the cut.

A one-under round of 70 yesterday left the world number three well positioned to challenge over the weekend, just two shots behind Matteo Manassero's leading mark of six under par.

The highlight of McIlroy's round was an eagle on the par-five first, his 10th hole of the day, but the home favourite covered his other 17 holes in one over.

"It was just a matter of making sure I was here for the weekend and give myself a chance. Sort of job done for the first two days and turn my attention to the weekend," said McIlroy.

"It's much better than nine years ago here when I was watching the third round on TV. Happy to be here for the weekend and happy to give myself a chance."

Italy's Manassero made a flying start to his second round with an eagle on the first followed by birdies on the second and third, with



another eagle coming from tap-in range on the par-five 12th following a stunning approach.

"Links golf makes you hit really difficult shots, everything has to be right. It takes a lot of energy out of you, but when you're playing well the adrenaline kicks in and I'm looking forward to tomorrow," said Manassero, the world number 127.

England's Todd Clements and Laurie Canter are Manassero's closest pursuers on five under.

Spain's Alejandro del Rey had also eagled the first and looked set to post a testing target when he reached eight under par, but ran up a quadruple-bogey eight on the 15th to finish alongside McIlroy and Scotland's Ewen Ferguson on four under.

SAILING

Britain pick Switzerland for America's Cup

Britain selected Switzerland yesterday as their opponents for the semi-finals of the America's Cup challenger series which begin this weekend, meaning Italy will face the United States.

The four teams are seeking to win the right to challenge New Zealand for the coveted "Auld Mug", which dates back to 1851 and is the oldest international sporting trophy, off Barcelona.

The first team to reach five wins in each semi-final will move into the Louis Vuitton Cup final. The winner of that will then face the Kiwis in October's America's Cup

Match. Ben Ainslie's British team were given the choice of their semi-final opponents after sealing victory in a round robin series, beating Italy in a sail-off for top spot.

"Ultimately you've just got to make a decision and get on with it and win some races," Ainslie said of the British decision during a press conference for the four remaining skippers. France have already been eliminated as potential challengers in the competition between huge AC75 foiling mono-hulls. These are lifted above the water on high-tech hydrofoils and can hit speeds approaching 50 knots. Reuters

Spanish tennis great Nadal pulls out of Laver Cup

Barcelona: Rafael Nadal will not compete at the Laver Cup next week in Berlin, said the 22-time Grand Slam champion in a statement released by tournament organisers yesterday. The Laver Cup pits a European team against a World team. Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe will captain the two six-player squads, as they have in all the six previous editions. Nadal pulled out of the US Open in August as he did not feel he could perform at his best. "I'm really disappointed to share that I won't be able to compete at the Laver Cup in Berlin next week," said the 38-year-old Spanish tennis great in the statement. "This is a team competition and to really support Team Europe, I need to do what's best for them and at this moment there are other players who

can help the team deliver the win." Nadal missed virtually all of the 2023 season because of a hip injury and has only taken part in one of the last seven Grand Slams, ousted in the first round of this year's French Open. The Laver Cup said a replacement player for Team Europe would be announced soon, to join other stars including Carlos Alcaraz and Daniil Medvedev. The competition takes place between September 20-22. "I have so many great, emotional memories from playing Laver Cup and I was really looking forward to being with my teammates and with Bjorn in his final year as captain," continued Nadal in the statement. "I wish Team Europe the very best of luck and will be cheering them on from afar." Nadal is next due to appear at the Six Kings Slam, a Saudi Arabian elite tennis exhibition in October.



PREMIER LEAGUE

Guardiola 'happy' Man City hearing finally set to start

AFP
Manchester

Manchester City manager **Pep Guardiola** said he is pleased that the club's long-awaited hearing into 115 charges brought by the Premier League is set to start on Monday.

City face 80 breaches of financial rules between 2009 and 2018, plus a further 35 of failing to co-operate with a Premier League investigation. The English champions stand accused of failing to provide accurate financial information between 2009 and 2018, including revenue from sponsors and salary details of managers and players.

City have vehemently denied any

wrongdoing and Guardiola has backed his superiors when pressed about the charges in the past.

"Start soon, and hopefully finish soon," Guardiola said of the hearing at his pre-match press conference yesterday ahead of Brentford's trip to the Etihad.

"I am looking forward to the decision. I'm happy it's starting on Monday. I know there will be more rumours, new special-ists about the sentences. We're going to see. I know what people are looking forward to, what they expect. I know what I read for many, many years. Everybody is innocent until guilt is proven. So we'll see."

If found guilty on some or all of the charges, City face a severe points deduction and possibly even expulsion from the Premier League. The hearing is set to last at least two months, with a decision not

expected until 2025.

The Premier League brought the charges in February 2023 but there has been a lengthy wait for the case to proceed before an independent commission. In the meantime, City have lifted two more Premier League titles and the club's first ever Champions League last year.

Since a 2008 takeover from Sheikh Mansour, a member of the United Arab Emirates royal family, City have been transformed into the dominant force in English football. They have won eight of the last 13 Premier League titles, including a record four consecutive league crowns in the past four seasons.

City have also won all three of their opening league games to the new season despite missing a number of key players who made it to the final of Euro 2024.

Spanish midfielder Rodri and England trio Phil Foden, Kyle Walker and John Stones are yet to make a single start since being handed more time off to recover from Guardiola. Foden and Rodri have also had to recover from illness and injury respectively but are now back in training and in contention to face Brentford.

However, Erling Haaland may not be able to build on his seven goals in three games due to the bereavement of a close family friend.

The Norwegian striker paid tribute to Ivar Eggja, a friend of his father and former City captain Alf-Inge Haaland, on social media after he died aged 59 this week.

"It was a tough moment for him and his family," added Guardiola. "We will see tomorrow if he is mentally and physically able to play."



PREVIEW

Arteta hopeful Odegaard injury not as bad as feared

Arsenal are already without Rice for the north London derby

AFP
London

Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta refused to rule captain Martin Odegaard out of tomorrow's north London derby at Tottenham despite fears the key midfielder could be sidelined for weeks.

Odegaard suffered an ankle sprain on international duty with Norway earlier this week that looked set to also rule him out of tough away trips to Atalanta in the Champions League and a Premier League visit to Manchester City on September 22. However, Arteta, who signed a new three-year deal on Thursday, said further tests were needed to discover the extent of the injury.

"We need some more tests," said the Spaniard. "Let's see the extent of the injury and how quickly we can get him back. Martin wants to be here every day but we have to wait and see. I leave that to the doctor. He's willing and he wants to be present in every game. We need to make sure we know first how good he is or not. Players with 48 hours are always available. Let's see what happens."

Arsenal are already depleted in midfield for the north London derby due to Declan Rice's suspension for a harsh red card in a 1-1 draw with Brighton before the international break. New signing Mikel Merino is also currently sidelined after breaking a bone in his shoulder.

However, Arteta could unleash another fresh face in Raheem Sterling, who joined in the final hours of the transfer window on loan from Chelsea. The former England international had been outcast by Blues boss Enzo Maresca due to Chelsea's bloated squad.

Sterling previously worked with Arteta during their time together at Manchester City and the Gunners boss believes the winger is fired up to silence his critics.

"He looks great. First of all because he has a big smile on his face, a lot of energy. He's at it and he wants to prove a point," added Arteta. "When someone has got that in his belly you sense it straight away. Obviously, I don't need to discover anything about his quality and what he can bring to the team."

Gabriel Jesus has returned to training in a timely fitness boost for Arteta, but Italian defender Riccardo Calafiori is a doubt after picking up a calf injury on international duty.

Meanwhile, Tottenham Hotspur's new striker Dominic Solanke is back in training and should be available for north London derby against Arsenal, manager Ange Postecoglou said. Solanke signed from Bournemouth in a deal worth up to 65m pounds but after making his debut against Leicester City he missed the next two games with an ankle injury. Postecoglou will also have defender Micky van de Ven available again after he missed the



Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta with midfielder Bukayo Saka at a training session yesterday.

defeat at Newcastle United before the international break.

Tottenham have had a mixed start to the season, picking up four points out of the nine available with a failure to convert enough of their 48 goal attempts in those games costing them. "Results come sooner rather than later. We've got to stay consistent in our approach. We dominated all three games," Postecoglou, who is looking for his first win in the north London derby, said. "Results haven't come but if we maintain that over 38 games we'll be in a good position. We've got to keep at it. Stay focused on the important elements of our game."

Tottenham had marginally the better of the away clash with Arsenal last season, a game that ended in a draw, but lost 3-2 at home after trailing 3-0 at halftime. Arsenal have re-emerged as Premier League title contenders under Mikel Arteta and Postecoglou said the Spaniard has instilled a relentless mental-

ity in his squad. "They have this confidence in themselves that they can challenge over the course of the season," Postecoglou said. "They're going to be a tough nut to crack, but it's a great opportunity for us."

Uruguayan midfielder Rodrigo Bentancur will likely start for Tottenham on Sunday despite facing Football Association charges for comments he made about teammate Son Heung-min during an interview in his home country.

FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

Today: Southampton v Man Utd (1130), Brighton v Ipswich, Crystal Palace v Leicester, Fulham v West Ham, Liverpool v Nottingham Forest, Man City v Brentford (all 1400), Aston Villa v Everton (1630), Bournemouth v Chelsea (1900)

Tomorrow: Tottenham v Arsenal (1300), Wolves v Newcastle (1530)

LA LIGA

Mbappe and Vinicius unaffected by criticism, says Madrid coach

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said strikers Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Junior were not letting critics weigh them down after an underwhelming start to the season. New arrival Mbappe netted a brace in his last outing for the club following three La Liga games without a goal, while Vinicius has one strike in the opening four matches.

"They don't seem affected to me, they are training well, happy. Kylian is progressing each day," Ancelotti told a news conference. "Many forget they started pre-season in the middle of August... they didn't have a pre-season, they have improved their fitness with games. They seem very well to me, and happy."

French superstar Mbappe joined Madrid at the end of his Paris Saint-Germain contract this summer and Ancelotti is still working out how to get the best from the forward, who like Vinicius, prefers to drift in from the left.

Thus far Mbappe has started in the middle with Vinicius in his preferred position, but the Brazilian has lacked spark.

"(Vinicius is) not at his best but he's still very important for us," continued Ancelotti. "The last thing I'm worried about is the state of Vinicius, he always works well, it's just a question of time before he's at his best. When a player is not 100 percent, the important thing is that he gives all he can."

Real Madrid face Real Sociedad today in La Liga ahead of their first Champions League match this season, against Stuttgart at home on Tuesday. Ancelotti said midfielders Jude Bellingham and Aurelien Tchouameni would not be ready for the trip to San Sebastian but could return after that. "We'll see in the next few days if they're available on Tuesday," added Ancelotti.

Meanwhile, Hansi Flick's Barcelona face Girona tomorrow in a Catalan derby aiming to secure a fifth win from five La Liga matches at the start of the season. Last season the Catalan giants were upset twice by their upstart minnow neighbours, who thumped Xavi Hernandez's side 4-2 home and away in the top flight.

Girona, in their fourth ever season in La Liga, ultimately finished third, behind second-place Barca, but for much of the season the Blaugrana could only watch as the tiny club battled Real Madrid for top spot.

Although Girona's title bid eventually collapsed, their sec-

ond triumph over Barca secured them Champions League football and delivered Madrid's record-extending 36th league crown.

A lot has changed since then, with Flick's arrival in place of Xavi seeming to revitalise Barcelona's squad.

Led by teenage star Lamine Yamal, new arrival Dani Olmo and veteran striker Robert Lewandowski they have won their opening four matches and are the only team in La Liga with a 100 percent record. Girona, on the other hand, have lost star names including Artem Dovbyk and Savinho and coach Michel Sanchez is still fitting together his replacement puzzle pieces.

After a 3-0 thumping by Atletico, Girona responded with 4-0 and 2-0 wins over Osasuna and Sevilla respectively, indicating they are on the right track once more.

Flick has a long injury list to manage but is expecting to have playmaker Olmo available despite suffering a blow against Serbia while playing for Euro 2024 winners Spain.

Morale is high at the club because of their fine start, including a 7-0 demolition of Valladolid before the international break, and Gavi's partial return to training on Thursday after a long injury lay-off provided further good news.

FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

Today: Mallorca v Villarreal (1200), Espanyol v Alaves (1415), Sevilla v Getafe (1630), Real Sociedad v Real Madrid (1900)

Tomorrow: Celta Vigo v Real Valladolid (1200), Girona v Barcelona (1415), Las Palmas v Athletic Bilbao (1630), Atletico Madrid v Valencia (1900)

Monday: Rayo Vallecano v Osasuna (1900)



Wathnan Racing's Aesterius wins Group 2 Flying Childers

Winner of the Group 3 Prix d'Arenberg at ParisLongchamp, the two-year-old Aesterius won the Group 2 Carlsberg Danish Pilsner Flying Childers Stakes at Doncaster yesterday. Trained by Archie Watson and owned by Wathnan Racing, the superb colt has now won four of his six life starts. With James Doyle in the saddle, the son of Mehmas was leading the near side group. Quickly challenged by Big Mojo, Aesterius found more close home to lead inside the final 100 yards and win by a neck. Big Mojo took second while Magnum Force went third.



Messi set to return after two-month lay off

Miami: Lionel Messi is set to return to action with his club Inter Miami today after spending over two months out with an ankle injury, Miami coach Gerardo Martino said.

"Yes, he is fine," Martino said before training yesterday. "He trained (Thursday), he is in the plans for the game. After training we will figure out the strategy for him, but he is available," added the Argentine.

Inter Miami, who lead the Eastern Conference and are top of the overall standings, host the Philadelphia Union today. Messi injured his right ankle during the final of the Copa America on July 14 when he helped Argentina to victory over Colombia. He has missed eight MLS

games for his club and this month's World Cup qualifiers for his country. "To get back the best player in the world to our team, which was already on a good run, we are all very happy with this situation," said Martino.

SON JUN-HO LEAVES KOREAN CLUB AFTER FIXING BAN

South Korean World Cup midfielder Son Jun-ho had his contract with top-tier Suwon FC terminated by mutual consent, three days after Chinese football banned him for life for alleged match-fixing. Son gave a tearful press conference on Wednesday in which he proclaimed his innocence, having been among 43 people banned this week by the Chinese Football Association.

The 32-year-old, who previously played for Shandong Taishan in the Chinese Super League, returned to South Korea in March having spent 10 months in detention in China.

He joined K League side Suwon in June as he attempted to get his career back on track, but he and the club on Friday cut ties as the controversy swirled.

According to report, public sentiment has turned against Son since a press conference that the news agency said "left more questions than answers". An emotional Son denied wrongdoing and accused Chinese authorities of blackmailing him to force a confession. Son played in three of South Korea's four matches at the Qatar 2022 World Cup.